

**ACCOMPANYING  
BOOKLET**



**CURATED BY  
DANIEL MILNES**

**01.02.2025 –  
10.08.2025**

**IN DIALOGUE**

**IN DIALOGUE  
HASSO PLATTNER COLLECTION:  
ART FROM THE GDR**

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# STUDIO CONVERSATIONS

In 1976, the Leipzig publishing house VEB E. A. Seemann released the book *Ateliergespräche* (Studio Conversations) by the art historian Henry Schumann. Schumann and chief editor Alfred Langer met at an exhibition opening, which led to their first appointment at the publishing house in January 1974. Schumann then submitted an proposal for a book project that represented a novelty in what was, relatively speaking, a still nascent art historiography of the GDR: a series of studio conversations in a dialogical format. In direct exchange, the artists would have the opportunity to speak for themselves, shedding light on current artistic and sociopolitical issues, as well as sharing the personal motivations behind their artistic work. In the resulting publication, which was sponsored by the publishing house over three years of its production and became the principle arts and culture publication of their 1976 program, twenty artists engaged in a dialogue with Schumann

The second comprehensive presentation of the Hasso Plattner Collection at DAS MINSK takes Schumann's book as its starting point and focuses on dialogue as a means to approach art from the GDR. On the ground floor of DAS MINSK, the book *Ateliergespräche* has literally been picked apart, creating a new kind of encounter with the historical conversations in the space. In addition to the individual pages from the book, there are works on display by artists who participated in the conversations with Schumann at the time: Bernhard Heisig, Harald Metzkes, Werner Tübke, Peter Herrmann, Ursula Mattheuer-Neustädt, Núria Quevedo, and Arno Rink. The unusual combination of established and emerging artistic perspectives, along with the focus on the artists' individual voices and the virtual opening of the private studio space to a broader public, signaled a relaxation of the GDR's cultural policy.

However, this shift was fundamentally compromised in the same year, 1976, by a series of cultural-political and social events—such as the expatriation of the poet and songwriter Wolf Biermann and the public self-immolation of Pastor Oskar Brüsewitz in Zeitz.

A timeline in the exhibition space places *Ateliergespräche* within the context of the cultural and social history of the time, outlining its development from Henry Schumann's first contact with the publishing house in 1974 to the printing and distribution of the book in 1977. The political and cultural historical events running parallel to Schumann's work illustrate the contradictions and the challenges inherent in writing a contemporary art history.

DM

### **Arno Rink (1940–2017)**

*Porträt Henry Schumann* (Portrait of Henry Schumann), 1968

Arno Rink's *Porträt Henry Schumann* (Portrait of Henry Schumann) was the impetus for the exhibition *IN DIALOGUE*. The head and shoulders of the art historian and critic can be seen in a studio space against a backdrop of stacked canvases. The painting was created in the first year after Rink's graduation and a section of his large-scale thesis work *Lied vom Oktober I* (October Song I) (1966–67) is visible in the background. This work aroused great interest and found its way into what was then the Deutsches Armeemuseum (German Army Museum). It was likely in this context that contact was established with Henry Schumann, who worked at the museum as an art historian. The Army Museum was located at the Marmorpalais in Potsdam while a new museum building was being built for the collection. Schumann lived and worked in the city from 1966 until the completion of the new building in Dresden in 1973 when Schumann moved back to Saxony. After he stopped working with the museum, he relocated to Leipzig and began working on his *Ateliergespräche*. Rink's portrait from 1968 can almost be read as a painted foreshadowing, as Rink and Schumann met again seven years later to record an interview for the volume. On this later occasion, Henry Schumann in turn produced a series of photographic portraits of Rink. In the images, Rink can be seen playing with his greyhound on a sofa.

