

Hans Grundig's Critical Legacy in the Postwar Press

Caitlin Dalton, 12 November 2016, Vorschlag

Kolloquium: "Kontinuität und Neuanfang: Hans Grundig Nach 1945 in Dresden"

In the June 1958 issue of *Junge Kunst*, only months before he passed away, Hans Grundig recalled the late 1920s and early 1930s as a prolific and vibrant art-historical moment for leftwing art and politics. "The struggle of the working class for socialism," he wrote, "became the basis for a new art production by a whole generation of young artists searching for truth."¹ He urged a new generation to look at this important early twentieth-century moment of activist class-conscious art. He promoted a socially engaged model of art production, and he expressed skepticism toward his contemporaries who insisted that they needed to retreat to the studio for ample time to make meaningful work. According to Grundig, the visual artist should take up his or her materials and immediately respond to challenges, strife, conflict, and other realities.² His argument in *Junge Kunst* was not only a moral stance against complacency, but also an insistence on the importance of cultural and personal memory. The artist's 1950s position stood against popular political rhetoric in both the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). By 1958, in the thirteen years since the Second World War and throughout the early reconstruction of both Germanys, postwar debates were dominated by future-oriented questions around aesthetic style, form, and content. Looking back was discouraged. Indeed, the famous concept of the 1945 "Stunde Null" (zero hour) was centered on the very desire to begin anew or start from scratch. Contrary to this pervasive amnesiac model, Grundig's art and writing of the 1940s and 1950s

¹ Hans Grundig, "Bundesgenosse der Arbeiterklasse," *Junge Kunst* 6 (June 1958), 29.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

promoted a critical mode of production that positioned history and memory as instructive, haunting, and ever-present.

Grundig had fought National Socialism since he had been a young student and member of the German Communist Party (KPD) in the 1920s, and a founding member, together with his wife Lea, of Dresden's branch of the Association of Revolutionary Artists in 1929 (ASSO). For him, the group's original proletarian tenets did not fade after the defeat of the Nazi Party in 1945, nor did they fully diminish after the founding of the two divided states in 1949. Even when the Socialist Unity Party (SED) increasingly restructured East Germany's institutions to match Moscow's Socialist Realist models, Grundig asserted that anti-fascist criticism still had a place in the GDR. His personal experience during the Third Reich included several arrests (1936, 1938, 1940), incarceration as a concentration camp prisoner in Sachsenhausen (1940-1944), enforced separation from his wife and artistic partner (1939-1949), and irreversible health damage due to tuberculosis. Put simply, it was impossible for Grundig to forget the damage from the Nazi years, and he saw an opportunity after the war to address these themes, while also responding to emerging postwar struggles.

On the surface, the new socialist nation prided itself as separate from West Germany because of anti-fascism.³ Under this premise, Grundig's messages should have been welcome critique. Nevertheless, more dogmatic adherents to the Stalinist Soviet model considered art that depicted pain and oppression—rather than celebrating workers—to be unproductive in the building of the country. As Günter Feist has pointed

³ For a brief discussion about the link between anti-fascism and the GDR, see Ursula Peters and Roland Prügel, "The Legacy of Critical Realism in East and West," in Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann (eds), *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures* (New York: Abrams in association with Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2009), 66.

out, Grundig faced criticism in the Soviet Occupation Zone as early as April 1946. Dresden Cultural Officer Anton Schnittke attacked Grundig's painting, *Das Tausendjährige Reich* for missing art's new demands. In his scathing article, he also took on former ASSO member Otto Griebel, calling his anti-fascist work from the late 1920s "political kitsch."⁴ *Das Tausendjährige Reich*, created during Grundig's inner emigration in Dresden, depicted a dystopia of destruction under National Socialism. His drypoint series from the same period, *Tiere und Menschen*, used humor and satire as tools against the Nazi regime. Opponents considered the work from this time and his work from the immediate postwar period a retreat from reality. Moreover, under Walter Ulbricht, the SED consolidated cultural institutions and began to dissolve small groups and committees that had previously been tolerated.⁵ In the political sphere, there was a concerted shift to demarcate the SED as distinct from the KPD. With this came instructions for art and literature to focus more on the emerging socialist democracy and less on the revolutionary and anti-fascist themes that had been so consequential to artists involved in the KPD and ASSO before 1933. Secretary of Culture Anton Ackermann also called for the dissolution of ASSO in 1946.⁶ For some politicians and critics, it was impossible to reconcile Grundig's fantastical themes and criticism with the polarized political climate. However, the artist, who was then Rector of the Dresden Akademie der bildenden Künste (now the Hochschule für bildende Künste), did not fade from the public

