

# ICWA LETTERS

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*Jill Winder is a Donors' Fellow of the Institute studying post-reunification Germany through the work and attitudes of its artists.*

## Lost on Rosenthalerstraße: An Introduction to Berlin Through its Architecture

By Jill Winder

AUGUST 9, 2004

BERLIN—In the six months between being appointed an Institute fellow in December 2003 and officially beginning my fellowship in July 2004, I have read with interest the newsletters of current fellows in the field, as well as Peter's reports of Institute meetings. But I must admit that when I received Peter's report of the June meeting at Monmouth University, with excerpts from the colloquium on post-Communist Russia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, I felt particularly at home in the ICWA community. The topic of "post-communism" (which I place here in quotes because of both the complexity and inadequacy of the term) has been the central interest of my work since 1998.

My fascination with this subject was born during my first brief visits to Berlin and Prague in 1997, which led to a year of living in Central and Eastern Europe in 1998–1999 as a Thomas J. Watson fellow. There I explored the cultural impacts of transition in the former Eastern bloc, saw exhibitions and interviewed artists, dissident writers, politicians, and theater directors. I wanted to examine the transformations of the previous ten years, to discover what sort of "political" engagement could be found in artistic and cultural production, and more fundamentally, to learn how young artists were defining "the political" after 1989.

Shortly after completing my Watson fellowship, I began working on a Master's degree in Curatorial Studies at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New York. I wanted to find ways to connect my previous study (of 20<sup>th</sup>-century political theory) with the contemporary art I had been exposed to in Central and Eastern Europe. It was in New York that I discovered, quite serendipitously, the Institute of Current World Affairs. In the fall of 2000, a few months after I began my Master's course, Jane Lombard (director of Lombard Fried Gallery and an old friend of Peter's) gave me a copy of one of Gregory Feifer's newsletters in which he reported on the Moscow Art Fair. After reading the report and the information about ICWA that appears in every newsletter, I immediately went to the Institute website to learn more, and resolved to write this mysterious Peter Bird Martin a letter as soon as I finished my degree.

I had been living in Berlin for a year, learning German and working as a freelance curatorial assistant and editor, when I was appointed an ICWA fellow last December. At the same time, however, I had just been offered my "dream job" (as I described it in interviews with the trustees) working as a curatorial assistant and editor on a cultural program in Amsterdam. The program's focus was Central and Eastern Europe, and the job would give me the opportunity to bring together my research from the past six years. My friend and colleague Maria Hlavajova, whom I met in Slovakia in 1999 and who now lives in The Netherlands, invited me to work with her developing a program that would include seven art exhibitions and the production of a large catalog/reader.

The program was initiated by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the



The author on Rosenthalerstraße

"In 1990," said Jill Winder in her fellowship application, "East German writer Heiner Müller wrote that German Unification signaled not only the end of socialism, but also 'the end of post-war German history.' I have become increasingly fascinated by what this statement means for the 'young' generation of Germans (those born between roughly 1968 and 1983). Their parents lived in a divided country that was haunted in both East and West by the specter of National Socialism. Confronting the political and moral implications of the Nazi regime was an omnipresent task, which defined much of post-war politics and cultural production.

"In contrast, the young generation came of age during the early years of German Unification, and the events of 1989 remain the seminal political and historical event that shapes their lives. There is no question that the initial phase of do-it-yourself organization and revolutionary excitement of the early 1990s, in Berlin in particular and the country in general, have come to an end. Significant transitions such as the expansion of the European Union, Germany's participation in peace-keeping missions in Bosnia and Afghanistan, the introduction of the Euro, the move of Germany's federal government from Bonn to Berlin, the fraying of German relations with the United States, and the architectural transformation of the capital itself have fundamentally altered the political landscape of the country.