DM

## **Wilhelm Klotzek (\*1980)**

*Titel für S. H. P.* (Titles for S. H. P.), 2023

For the exhibition *WERK STATT SAMMLUNG* in the summer of 2023, DAS MINSK invited artist Wilhelm Klotzek to respond to the exhibited artworks from the Hasso Plattner Collection with his own works. The result was a humorous yet critical examination of the collection, which focuses on art from the GDR. Klotzek designed book covers for fictitious publications that, as a kind of visual poetry, open up unbiased new perspectives on the past and suggest alternative narrations of (GDR art) history: "Books record history. I imagine other possible histories with my invented book covers." Considering the often one-sided perception of to so-called "GDR art," as well as the partially controversial positions in the collection, Klotzek addresses the role of printed matter and collections in defining an art canon and encourages its continuous revision from a contemporary perspective.

LB

## **Werner Tübke (1929–2004)**

*Der Narr und das Mädchen* (The Jester and the Girl), 1982

*Drei Frauen aus Cefalù* (Three Women from Cefalù), 1983

*Kalenderblätter – Panorama Bad Frankenhausen*

(Calendar pages – Panorama Bad Frankenhausen)

First broadcast: 16.1.1977

## **EARLY BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION IN GERMANY. THE MONUMENTAL PAINTING IN BAD FRANKENHAUSEN**

In 1976, the year when *Ateliengespräche* was released, the Leipzig painter Werner Tübke took on the largest commission in GDR art history. He began his work on the panoramic painting *Frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland* (Early Bourgeois Revolution in Germany) (1976–87), which was to be created as part of a monument to the German Peasants' War in the Thuringian town Bad Frankenhausen. 2025 marks the 500th anniversary of this historic event. Tübke painted his monumental circular painting on a 14-meter high and 123-meter-long canvas, which the Soviet textile plant in Sursk wove in one piece especially for the work. Tübke spent the first years of the commission doing research and creating sketches and paintings, through which he acquired visual material to implement in the panorama painting. Two paintings in the Hasso Plattner Collection were created during this phase: *Der Narr und das Mädchen* (The Jester and the Girl) (1982) and *Drei Frauen aus Cefalù* (Three Women from Cefalù) (1983). The jester can be found in Tübke's final version in Bad Frankenhausen. With the support of fifteen assistants, Tübke began work on the monumental painting in 1983. In 1987, he finished the work and signed the painting. The

panorama was made accessible to the public only after a second construction phase, on September 14, 1989. The largest artistic work of the GDR became public just before the fall of the state that commissioned it.

In a video originally broadcast on television as part of the program *Kalenderblätter* in 1977, one sees the process of the memorial's creation not only from the perspective of the painter, but also from that of the construction workers, the supervising historian and former history teacher Horst Müller, and the town's residents. Even if Tübke's painting aimed to create a dialog between a timeless humanism and the artistic achievements of the European Renaissance, the program clearly demonstrates that the project was not only a painting, but also a socialist memorial that was intended to leave a lasting impression on the geographical and ideological landscape. The historical sequences and the statements made in them must therefore be critically examined within the context of official cultural policy and the nationalist rhetoric of the communist regime in East Germany.

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### **Rolf Händler (1938–2021)**

*Maler* (Painter), 1988

### **Wolfgang Mattheuer (1927–2004)**

*Das graue Fenster* (The Gray Window), 1969

*Interieur* (Interior), 1976

### **Harald Metzkes (\*1929)**

*Regentag im Atelier* (Rainy Day in the Studio), 1987

### **Stefan Plenkers (1945–2024)**

*Raumdurchblick* (View Through a Room), 1983

### **Johannes Heisig (\*1953)**

*Friedrichstadt*, 1988

## **STUDIO PAINTINGS**

The artist studio can be both a private place of introspection and work as well as a space of encounter and exchange. In Henry Schumann's *Ateliergespräche*, the author describes the place where he met each of his conversation partners in an introductory paragraph preceding the interviews. His descriptions reveal the diversity of these working environments, which correspond to the medium and working methods of the respective artists and range from their own apartments to a quarry. The exhibition *IN DIALOGUE* brings together a series of painted studio depictions of a more classical and archetypal nature.