⁴ Grundig was attacked alongside Otto Griebel in *Tägliche Rundschau*. See Günter Feist, "Allmacht und Ohnmacht: Historische Aspekte der Führungsrolle der SED," in Günter Feist, Eckhart Gillen, and Beatrice Vierneisel (eds), *Kunstdokumentation SBZ/DDR* (Berlin: Museumspädagogischer Dienst, 1996), 57-58. For original article, see A. Schnittke, "Aktive Malerei: Zur Eröffnung der Sächsischen Kunstausstellung," *Tägliche Rundschau*, 10.4.1946.

⁵ Eckhart Gillen, "Kultur und Kunstpolitik der SBZ/DDR im Schatten des Stalinismus," in *Das Kunstkombinat DDR* (Museumspädagogischer Dienst Berlin, 2005), 30-59.

⁶ See Jens Semra, "Kein ASSO! Fritz Duda und die "Arbeitsgemeinschaft der in der SED organisierten bildenden Künstler," in Feist, et. al, *Kunstdokumentation SBZ/DDR*, 131.

sphere. In artwork and in the press, he tenaciously publicized personal stories and histories of pain and resistance. Although Grundig's perspective was sometimes at odds with official politics, he was increasingly recognized as an important voice. When he and Lea Grundig were awarded the National Prize in 1958, just after his death, it was clear that a critical and memorial strand of realism had indeed become part of the fabric of GDR art.

For Grundig, memorials and forms of remembrance were key elements within the postwar art world. In both versions of *Den Opfern des Faschismus* (1946-1949), two prostrate skeletal concentration camp victims, marked with identification numbers and the Star of David, occupy the lower half of the horizontal canvas. Above the isolated figures, a small mass of black crows against a red and brown clouded sky emphasize the scene's isolation and abandonment. Even the small guardpost in the background is empty and lifeless. Grundig's tribute to Jewish victims of the Holocaust was one of the first postwar examples of an artist confronting the recent past. Here was anti-fascist criticism that was sorely needed. For Grundig, the new model of realism must make room for such work, even if it did not fit the prescribed aesthetics promoted by Party officials. In 1946, the artist lamented the absence of more meaningful work around him in a private letter to Lea: "nowhere is anyone making art that reflects the terrible years of the Third Reich."⁷ At the time, he and Will Grohmann were culling work from artists living in Germany's four occupation zones for the *Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, held in Dresden later that year. While the exhibition displayed a broad range of work—from the abstract canvases of Willi Baumeister to the realist work of Otto Griebel—Grundig's letter

⁷ Hans Grundig, letter to Lea Grundig (March 1946), quoted in John-Paul Stonard, *Fault Lines* (London: Ridinghouse, 2007), 85.

implies that he was witnessing an unsettling denial of past atrocities. His concerns were not about the aesthetic style of the works of art on display in the exhibition, but about the absence of antifascist themes. It appeared to him that an honest grappling with the truth was at stake.

In his speech at the reopening of the Dresden Academy in April 1947, Grundig encouraged art students to be alert to the conditions of postwar life. He called for a comprehensive pedagogical model where artists would not become self-interested specialists in a single medium, but that they would be able to work in dialogue with many other kinds of artists and craftsmen.⁸ A few months later, he published an article in *Prisma*, in which he promoted art that “leaves behind real, lasting sensations and always forms a bridge to fellow humans.”⁹ He warned against blind optimism, for it would “not be able to express the gravity of past years and all that is necessary in the future.”¹⁰ For Grundig, this was an important liminal moment, in between the unbelievable trauma and violent memories of the past and a yet-to-be-determined future.

In both the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR, official doctrine surrounding art and culture was most often decided in political meetings and conferences, and passed onto artists through institutions, public lectures, and the press. These were also vehicles for critics, art historians, and artists to voice their opinions and publicly grapple with the challenging and sometimes confusing terms and mandates. “Socialist Realism,” introduced by Soviet cultural officers, aimed to match the mandates in literature and art

⁸ Hans Grundig, “Rede für Wiedereröffnung der Akademie der bildenden Künste Dresden” (Manuscript, April 17, 1947), n.p. Hochschule für bildende Künste Dresden Archiv

⁹ Hans Grundig, “Gedanken zur realistischen Kunstauffassung” in *Prisma* 1, vol. 8 (Juni 1947), 19. The article was published again in 1957/58 in *Dresdener Galerieblätter, Monatschrift der Staatlichen Kunstsammlung Dresden* (Akademie der Künste Archiv, Hans and Lea Grundig Nachlass, Signatur Nummer 254).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

set up at the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress in Moscow under Stalin. Cultural Officer Alexander Dymshitz spread the term and practice in the Soviet Occupation Zone in 1947 as a strategic weapon against “bourgeois” modern art in the west.¹¹ The binary political language around Socialist Realism championed clarity and accessibility over western distortion and elitism. However, the procedure for implementing these standards was not clear, both before and after the founding of the GDR in 1949.