"For the young generation, the early years of freedom and opportunity have morphed into a second coming-of-age, which is often symbolized by lining up at the Unemployment Office. Now that the first decade after unification has passed, this young generation is beginning to reflect back, not only on the 1990s, but also on their childhoods in both East and West Germany. In the last few years, in visual art, literature, film and music, this generation has begun to historicize itself. As an Institute of Current World Affairs Fellow, I would continue to pursue my interest in Europe's transition by exploring the cultural discourse about the experience of unification and the coming of age of this *zwischen*generation (in-between generation) in Germany."

Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science on the occasion of the Dutch presidency of the European Union, the first full-term presidency of the newly expanded 25-member Union. Peter and the trustees generously allowed me to defer beginning my fellowship term for six months so that I could accept the position.

From January to June of this year, I have been working on the visual-arts component of the program, with the overall title, *Thinking Forward*. (The full program of over 200 events all over Europe can be found at: [www.thinkingforward.nl](http://www.thinkingforward.nl).) Maria's primary motivation in the visual-arts program was to interpret the official political assignment as an opportunity to appeal modestly to European artists, thinkers, and others to take an active part in political and cultural discourse through contemporary art. The title of the visual arts program, *Who if not we should at least try to imagine the future of all this? 7 episodes on (ex)changing Europe*, thus functions as a kind of call for active engagement and participation from people in the cultural field to generate new and innovative discussions about the meaning of Europe and the role art can play within it.

There are seven exhibitions in the program: *Surfacing*, Ludwig Museum, Budapest; *Time and Again*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; *Cordially Invited*, BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht; *Out of the Shadows*, Witte de With, Rotterdam; *Safety and Peace! Order and Freedom!*, Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana; *Olandu biuras—Vilnius*, Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), Vilnius; and *Edward Krasiński's Studio*, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw. Organized by local curators, they present contemporary art by artists from the new EU member states (the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) as well as the Netherlands, and take place almost simultaneously this fall.

My primary responsibility in the program has been working as co-editor and managing editor of the book we produced for the project, which will be released in October 2004. It evolved into a 300-page publication, serving as a "catalog" previewing the seven exhibitions, and a "reader," which includes new and anthologized texts by some of the most significant contemporary European philosophers, thinkers and artists, including Etienne Balibar, Boris Groys, artist group IRWIN and Slavoj Žižek. Working on the book allowed us to bring together what Maria and I feel are key texts on the subject of post-communism, as well as writings that address topics such as European cultural identity, the transatlantic schism created after 9/11, migration and borders, and the political responsibility of intellectuals.

Over the last six months of working on this project, and more recently when reading excerpts of the colloquium at the June ICWA meeting, I have been continually struck by Germany's special position in both the post-communist discourse, and in the expanded European Union. The historical burden of National Socialism, the Second World War, the Holocaust, Germany's post-war division, as well as the more recent challenge of German reunification, create a complex and dynamic political, social and cultural situation in the country. German politicians have since 1945 been compelled to walk the fine line between rebuilding the country into a strong democratic and economic entity while remaining ever-conscious of the aggressions and crimes perpetrated by Hitler.

Yet the answer to the "German question"—how to keep Ger-

man power in check—is a European preoccupation that certainly pre-dates the twentieth century. The expansion of the EU and its potential impact on the German economy, Germany's relations with Poland, increased immigration into Germany, etc. have been widely debated not only in the country but in other "old" and "new" member states of the Union as well. The interesting development in the last year of a strong Franco-German political alliance, based in large part on the relationship between Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his French counterpart Jacques Chirac, and their opposition to the US-Iraq war, have led many political commentators to ask whether the real power in the EU will now be concentrated in the ad-hoc union of these age-old rival nations. These are political issues with great significance, not only for Germany and Europe, but also for the relationship between the US and Europe. These issues have an equal importance in the cultural field, for we can often see relatively abstract political debates more clearly in the way such debates are reflected not only in cultural and social discussions, but also through works of art themselves.