Two of the rooms are described by Schumann in his book. The Wilhelminian-style corner house at the Clara-Zetkin-Park in Leipzig, for example, where Ursula Mattheuer-Neustädt and Wolfgang Mattheuer had workspaces in their shared apartment. "High, well-proportioned rooms" with a "cozy atmosphere" and "a muted, warm color scheme" can be seen in the painting *Interieur* (Interior) (1976), in which Ursula Mattheuer-Neustädt sits concentrated at a table. In the background, a door opens to the artist's study. *Das graue Fenster* (The Gray Window) (1969), on the other hand, offers a view of the city from Wolfgang Mattheuer's studio, which is interrupted by a strange guest who flies past on a pigeon and seems to be calling a message into the room through the empty easel. The creative tumult in Harald Metzkes's *Regentag im Atelier* (Rainy Day in the Studio) (1987) has an equally surreal effect, which strongly differs from Schumann's prosaic description of the view from the building on what is now Kollwitzstraße in the "working class" district Prenzlauer Berg, which includes the water tower and Immanuelkirche. Further paintings show the studio spaces of Stefan Plenkers, the painter Rolf Händler with his cat, as well as a view from Hubertus Giebe's studio, painted by Johannes Heisig.

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# THE CONVERSATIONS THAT DID NOT TAKE PLACE

On the upper floor of DAS MINSK, works of art from the collection enter into dialogue to address broader questions about the GDR's art history and cultural policy after 1976. In contrast to the presentation on the first floor, where Schumann's historical conversations are visualized, the focus in the second part of the exhibition is on conversations that could not take place for various reasons. This speculative approach from a contemporary perspective expands existing narratives on art in the GDR in the 1970s and 1980s and illustrates both the restrictions of the GDR's authoritarian art system as well as the innovative and subversive creative power of the artists who worked in this system.

In the first dialogue, Gabriele Stötzer's strong oppositional voice comes into contact with recognized painters in the cultural-political system of the GDR: Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Willi Sitte, and Werner Tübke. A second impossible dialogue is painted by Ralf Kerbach directly on canvas: it shows an encounter with his friends Sascha Anderson and Cornelia Schleime, who were still in the GDR at this time while Kerbach had already emigrated to West Berlin. A third dialogue between Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, Robert Rehfeldt, and Thomas Schulz demonstrates the significance of mail art as a space of possibility that transcended national borders, even amidst the restricted freedom of travel in the GDR.

These three staged dialogues are complemented by other works from the Hasso Plattner Collection that illustrate the dynamic between speaking out and being silent, between expression and withdrawal.

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# DIALOGUE 1.

## **Gabriele Stötzer (\*1953)**

*Seher in der Wüste* (Seer in the Desert), 1978–79

## **Gabriele Stötzer & Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Willi Sitte, and Werner Tübke ON VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY**

On November 16, 1976, the critical songwriter and musician Wolf Biermann was expelled from the country for alleged “gross violations of civic duties.” Although he had already been banned from working in the GDR in 1965, Biermann was unexpectedly granted permission to leave the country for concerts in West Germany in November 1976. At the invitation of the IG Metall trade union, he was able to play a concert for approximately 8,000 visitors at the Sporthalle in Cologne that lasted over four and a half hours. Just two days later, it was officially announced on GDR television that Biermann’s citizenship would be revoked. This was followed by a wave of protests against the expatriation among cultural workers in the GDR, led by Berlin artists.

In Erfurt, Gabriele Stötzer typed up the Berlin letter and attached the twenty signatures that she and her husband had collected locally. Stötzer wanted to personally bring the petition to Berlin, but on the evening before the trip her apartment was searched and Stötzer was arrested. After many conversations and refusing to change her stance in favor of the official state position in writing,

Stötzer was imprisoned. Following five months in custody in Erfurt, she served a year in Hoheneck Women’s Prison. The painting *Seher in der Wüste* (Seer in the Desert) (1978–79) was created directly after her release as part of a series of small-format paintings with the title *Aus der Isolierung nach dem Knast* (Out of Isolation After Prison), in which Stötzer worked through the psychic and physical experiences of her time in detention.

