

DAS MINSK

KUNSTHAUS IN POTSDAM

INTERPLAY

INTERPLAY is an ongoing collection format of DAS MINSK Kunsthaus in Potsdam. In each INTERPLAY, a work from the Hasso Plattner Collection encounters a work from another collection. Bringing the works together temporarily in the DAS MINSK Kabinett provides insights into the museum's own holdings and other collections. Sometimes INTERPLAY shows similarities, and sometimes differences between art and artists. This opens up new perspectives that can only arise in the space between works of art.

Good music is characterized by the perfect interplay between different instruments and voices. In jazz, musicians can get in each other's way and challenge bandmates. This is also the case in DAS MINSK's Kabinett, where two artworks encounter one another, not exclusively seeking harmony, but also confrontation. Just as in an interplay in jazz, an interaction occurs in which each side influences the other. Both work together and yet each is independent. Sometimes they attentively listen to one another, interrupt each other, or paraphrase one another. The interaction of the works creates a reciprocal effect that is transmitted into the exhibition space like the sound of a good piece of music.

INTERPLAY NO. 1: Willi Sitte & Monika Geilsdorf

In the first INTERPLAY at DAS MINSK Kunsthaus in Potsdam, two painted self-portraits meet: the *Self-Portrait with Paint Tube and Safety Helmet* (1984) by the artist Willi Sitte from the Hasso Plattner Collection and *Self-portrait* (1976) by the artist Monika Geilsdorf from the collection of the Brandenburgischen Landesmuseums für moderne Kunst (BLMK).

Self-portraits occupy a special position within portrait painting because they are simultaneously forms of both self-exploration and self-portrayal. In order to produce a self-portrait, the artist must rigorously observe themselves. They often use their own reflection as a model in these paintings, so they must be able to look themselves in the eyes. In any case, this intensive process can be arduous, both literally and metaphorically, but especially when the artist lives and works in a politically restrictive system, in which daily life as well as art demand particular existential decisions.

In a painted self-portrait, attention is given to every detail. These are artistic decisions, on a formal as well as on a personal and political level, which are consciously made by the artists in order to immortalize themselves in painterly form. The gaze or expression that the artist chooses for themselves is thereby just as decisive as the situation in which they present themselves, including the clothing and the attributes with which they are depicted.

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In the Kabinett of DAS MINSK the self-portraits are shown on opposite walls, so that the gazes of Monika Geilsdorf and Wille Sitte meet in the center of the exhibition space. Yet they are not only looking at each other, but also the visitors in the exhibition space.

The strong sense of tension between the self-portraits shown in the framework of INTERPLAY NO.1 begins with how they are painted. The style of both artists couldn't be more different: expressive brushstrokes with Sitte and precise objectivity and attention to detail with Geilsdorf.

While Monika Geilsdorf simply titles her work *Self-portrait*, Wille Sitte gives his painting the longer title *Self-Portrait with Paint Tube and Safety Helmet*. The artist thereby draws attention to two ostensibly decisive attributes for him: the paint tube and the hard hat. Painting implements such as a tube or brush are frequently found in self-portraits, but a hard hat? Sitte depicts himself as a painter, is naked and wearing a construction hard hat, a clear worker's symbol, or perhaps a metaphor of protection, whereby the easel also becomes a protective shield.

Monika Geilsdorf, on the other hand, does not present herself with a brush, but in her self-portrait instead holds a cigarette in her hand, the indispensable attribute of the moderns. The gesture is not new and recalls many a sophisticated self-portrait by Max Beckmann or Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler. And yet Monika Geilsdorf also gives a clear indication of her painterly identity: like Willi Sitte, she also integrates paint tubes in her self-portrait, placed on the wooden structure behind her. Her top resembles a jersey and shows her muscular shoulders, perhaps indications of her strength and agility. Her hairstyle and glasses are of a striking modernity. One almost gets the impression that the self-portrait is painted today, in 2022, not only because of the style but also because of the aesthetic and impression with which the artist shows herself: in everyday life, nonchalant, almost a bit noble with a defiant and self-assured gaze.

Monika Geilsdorf was a member of the Association of Visual Artists (VBK) of the former GDR. Her *Self-portrait* from 1976 was immediately presented in the VIII Art Exhibition of the GDR. In her 1978 publication commissioned by the Ministry for Culture and produced by the VBK on the occasion of the exhibition, the art historian Helga Möbius concludes that terms such as heroism, pathos, activism, and optimism could only be applied to a few paintings in the exhibition.¹ While the "efficacious, active, optimistic socialist persona" could still be found in "epochal images", the artists of the VIII Exhibi-

¹ Helga Möbius, "Menschenbild von heute und morgen", in Georg Kretschmann, ed., *Kunst im Dialog: Die VIII und die Öffentlichkeit* (East Berlin, 1978), pp. 93–97 (first published in *Bildende Kunst*, 1 [1978]).