My ICWA fellowship will allow me to expand my work on the questions of post-communist transition and contemporary art, using Germany as a particular and

pressing case study. In my fellowship interview last November, David Hapgood and I were discussing the thorny issue of German identity, and identity in general. David thought that the most interesting question I might ask young Germans would be, "How do you identify yourself?" In other words, would my friends say: "I'm European," and then, "German," or might they reverse the order: "I'm German and European," or even more interestingly, they might respond, "I'm European, German, and I grew up in the former East/West?"

Over the course of the next two years, I will be learning much more about contemporary Europe and its transformations since 1989, the experience of German reunification, the question of German identity, and the coming of age of the young generation in Germany through the cultural discourse generated by artists and writers born between 1968 and 1983. As I returned to Berlin in July, this was the continuing task at hand that I carried with me.

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During my last months in Amsterdam, I had begun to grapple with what I would write in my first newsletter. What would be the best way to introduce Berlin, a city I had lived in before the fellowship, and that had

long since ceased to feel unfamiliar to me? I didn't come up with a solution until my first night in Berlin, when I suddenly felt lost on a street I knew intimately, and was reminded that the city's dynamism and whirlwind pace of change is one of the reasons that one can continually encounter Berlin, even after many visits and a year of residence, as startlingly *unheimlich*.

Late on the day of my arrival, I was on my way to my best friend's flat on Ackerstraße in Mitte and got off at the Weinmeisterstraße U-Bahn stop. It was July 1<sup>st</sup>, and the last time I had been in Berlin was less than three weeks before. I have taken this route to my friend's flat hundreds of times, yet that night as I exited the U-Bahn, I was completely disoriented by what I saw. Not recognizing the streetscape in front of me, I turned and walked two blocks in the wrong direction. I soon realized my mistake, turned around and saw what had caused my confusion: the unveiling of two glitzy new office complexes on both sides of Rosenthalerstraße and the opening of three new chic boutiques had so changed the appearance of the street I had seen a few weeks before that for a moment



this familiar street was beyond recognition.

The rapid and on-going urban transformation of Berlin since 1989 has become a metaphor for the political, social and cultural upheavals of reunification. Take Mitte, where my friend's flat is located, for example. Mitte, the central district of the city, has come to epitomize Berlin's metamorphosis. Since the late 1970s, the apartment buildings in Mitte, which were a few blocks from the East German government ministries and foreign embassies on the Unter den Linden, had been gradually emptied of tenants by the East German government, turning the maze of streets between Oranienberger Tor and Invalidenstraße (once part of the Jewish Quarter) into a kind of no-man's land.

Almost immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, thousands of young students, artists, and others flocked to this area, promptly squatting the buildings (inhabiting them illegally), opening underground clubs, bars and galleries in the hundreds of vacant storefronts and courtyards. Mitte is now the "Soho" (or perhaps by now the "Chelsea") of Berlin, filled with boutiques, hundreds of galleries and trendy bars and restaurants. Mitte is also the location of Potsdamer Platz, which during most of the 1990s had the distinction of being the largest construction site in the world. The area around Potsdamer Platz, directly in the middle of the city, was totally vacant.

From 1961 to 1989, the Berlin Wall had run through this area. When the Wall was torn down, there suddenly appeared a large swath of prime real estate in the city center. The German government initially considered making the space a public park, but soon gave in to the proposals of large multinational corporations such as Deutsche Bank, Deutsche Bahn, Sony Europe and others to develop the area. The construction of numerous "high-rise" office towers, corporate headquarters, a shopping arcade, cinemas and theatres, a casino, and high-end loft and apartment buildings were erected on the site from the mid-1990s–2000 by internationally known architects such as Renzo Piano and Arata Isozaki. Potsdamer Platz now looks like the business center of any mid-sized American city. The vacant space on Potsdamer Platz presented the city of Berlin with an extraordinary asset: a large area of open land in an old city. I, and many Berliners and Germans, feel that the opportunity to turn Potsdamer Platz into a truly public space, which would have also made room for some kind of memorial or markings of the Berlin Wall, was lost in the way the area was developed.