Two weeks before Biermann was expatriated, Manfred Schneckenburger, the artistic director of the upcoming documenta 6, invited Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Willi Sitte, and Werner Tübke to take part in the major exhibition. All four accepted the invitation and became the first official representatives of the GDR at documenta with the support of the Verband Bildender Künstler (Association of Visual Artists). Their works were supposed to hang next to those of the Dresden non-conformist A. R. Penck, as well as Georg Baselitz and Gerhard Richter, who had previously emigrated to the Federal Republic. However, all three withdrew their paintings from the exhibition, partially in protest against the participation of artists from the GDR.

While the works of Mattheuer, Sitte, Tübke, and Heisig were made visible to a global audience at documenta as figureheads of the GDR’s cultural policy, Gabriele Stötzer was in prison working as a forced laborer in the production of textiles bound for the Western market. In addition to Stötzer’s painting, archive film material on documenta 6 (1977) is on display that offers viewpoints from both the East and the West. Works by Heisig, Mattheuer, Sitte, and Tübke provide a perspective on the use of art in the service of nation-building in the GDR.

DM

## **Gabriele Stötzer (\*1953)**

*...hab' ich Euch nicht glänzend amüsiert?*  
(...did I not wonderfully amuse you?), 1989

The painting *Seher in der Wüste* (1977–78) marked the beginnings of Gabriele Stötzer's path as a visual artist. In addition to her literary activities and her political activism, in the following years she developed a multilayered practice that encompassed media such as performance, film, photography, textile, and painting on various surfaces. The development of alternative artistic communities and spaces in Erfurt played a key role in this. In 1978, Stötzer was part of a group of young artists who set up a series of workshops in the spirit of the Bauhaus at Pergamentergasse 41 in Erfurt's old town, including a photo lab, a screen printing workshop, a wood-working workshop, and a textile workshop, which Stötzer managed. In 1980, she took over the organization of the Galerie im Flur (Gallery in the Hallway), whose activities were finally terminated in 1981 by the Erfurt District Administration of State Security and the Department of Culture of the City Council shortly before the opening of a planned exhibition of works by Ralf Kerbach. In 1984, Stötzer founded Künstlerinnengruppe Erfurt (Erfurt Women Artists' Group), thereby opening a space for experimental and subversive art by women in the city. The group produced performances, fashion objects, photographs, and Super 8 films, celebrating a self-determined image of women and denouncing the patriarchal structures in GDR society. An example of this is the film *... hab' ich Euch nicht glänzend amüsiert?* (... did I not wonderfully amuse you?), filmed in 1989, in which Stötzer paints her body and face with white and red paint. In addition to her artistic work, Stötzer has been a strong voice in exposing the history of SED injustice in Erfurt since 1989. In 2024, she was awarded the prestigious Pauli Prize for Contemporary Art.

DM

## **Wolfgang Mattheuer (1927–2004)**

*Freundlicher Besuch im Braunkohlenrevier*  
(Friendly Visit to the Lignite Coalfield), 1974

*Freundlicher Besuch im Braunkohlenrevier* (Friendly Visit to the Lignite Coalfield) is one of six paintings by Wolfgang Mattheuer that were exhibited at documenta 6 in Kassel. In contrast to the classical view of landscape painting, which often shows a wild or unspoiled image of nature, Mattheuer's work clearly shows the active transformation and damage to the environment caused by human activity. In this case, a lignite mining area serves as a setting and refers to the energy policy of the SED, under which the GDR became the world's largest producer of lignite. In the foreground, the viewer encounters the gaze of a worker walking across the open-cast mine site toward his fellow miners. Their path is crossed by three strange figures wearing clothing unsuited to the terrain and with mask-like boxes instead of heads. In an allusion to the class of party functionaries, the first figure carries a roll of paper—presumably a speech—and tulips wrapped in plastic ready to present to an exceptional worker. The figures arrive at the wrong time, cast no shadows, and seem to belong to a different reality. These clearly critical moments in the painting did not prevent it from being presented at documenta. According to the 1977 catalog text written by Lothar Lang, Mattheuer's paintings were "aimed at discovering a new social reality" and "intellectually and visually . . . grew out of, and developed in a continual dialogue with the present circumstances in the GDR."