Grundig’s Marxist beliefs and distrust of capitalism made him largely sympathetic to Soviet-German cultural ties. In the November 1953 issue of *Volkkunst*, he published a review of an exhibition in Dresden that displayed pre and post-revolutionary art in the Soviet Union. Praising works by Ilya Repin, the Kukriniksy Collective, and Vladimir Makowski, he celebrated the story-telling quality of the work: “the art of the narrative has been preserved to the present day.”¹² Indeed, for Grundig, nineteenth-century Russian genre painting and twentieth-century Soviet depictions of everyday life were crucial influences on his own work and teaching. Nevertheless, he resisted the idea that artists should only make figurative depictions of an inviolable socialist system. He also rejected the idea that GDR realism needed to develop in the same way as it did in the Soviet Union, especially because Germany’s history was fundamentally different. In 1952, he wrote, “Our memorials have to take into account our own specific situation.”¹³ While the earliest years of the GDR were more politically stringent, already by the mid to late 1950s, the implementation of hard-line doctrine began to soften when it was becoming

¹¹ For a discussion on Socialist Realism in Germany, see Barbara McCloskey, “Dialectic at a Standstill,” in Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann (eds), *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures* (New York: Abrams in association with Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2009), 104-117.

¹² Hans Grundig, “Der Realismus in der vorrevolutionären und sowjetischen Malerei,” *Volkkunst* (November 1953), 19.

¹³ Hans Grundig, “Kritisches zu unseren OdF-Mahnmalen und Gedenkstätten,” *Die Tat* 6 vol. 38 (September 1, 1952), np. Also in Stephen Weber, *Schaffen im Verborgenen* (Dresden: Phantasos, 2001), 67.

clear that realism in Germany needed to expand in order to account for certain leftwing artists whose past and present work challenged a rigid model.

As Ulrike Goeschen has observed, art historians played a pivotal role in this shift: “They reappraised art history in order to find academic and ideological grounds for what the artists were trying to do.”¹⁴ Art Historian Wolfgang Hütt, a key contributor to the art magazine, *Bildende Kunst*, and an important intermediary between artists and officials, posited a defense of “Critical Realism” as an expansion of Socialist Realism in January 1957.¹⁵ For him, it was important not to jettison historical and contemporary examples of powerful socially-engaged art and literature. He recognized a heritage from Hans Holbein to David Wilkie to Käthe Kollwitz, and noted that “in art, there is nothing that is not long prepared.”¹⁶ The next year, Hütt delivered a lecture in Berlin where he validated several more artists, including Max Beckmann and Oskar Kokoschka, whose earlier twentieth-century work had come under scrutiny in the GDR.¹⁷ Hütt’s remarks were significant in three inter-related ways: first, his historical perspective helped dismantle the thought that realism was strictly a Soviet twentieth-century phenomenon. Second, he justified artistic styles outside of photo-naturalist realism through acknowledging proletarian art from the interwar period by Kollwitz, Otto Dix, and George Grosz. Third, his comments helped bridge a growing divide between a generation of artists who had been active in leftwing circles during the Weimar Republic and a younger generation who had been too young to witness the anti-fascist and anti-capitalist movements of the 1920s and 1930s. Rather

¹⁴ Ulrike Goeschen, “From Socialist Realism to Art in Socialism: The Reception of Modernism as an Instigating Force in the Development of Art in the GDR,” *Third Text* 23 vol. 1 (January 2009), 48.

¹⁵ Wolfgang Hütt, “Der kritische Realismus in Deutschland,” *Bildende Kunst* 1 (1957), 9-13.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Hütt, Vortrag vom 13.3.1958 (Berlin Kolloquium), in Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2001), 69, fn 8.

than categorically dismiss art before the founding of the GDR as naïve, formalist, or dangerously subjective, Hütt's measured allowances marked a change in public discussion around what constitutes appropriate and progressive art.