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Berlin is famous for its construction boom and the rebuilding of much of the city, but I would like to focus on an obvious aspect of this process that is infrequently mentioned: the fact that rebuilding often entails the erasure of what was there before. In the following pages, I will share some impressions about the current controversy raging over the proposed demolition and closure of two of the most historic buildings in the city center:



(Above) Aerial view of Tempelhof Airport, photo: Zeitort.de  
(Below) Tempelhof Airport, main departures hall



Tempelhof Airport and the Palast der Republik.

Tempelhof Airport is the oldest and most centrally located of Berlin's three city airports: Tempelhof, Tegel (in former West Berlin), and Schönefeld (in former East Berlin). It is located in Berlin's Kreuzberg 61 district (2 blocks from my former flat on Fidicinstraße) and from the airport it is a mere 10-minute U-Bahn ride to Friedrichstraße in the heart of the downtown area. By a vote in the Berlin Senate last month, the airport is scheduled to close by the end of October 2004. Tempelhof, a vast complex of buildings, houses not only airport operations, but also dozens of offices and laboratories that private firms have rented, generating additional revenue for the city.

Operations at Tempelhof are subsidized by the municipal and federal governments, and last year the airport ran a deficit of 15 million Euro (\$18 million). The city of Berlin, which currently has a budget deficit of 30 billion Euro (\$36.6 billion) says it can no longer afford to subsidize the airport, which is used primarily for cargo flights and small-scale commercial flights serving destinations within Germany, as well as in Belgium.

This withdrawal of funds is in due in part to the fact that the city government is already committed to bankroll the massive renovation of Schönefeld, which will be re-

opened as the Berlin Brandenburg International Airport (although it will not be operational until at least 2012).

The main problem with operations at the airport, says a spokesperson for the state-owned company that runs all three airports, is that the runways at Tempelhof are not long enough to accommodate the mid-sized planes that are the life-blood of discount airlines such as EasyJet. Thus, attracting more airline business to the airport is nearly impossible. Although a small German cargo airline has recently made a bid to buy Tempelhof, the government says its decision to close the airport is final.

The closure, which created a public outcry, has been recently reported in international newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. The announcement has been met by vigorous protests from airport employees, customers, local residents, historians and the architectural community, who argue that the extraordinary architectural and historical significance of the building demands preservation. In addition to these considerations, opponents of the closure also (quite rightly) fear that the next logical step would be the sale of the building by the city of Berlin to developers, and its subsequent demolition. Germany's federal government will not take responsibility for the building if air traffic ceases, and it is clear that the bankrupt city government would be hard-pressed to resist offers of a substantial scale from developers keen to take control of this estimated 300,000 square meters (approx. 984,000 square feet) of prime real estate in the center of the city.

Tempelhof Airport's extraordinary history began in 1923, when it replaced an existing airfield located on a former Prussian military parade ground. The first Lufthansa flights departed from and arrived at Tempelhof in the mid-1920s. Its current design was created by Ernst Sagebiel, a Nazi architect (who had studied with famed Modernist architect Erich Mendelsohn during the 1920s. Mendelsohn, a Jew, was forced to emigrate to Palestine and later to the US in 1933. When he did so, Sagebiel took over the Mendelsohn studio for a number of years). Sagebiel, who also designed Hermann Göring's Air Ministry, worked on the design between 1934-1936, and the airport was under construction until mid-1941—well into the Second World War.

The enormous structure is a remarkable example of monumental Nazi architecture and includes, among other things: 15 sentry-like stair towers used for observation, an extensive network of underground bunkers and a 1.2 kilometer (3/4 mile)-long roof-top amphitheater designed to seat 100,000 spectators who would be able to view the mass Nazi victory celebrations that Albert Speer was planning at the end of World War II. Though I have never been able to confirm this, it is said that Speer directed Sagebiel to design the airport so that the complex of buildings would look from above like an eagle in flight. Indeed, Tempelhof is the last fully preserved piece of Albert Speer's megalomaniacal architec-

tural plan for the new capital of the Third Reich, "Germania." It was damaged during the Second World War and seized by the Red Army in 1945.