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**Willi Sitte (1921–2013)**

*Angela Davis und ihr Richter* (Angela Davis and her Judge), 1972

**Werner Tübke (1929–2004)**

*Kreuzabnahme* (Descent from the Cross), 1982

In 1970–72, the GDR supported the release of the American communist and Black Power activist Angela Davis with the campaign “A Million Roses for Angela.” Willi Sitte’s *Angela Davis und ihr Richter* (Angela Davis and her Judge) (1972) was created in this context, combining solidarity with African Americans and Davis as “the hero of the other America” with a critique of the “class enemy” represented by the US. Davis is elevated iconically, similar to a Madonna, while the judge is depicted as a threatening being, an embodiment of imperialism and war. Sitte’s painting was exhibited in 1972–73 at the VII. Kunstausstellung der DDR (7th Art Exhibition of the GDR) together with other paintings in honor of the civil rights activist. On June 4, 1972, Davis was acquitted and welcomed as a state guest in the GDR that same year.

Fifteen years later, Werner Tübke’s *Kreuzabnahme* (Descent from the Cross)—on view here in a smaller, earlier version from 1982—was presented at the X. Kunstausstellung der DDR (10th Art Exhibition of the GDR). The biblical depiction of Christ being taken down from the cross in the detailed manner of the old masters is linked to Tübke’s monumental Peasants’ War panorama *Frühbürgerliche Revolution in Deutschland* (1976–87), which was commissioned by the GDR government in order to glorify the peasant leader Thomas Müntzer as a revolutionary pioneer and symbolic figure for social justice and class struggle.

These works demonstrate how the national art exhibition in Dresden—especially in its initial phase—became a state-building moment. Through the selection by jury and the awarding of commissions, an attempt was made to define a controlled pictorial program with its own iconographic characteristics and historical models, which was intended to consolidate and strengthen socialist values in the ideological struggle of the Cold War.

LB

## **Bernhard Heisig (1925–2011)**

*Venedig (Venice)*, 1989–90

The painting *Venedig (Venice)* shows a canal view of the Italian lagoon city captured in lively brush strokes. A red-and-white striped balloon floats in the sky over the Scuola Grande di San Marco.

The motif very likely relates to Bernhard Heisig's participation in the GDR's presentation at the Venice Biennale in 1984 and that of his wife Gudrun Brüne in 1988. In the years between 1982 and 1990, the GDR took part in the Venice Biennale four times. The contributions were presented in the Venetian Pavilion at the end of the Giardini.

The initiative to participate in the international art show came from Willi Sitte, who was president for the Association of Visual Artists in the GDR, as well as the association's vice president for international relations, Hermann Raum, who organized the GDR's presentations at the biennale. Participating in Venice was a further step in the GDR's cultural policy toward positioning itself as an autonomous country in the international community and provoked the new inscription "Bundesrepublik Deutschland" on the West German Pavillion. The presentation in 1990 was the last official manifestation of the art of the GDR and took place within the context of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the transitional moment of reunification. Henry Schumann wrote the accompanying essay for this last presentation in Venice, which featured works by the painters Hubertus Giebe and Walter Libuda.

DM

## **The GDR and documenta 6**

In the summer of 1974, a group of international artists and curators convened in West Berlin to initiate the preparations for the sixth edition of the international art exhibition documenta. Klaus Honnef, Pontus Hultén, Kynaston McShine, Karl Ruhrberg, and Evelyn Weiß were interested in exhibiting recent developments in the painting of the GDR in Kassel. A few months later, the XXVI. General Assembly of the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art (AICA) took place in Berlin and Dresden, which brought critics from the West—including documenta team member Klaus Honnef—to the East and enabled direct contact with art in the GDR. In 1976, the designated artistic director of the documenta exhibition Manfred Schneckenburger made contact with the permanent representative of the Federal Republic in the GDR and requested support in inviting artists from the GDR to documenta.