Literary theorist Georg Lukács also wrote in 1958 that Critical Realism was an acceptable addition to Marxist aesthetics.¹⁸ While holding firm to his argument twenty years earlier against Ernst Bloch's defense of Expressionism in *Das Wort*, he was now skeptical of a narrow-minded Stalinist interpretation of realism, which drove "critical realist writers [to stop] writing, or [to make] concessions against their better judgment."¹⁹ It seemed clear that GDR cultural policy and censorship required careful reconsideration in order to stay relevant and dynamic. This change would come gradually throughout the following decade, but the theoretical, academic, and artistic groundwork was already being laid.

In 1957, Grundig published his autobiographical memoir, *Zwischen Karneval und Aschermittwoch*, which narrated his life and development as an artist committed to anti-fascism. In the fifth section, titled "Artistic and Political Work Until 1933," he made a pointed reference to the importance of Critical Realism in contemporary art, and attributed its indebtedness to his colleagues in ASSO, and also to Kollwitz, to Heinrich Zille, and to the graphic artists involved in the satirical magazine, *Simplicissimus*.²⁰ This was a history Grundig felt young artists in 1950s East Germany desperately needed to grasp. Cultural memory was fading too quickly. In a review of Grundig's autobiography

¹⁸ Georg Lukács, *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus* (Hamburg: Classen, 1958). For an excellent discussion about critical realism, see Peters and Prügel, "The Legacy of Critical Realism in East and West," in *Art of Two Germanys*, 64-83.

¹⁹ Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (English edition) (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 135. Lukács' 1938 essay, "Es geht um den Realismus" was a response to Ernst Bloch's "Diskussion über Expressionismus" (1938). See both essays in English translation in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London and New York: Verso, 2007).

²⁰ Hans Grundig, *Zwischen Karneval und Aschermittwoch* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1958), 213.

in the newspaper *Sonntag*, Kurt Liebmann cited an anonymous student's response: "Sometimes we forget how much blood and pain went into this earth, on which we walk effortlessly [...] so we [now] commit ourselves to continue the struggle for which the best people all over the world gave their lives."²¹ Surely this would have encouraged Grundig, who had spent the past decade speaking out about the urgent need for the young artists to collaborate with older generations in order to bring forth a vibrant art scene.²²

At the same time that he was calling attention to the history of activist art in his writing, Grundig was also responding to particular global Cold War concerns in his paintings and graphic works. In the 1950s, the threat of the nuclear bomb seemed dangerously imminent and caused a chronic sense of political instability across the young country. For an artist to turn a blind eye to these present fears and only depict positive pictures of workers appeared to him as disingenuous and insular. Grundig's paintings, *Ächtet die Atombombe* (1954) and *Kampf dem Atomtod* (1958), originally intended to be part of a larger triptych, underscore the artist's Cold War anxiety and nightmarish apocalyptic visions. *Ächtet die Atombombe* would have been the left panel of the triptych. It depicts a still life with two flower vases standing next to an open art book showing Leonardo DaVinci's *Madonna Litta*, children's gloves, and a paper with a hand-scribbled cautionary quotation from Bertolt Brecht: "Great Carthage waged three wars / It was still powerful after the first / It was still inhabitable after the second / It was no longer traceable after the third." Behind the table is a pinned-up painting of a landscape consumed with fire. A red, orange, and white mushroom cloud rises from the destroyed

²¹ Kurt Liebmann, "Kampfgefährten der Arbeiterklasse: Zu einer Ausstellung des Gesamtwerkes von Hans und Lea Grundig," *Sonntag* 27 (1958), newspaper clipping in Akademie der Künste Archiv, Lea und Hans Grundig Nachlass, Signatur 254.

²² See, for example, Hans Grundig, "Sinn und Ziel der künstlerischen Ausbildung an der Akademie der bildenen Künste in Dresden," *Zeitschrift für Kunst* 3 (1947), 68.

buildings at the bottom of the scene. The colors of the subsuming cloud match the warm palette of the peonies and roses placed on the table in the still life. The brushstroke of a flower stem blends seamlessly into a brushstroke from the atomic bomb. In a similar play with spatial depth, an outline of a flower appears in the background painting within the clouds that rise up from the rubble. This formal interplay of flowers and flames suggest blurred boundaries between symbols of life (the flowers) and admonitions of death (the atomic bomb).