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tion found a more realistic and contemporary means of expression. What is striking in these works is a new "sobriety, everydayness . . . that is no longer oriented toward outstanding individual personalities or special events, but rather toward the often difficult and stressful everyday life of the working people." Referring to the portraits on view, including the one by Monika Geilsdorf, Möbius says: "from their motionlessly still posture, firmly fixed in pictorial space, and their unassuming appearance, comes the impression of steadiness and reliability, of willingness and ability to take on and cope with burdens not only in a one-time feat of strength, but in the long run."² What from a contemporary view can be interpreted as a challenging view toward the system, almost rebellious, was thus interpreted by Möbius at the time as a sign of continued perseverance in the system. The subversive, modern, and everyday qualities of Geilsdorf's portraits were thereby inverted into a symbol of subordination.

After making statements critical of the system and attempting suicide twice in the early 1960s, the artist Willi Sitte experienced what criticism from above can lead to: "What a brilliant artist comrade Sitte could be if he consistently chose Socialist Realism,"³ was the unambiguous demand of Bernard Koenen, first secretary of the district manager of the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) in Halle, in the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* in December 1962. In the following year, Sitte published a self-critical statement in the same paper. 1963 thereby turned out to be a decisive year for the artist's work. A change of heart took place, caused by the pressure exerted by a high-level party functionary as well as the Stasi. This experience would henceforth make an impact on his painting. Sitte's public commitment to the party was rewarded by a large exhibition in 1971 in Halle. In 1989, he said, "In the moment that art is autonomous, making itself independent of state and party, it withdraws from life, from people. I consider this very dangerous."⁴ This brings us back to the hard hat: Did a painting style that conformed to the system form the hard hat?

From a contemporary perspective, the hard hat could be understood as a subversive commentary within a political system that had, to some extent, forced the artist to publicly criticize himself. But can an artist considered a "party painter", such as Willi Sitte, who consistently held different official positions within the system, be subordinated?

"Arbeit am Ich" was the title of journalist Andreas Platthaus's review of Willi Sitte's

² Ibid., p. 93f.

³ Bernard Koenen, "Erfolg und Schwanken Bildender Künstler," in *Neues Deutschland*, December 19, 1962, p. 6.

⁴ Willi Sitte in Renate Luckner-Bien, "Bildende und angewandte Kunst" Gespräch mit Willi Sitte," in *Sittes Welt: Willi Sitte: Die Retrospektive*, Christian Philipsen, ed., exh. cat. Kunstmuseum Moritzburg Halle/Saale (Leipzig, 2021), p. 292.

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comprehensive retrospective in 2021 in Halle an der Salle, fifty years after his very first retrospective in the same city and 100 years after his birth. The *Self-Portrait with Paint Tube and Safety Helmet* from the Hasso Plattner Collection was also shown there. With regard to this comprehensive and meticulously researched exhibition, Plattenhaus states, "In this painter of German discord, the duplicity of our nation after 1945 is reflected. One looks and gazes in astonishment and learns."⁵

"Arbeit am Ich" is indeed central to the understanding of German-German history after 1945. This was a time in which the personal, political, and artistic were interwoven in an existential way. It is central for many of the exhibitions at DAS MINSK. Thus, the first INTERPLAY opens with self-portraits by two artists whose work could not be more different formally. But both chose the self-portrait, which likely reveals more about the artist's preoccupation with themselves and their surrounding society than any other genre.

"How much 'for' is necessary and how much 'against' is possible without breaking from the circumstances and betraying one's own roots?" This question, which was raised by the journalist and filmmaker Sylvie Kürsten in our first AUDIOSTORIES, leaves space for many different answers and perspectives, then and now. It's worth listening carefully to the responses of both artists in DAS MINSK because they not only tell us something about their own time, but also about the present, and they make palpable the fragility of artistic freedom, which is too often taken for granted.

Text: Paola Malavassi, director DAS MINSK Kunsthaus in Potsdam

⁵ Andreas Platthaus, "Arbeit am Ich: Ein Leben wie gemalt für das zwanzigste Jahrhundert: Das Museum Moritzburg in Halle zeigt das Werk des umstrittenen DDR-Künstlers Willi Sitte," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 228, October 1, 2021, p. 9.