On November 2, 1976, invitations were issued to the artists Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Willi Sitte, and Werner Tübke. Although these invitations were sent by the documenta office directly to the individual artists, participation was not possible without the involvement of the SED's cultural administration, if only because Willi Sitte at this time was the president of the Association for Visual Artists. Sitte and SED cultural functionaries viewed the invitation as an opportunity to showcase the political-ideological conception of art in the GDR to a Western audience. Additionally, it aligned with the GDR's efforts to gain recognition as a state by the Federal Republic. Finally, the show also served to increase the visibility of GDR painters in the West. This interest arose from a desire to enhance the marketability of their art abroad and to benefit from the increased foreign exchange earnings it generated.

The art historian and curator Lothar Lang was tasked with the organization of the presentation. Once an ally of the unofficial art scene in the GDR, Lang was recruited as an IM (unofficial collaborator) for the Ministry for State Security in the summer of 1976, later targeting diplomats and East German artists who had already relocated to West Germany.

In the summer of 1977, paintings by Heisig, Mattheuer, Tübke, and Sitte as well as sculptures by Jo Jastram and Fritz Cremer came to Kassel for documenta. Among them was Mattheuer's *Freundlicher Besuch im Braunkohlenrevier* (Friendly Visit to the Lignite Coalfield), which is now part of the Hasso Plattner Collection. The participation of the GDR artists in the painting section created an uproar and was the subject of several protests: the artists Georg Baselitz and Markus Lüpertz, who had emigrated from the GDR, withdrew their works shortly before the opening. The non-conformist painter A. R. Penck, who was still living in Dresden at the time, also felt compelled to have his paintings removed shortly before the start of the exhibition due to the participation of officially recognized painters from the GDR, as well as the overcrowded hanging situation in the Fridericianum. Equally unsatisfied with the hanging, Gerhard Richter withdrew his paintings several days after the opening. During the course of the exhibition, there were also protest actions by a group of artists who had left the GDR and called themselves "Die ungehorsamen Maler" (The Disobedient Painters). They drew attention to the unequal treatment and repression of artists in the East who did not conform to the political doctrine with their works.

The GDR's participation at documenta was discussed in several newspapers and art journals. In the exhibition, the report from the GDR TV program *Kulturmagazin* is juxtaposed with footage

from the Hessischer Rundfunk report on the painting section of documenta, in which artists from the GDR appear prominently. The recordings show the different approaches to mediating art from the East and West in the respective media landscapes. A thoroughly negative tirade about Western art from the East is contrasted by a rather subtle rejection of GDR painting by the Western media, whose portrayal, after initially appearing open and objective, ends with a pointed conclusion on the irrelevance of GDR painting.

DM

The information on the preparation of documenta 6 and the participation of the GDR comes from the following publication: Alexia Pooth, *Exhibition Politics: Die documenta und die DDR*, Bielefeld 2024.

## DIALOGUE 2.

### **Ralf Kerbach (\*1956)**

*Dresdner Freunde* (Dresden Friends), 1983–84

### **Ralf Kerbach, Cornelia Schleime, and Sascha Anderson CROSSING BOUNDARIES**

A second conversation that could not have taken place is visible in a painting by Ralf Kerbach. In *Dresdner Freunde* (Dresden Friends) (1983–84), the painter can be seen at a table with the artist Cornelia Schleime and the author Sascha Anderson. Together the three formed an important part of the Dresden subculture of the late 1970s and early 1980s and played together with others in the punk band *Zwitschermaschine*. The painting was created at a time when Ralf Kerbach had already emigrated to West Berlin due to the limited possibilities for creative development and professional self-realization in the GDR. The painting thus represents an imaginary encounter or a memory of a conversation with friends who had remained in Dresden at the time.

In 1979, the exhibition *Dezennien Teil I* (Decades Part I), known as the “door exhibition” took place at the Leonhardi-Museum in Dresden, in which Kerbach and Schleime participated as students of the academy, as well as Sascha Anderson. The different ways in which doors were transformed into art objects caused an uproar in local cultural politics due to the use of artistic materials that were not conventional for the GDR, as well as the door’s politically

explosive power as a symbol. Kerbach was then advised to voluntarily exmatriculate from the Dresden Academy, a request he complied with in November 1979. After a few years of independent artistic activities and an exhibition ban imposed shortly before the opening of his solo presentation at the unofficial Erfurt Galerie im Flur, Kerbach decided to apply to leave the country. In September 1982, the application was granted and he relocated to West Berlin.