Brecht's words about the burning ancient city of Carthage—written only three years prior to Grundig's painting—had also been intended as a warning. They were the final words in his 1951 "Open Letter to German Artists and Writers," in which the writer called for unity between the two Germanys and for freedom in all forms of art and literature. In the letter, Brecht expressed his deep concern over the program for remilitarization within the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).²³ Grundig's 1954 painting continued Brecht's protest against escalating Cold War tensions between East and West. It had been less than ten years since the Allied air raids over Dresden had left the artist's city in ruins. Even more recent were the bombs that destroyed Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Then in 1950, when United States President Harry Truman announced plans to develop the hydrogen bomb, and in 1952, when the first thermonuclear device exploded in the Marshall Islands, protests occurred throughout the GDR. Campaigns against nuclear testing and the escalation of the arms race pervaded the streets and news outlets. As an artist, Grundig joined the anti-nuclear cause. For him, there was too much at stake with the possibility of more war.

²³ Bertolt Brecht, "Open Letter to German Artists and Writers," (1951), trans. Laura Bradley, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn, in Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Art and Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 317-319.

Kampf den Atomtod, intended to act as the center painting of the triptych, remained unfinished when the artist died in September 1958. It recalls the theme of the deceased figure that appeared within the predella for *Das Tausendjährige Reich* and also in both versions of *Den Opfern des Faschismus*. Here, the painting invokes an additional trope—the mother and child. A woman lies across the bottom of the painting, her face and belly illuminated by fire surrounding her body and the glow of an atomic mushroom cloud above. A young boy clutches his mother’s neck. His closed eyes suggest the futility of the future. This depiction of a dead mother and grieving child amid atomic ashes and hellish flames seems a far cry from the outline of Leonardo’s *Madonna Litta* that appeared on the turned-up book page in Grundig’s still life. Instead of an adoring Virgin Mary breast-feeding the Christ child, the stiff figure in *Kampf den Atomtod* can offer nothing to her desperate child. Years later, Lea Grundig recalled the potency of her late husband’s paintings: “The problem of nuclear power [...] goes beyond all boundaries of our experience and demands our imagination in a way that our imagination has never yet been required.”²⁴ She claimed that her partner’s anti-war work—even in their embrace of fantasy—held the capacity to awaken viewers and encourage them to combat heightening militaristic international threats.

One of the most striking examples from Grundig’s work from this period is his drypoint intaglio print, *Ächtet die Atomwaffen!* (1957). Here, the artist combines the theme of the mother and child present in *Kampf den Atomtod* with an atmosphere of mushroom cloud rings radiating above the horizontal figures. Instead of colorful blended brushstrokes, black stacatto gouges and marks in the metal plate create the dark chaotic

²⁴ Lea Grundig, *Über Hans Grundig und die Kunst des Bildermachens* (Berlin: Volk und Wissen Volkseigener Verlag, Berlin, 1978), 99.

environment of smoke and ash. The white space surrounding the figures at the bottom suggests a compositional separation between humanity and war. Still, matching the mother in *Kampf den Atomtod*, the woman here is also lifeless and incapable of consoling her mourning child.

The print was published on the final page of Grundig's 1958 *Junge Kunst* article, "Bundesgenosse der Arbeiterklasse." It functions here as a fitting link to a longer history of revolutionary artistic production. *Der Imperialismus* (1936), re-titled from the artist's 1930s *Tiere und Menschen* series, and *Ächtet die Atomwaffen!* are reproduced on opposite sides of the magazine's double-page spread. The earlier print depicts an aggressive open-jawed lunging tiger as a blatant symbol of imperialism. The print had previously been titled *Überfall* (Aggression), and here the "Imperialism" title in the magazine helps clarify the metaphor for contemporary viewers unaware of Grundig's larger body of work. Grundig's line and texture is expressive in conveying the animal as a violent symbol of oppression. Even at the end of his life, the artist did not back down from linking his art and political convictions. He showed the earlier print in order to demonstrate the trajectory of political critique. But the *mise-èn-page* in *Junge Kunst* does something more than create a historical timeline of revolutionary art; together, the side-by-side reproductions illustrate the relationship between aggressor and victim. "No artist is able to escape the responsibility placed in his hands today," Grundig wrote in the final paragraph of the article. "It burns in our nails, that we have to fight against atomic death by all means, against those generals who, on behalf of Adenauer, want to repeat the game of yesterday."²⁵

²⁵ Grundig, "Bundesgenosse der Arbeiterklasse," 30.

With the pen, brush, and the press, Grundig fought against what he saw as imperialist threats and reincarnations of fascist-like language and policy. As art historians today, it is important to consider the artist's postwar work against the landscape of polarizing early Cold War rhetoric and propaganda, and take note of the vexed political ideologies Grundig both resisted and accepted. But beyond this backdrop lies a story of moral and humanist conviction, and a fierce reminder of personal and collective memory.