After the partition of Berlin, Tempelhof became part of the American sector. Tempelhof's post-war claim to fame dates from 1948-1949, when it was the site from which planes took off and landed during the Berlin Airlift. The US Army re-built the damaged airport well into the 1950s (interestingly, during reconstruction the Army followed Sagebiel's original architectural plans to the letter). The decorative eagles that perch on the façade of the building are said to date from the Weimar Period, and thus survived the purge of Nazi ornamentation throughout the city in the post-war period. Tempelhof was used by the US Army from the mid-1970s-mid-1990s.

Last summer, I had a unique chance to see a part of Tempelhof that is completely closed to the public. Although the air-terminal area is publicly accessible, the vast majority of the building, including used and vacant wings of the structure, is not. My former roommate Tina's mother is a native Berliner and her father, Emory Holmes, is an American G.I. who came to Berlin to work at Tempelhof in the early 1970s. He worked in the air-traffic-control tower of Tempelhof until his retirement last



(Above) Tempelhof Airport, northern stair tower and façade  
(Below) Tempelhof Airport, view from Platz der Lüftbrücke



year. One night while he was on duty, Tina asked if we could pay him an (unofficial) visit because I was dying to get a view of the building from above. Emory took us through a maze of hallways, up to the air-traffic-control tower, and onto the roof from which we had an amazing view of the entire complex.

The vastness of Tempelhof and the grandiosity of the scale and scope of the structure was both spectacular and terrifying. Curiously, as we looked out onto the runway and took in the view, we saw glittering strobe lights, hanging lanterns, colored beams of light emanating from an elaborate (though makeshift) disco dance floor, lines of limousines, TV-camera equipment and clicking flashbulbs from a northern section of the building. The space, Emory told us, had been rented out for the exclusive premiere party of a blockbuster American film, *Pearl Harbor*.

Living next door to Tempelhof for a year has made the building a subject of fascination for me, and it is a place that I show to everyone who visits. I am angered by the proposed closing of the airport, or rather the fact that such a closing would almost certainly lead to the eventual demolition of the building. While the finances of keeping the airport open are prohibitive, there would be many other ideas for usage that could keep the building open. For example, commercial tenants could be sought for the building, and the main reception hall of the Airport could be used to house and display historical material about the Airlift or the unique architectural history of the building. The fact that the Berlin Senate has so cavalierly dismissed the historical and architectural preservationists' arguments about the importance of the building in 20<sup>th</sup>-century German history is something that many residents of Berlin, myself included, cannot understand.

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Of course, Tempelhof is not the only historic building under threat of demolition. The Palast der Republik (the East German Palace of the Republic), which happens to be my favorite building in Berlin, has been at the center of controversy ever since German reunification, but in recent months the debate has become more publicly visible, and has become a topic of conversation among young Germans in particular.

*Zitty* magazine is the Berlin equivalent of *Time Out* in London and New York: a trendy magazine with listings for art exhibitions, concerts, clubs, and movies. It recently ran a cover story about the Palast der Republik, entitled "*Lass Ihn Stehen! Warum der Palast der Republik bleiben muss*" (Let it be! Why the Palast der Republik must remain). February 2005 is the date



*Zitty* magazine cover, July 22-August 4, 2004 issue

planned for the beginning of the Palast's demolition, a project that will itself cost approximately 40 million Euro (nearly \$50 million).

The article argued that the building's cultural and political significance, as well as its architectural significance, should be reason enough to lobby for its preservation. There is certainly a bit of what the Germans call *ostalgie* (nostalgia for the East) operating in many people's love of the building. Beyond its political significance as the last significant GDR building in the city center, the Palast has become a cult object for many young Germans, primarily because of its "High Socialist" exterior and interior design, which date from the 1970s. The *Zitty* article also contained information about how the Palast, vacant for the last 13 years due to the removal of asbestos in the building's interior, has recently been used for cultural activities, proving that it could one day be used as a cultural center, adding to the vast offerings of the city. As is the case with Tempelhof Airport, there are economic alternatives to the building's demolition. Indeed, according to city officials quoted in the article, the building in its current state is worth over 100 million Euro (\$120 million).

The central driving force advocating sensible and high-quality cultural uses of the Palast is the Verein Zwischenpalastnutzung (Association for the Interim Use of the Palast). The association emerged from an "Urban Catalyst" EU research project at the Technical University in Berlin and was established in 2003 under the direction of architecture theorist Phillip Oswalt in cooperation with a variety of cultural institutions, theaters and alternative cultural spaces such as galleries and clubs in Berlin including *sophiensaele Theater*, *Club WMF* and the *State Opera on Unter den Linden*. It is primarily funded by private donations and support from participating institutions.

The association organized its first event in July 2003, offering limited public tours of the Palast interior to the public. Tickets for the tours sold out within hours of being available, and approximately 4,300 people were able to see the inside of the Palast for the first time in 13 years. The second event was a musical project called "The Wagner Complex," which was performed to a sold-out audience in September 2003. This year, the association has organized a diverse series of events that will run from August 20 to November 9, 2004. Projects include the premiere of renowned choreographer Sasha Waltz's "Dialogue 4", the "Shrinking Cities Music Festival" organized with *Kunst Werke* (a significant contemporary art space in Berlin) featuring international artists and DJs, an architectural conference, public tours and a performance of "Transformation" (a play about German reunification developed over the last two years by Berlin's *Hebbel Theatre*). The complete program can be found on the website of the association: [www.zwischenpalastnutzung.de](http://www.zwischenpalastnutzung.de).

Like that of Tempelhof Airport, the Palast der Republik has a long and fascinating history. The Palast, located on the *Unter den Linden*, was built in 1976 on



*Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani, Palast der Republik, Westseite, 2002, color print mounted on Alu Dibond, 25.6" x 8". Courtesy Galerie EIGEN + ART, Leipzig/Berlin*

the ruins of an eighteenth-century Prussian Imperial Palace. Seriously damaged by Allied air raids during World War II, the ruins of the Royal Schloß (Palace) were located in the eastern sector of Berlin after 1945. In ravaged post-war Germany (and particularly in the East), many rejected the country's imperial legacy as the origin of German militarism and nationalism. In this climate, the East German government considered the Royal Palace an aberration that demanded erasure. Dynamiting of the Royal Palace ruins began on September 6, 1950 and it took months to remove the debris. As Brian Ladd notes in his remarkable book, *The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape*, the site had a central ideological role in the mind of Walter Ulbricht, the Socialist Unity Party (SED)'s General Secretary who declared, "The center of our capital, the Lustgarten and the area of the palace's ruins, must become a grand square for demonstrations, upon which our people's will for struggle and for progress can find expression."

The Palast der Republik was opened on April 23, 1976. Designed by architect Heinz Graffunder, and located on Marx-Engels Platz, the building was in the center of the East German government district of Mitte. The rectangular structure, clad in white marble and Belgian bronze-colored reflective glass, was an unremarkable example of international high modernism. What made the Palast unique was its designation as a space for both official and public functions in keeping with the utopian socialist program of the GDR itself. In fact, only 5 percent



*Palast der Republik (structural beams)*  
photo: Verein Zwischenpalastnutzung

of the activities that occurred in the Palast were related to official political functions. The most important official space in the building was an auditorium where the East German Parliament infrequently met. A larger assembly hall (the *Volkskammer*) was the site of more frequent party congresses.

By far the most popular spaces in the Palast were

those used by the public: over a dozen bars and restaurants, a number of popular cafes, a bowling alley. In part, the significance of the Palast der Republik to GDR citizens was that it provided the closest thing to a truly public sphere in East Berlin. Such accessible public space for meeting and socializing was severely limited (or financially prohibitive) in a country where Ministry for State Security (Stasi) police surveillance was among the most aggressive in the Soviet bloc.

The symbolic and historical significance of the Palast only increased after the fall of the Communist regime. It was there that the new, freely elected East German Parliament voted to join the Federal Republic (West Germany) in August 1990. Ironically, just two weeks later, an official inspection of the premises by West German authorities declared the Palast completely contaminated by asbestos, and ordered the building to be closed and sealed.

After an almost three-year vacancy, the Palast was condemned to demolition in March 1993. This raised a substantial public outcry among former GDR citizens who demonstrated, signed petitions and formed preservation coalitions. Many resented the West's overarching influence, and saw the demolition as an attempt symbolically and visually to expunge the GDR period from German history. Some remembered the building as a truly communal place, one that could remain a symbol of the few positive memories of a now-vanished life. The building had come to embody East German identity in all its complexity and contradiction. The Palast was seen by many West Germans (and certainly some East Germans as well) as a traumatic testament to a divided Germany. The fate of the Palast also became entangled with that of the destroyed Royal Palace, when a rival protest group formed in the early 1990s and campaigned to rebuild it. The highly visible activities of this group were most strikingly demonstrated in the creation of a scaffold draped with a painted canvas façade exactly replicating the Royal Palace. This edifice, part stage set and part simulacrum, was erected on a site adjacent to the Palast and remained there as a popular tourist attraction for over a year. In 1995, the decision to demolish the Palast der Republik was overturned, but the building remained condemned. Three years later,

(Right) Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani, Palast der Republik, Nordseite, 2002, color print mounted on Alu Dibond, 11.2" x 8".

Courtesy Galerie EIGEN + ART, Leipzig/Berlin

(Bottom, left) Palast der Republik (interior hallway). Photo: Verein Zwischenpalastnutzung (Bottom, right)

Palast der Republik (Volkskammer (Main Hall)). Photo: Verein Zwischenpalastnutzung



asbestos removal began. It was completed in 2002 and ultimately cost the city government 76 million Euro (\$93 Million).

Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani are German artists of a younger generation whose work is informed not only by the post-1989 emergence of a "new" Berlin, but also by the removal of remnants of the past in the name of the future. Their large-scale installation, *Palast der Republik* (2001/2002), combines documentary footage of the Palast from the GDR television archive, photographs of the building's exterior and two video works filmed in the condemned interior of the building. It presents surprising evidence of stasis and suspension hidden within this context of overwhelming acceleration. Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the Palast's story is the paradox that while the famous exterior of the building has undergone only minor changes since 1989, the just-as-famous interior décor of the building in classic Socialist style has been totally destroyed in the asbestos-removal process.

In a way, the paradox of the Palast, where extraordinary internal change goes unnoticed, hidden by the familiar face of a famous façade, echoes the complex subjective upheavals experienced by the city's inhabitants. Fischer and el Sani's installation offers a perspective where erasure, representation, and recollection exist in the irreconcilable gap between a not-too distant past and an uncertain future. Literally, the building is a remnant of an old regime of power, one of many that has ruled from Berlin. To many West Germans and some former GDR citizens it is an eyesore that represents the oppressive police state of East Germany and its grandiose (and bankrupt) Communist ideology. To others, the Palast represents the social and communal life that survived and thrived even under such conditions. And for some, particularly young Germans such as Fischer and el Sani, it stands as an aesthetic document of the best things about the GDR, a nostalgic throwback to their childhood and personal history. The building now symbolically "houses" all of these conflicting and competing identities. By illuminating the Palast der Republik's status as an abandoned icon in the process of being rehabilitated for an undecided role in the future, the artists also imply the uncertain fate of the East German legacy.

After my long love affair with the Palast der Republik, I'm anxiously awaiting August 20, the opening of the cultural program organized by the Verein Zwischenpalastnutzung, when I will finally see the interior for the first time. As for the long-term fates of these two remarkable buildings in Berlin...we shall see. □

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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