Cornelia Schleime also came under scrutiny from cultural officials and the Ministry for State Security (Stasi) due to her non-conformist, provocative works and exhibition ideas. She, too, was compelled to leave the country and in 1984 she settled in West Berlin. Sascha Anderson followed two years later. It was not until the early 1990s that it was exposed that Anderson was an IM (unofficial collaborator) of the Stasi and had worked for the State Security since 1975—throughout his acquaintance with Kerbach and Schleime. Even after moving to West Berlin, Anderson continued to report to the Stasi about the activities of former GDR citizens in the West.

Other works relating to the themes of exile, emigration, and border crossings between East and West Germany are grouped around Kerbach’s painting, including works by Schleime, Günter Firit, Stefan Plenkens, and Gerhard Richter, who emigrated from Dresden to the West as early as 1961 when the Wall was built. Artist Peter Herrmann—a signatory of the Biermann petition, whose work is presented on the ground floor—also emigrated to West Germany in 1984.

DM

## **Cornelia Schleime (\*1953)**

*Styx I*, 1984

*Styx II*, 1984

The paintings *Styx I* and *Styx II* originate from a period of upheaval in the life of the artist Cornelia Schleime, who moved from the GDR to West Berlin in the year they were created. Before this, Schleime was part of the East German underground art scene, where she was subject to state restrictions due to her non-conformist work. The title of the paintings refers to the mythological river Styx, which in classical Greek mythology marks the boundary between life and death—a metaphor for her own experience with borders and crossing frontiers, both geographic as well as artistic. The works, created in ink, are characterized by an expressive, surreal-looking visual language in which abstract and figurative features intertwine. They exemplify Schleime's exploration of themes such as vulnerability and resilience and her testing of the possibilities of artistic expression in repressive systems.

Schleime was also active as an author, filmmaker, and musician and, among other projects, founded the punk band Zwitschermaschine. The film *Puttenest* (Cherubs' Nest) (1984) is her last filmic work created in the GDR and one of the few works that the artist could save when she left the country. She had to leave behind almost all of her early work. The film becomes an important testimony that captures motifs from Schleime's lost oeuvre, as well as the melancholic monotony of the places depicted and her day-to-day life at the time. Some scenes show decaying cherubs in a dreary-looking Potsdam Sanssouci.

LB

## **Günter Firit (1947–2010)**

*Selbstzerstörung* (Self-Destruction), early 1980s

The painting *Selbstzerstörung* (Self-Destruction) by Günter Firit was created in the early 1980s during a time of several upheavals in the painter's life. In 1982, one year after his separation from his wife Maria Firit, she was found dead in her apartment. The work was most likely painted as a means of coming to terms with this event, as suggested by the female sexual characteristics of the figure depicted. Around the time of its creation, the painting was presented in several exhibitions, including the *1. Leipziger Herbstsalon* (1st Leipzig Salon d'Automne), which opened in November 1984 at the city's Messehaus. Together with the artists Hans-Hendrik Grimmling, Frieder Heinze, Lutz Dammbeck, Günther Huniat, and Olaf Wegewitz, Firit was involved in the organization of this autonomous exhibition, circumventing state cultural functionaries. Shortly before the opening, the authorities became aware of the planned presentation and attempted to prevent it. Likely out of fear of protests in such a central place, the exhibition was nonetheless permitted to take place, but it was ordered for it to appear as a kind of workshop setting—no nails were allowed to be hammered into the wall. Shortly after the exhibition, Firit applied to leave the country for the Federal Republic in 1985 and received approval to settle in Munich in 1986. He was able to export the majority of his previous works to the West, including *Selbstzerstörung*.

DM

## **Stefan Plenkers (1945–2024)**

*Fremde Zeichen* (Strange Signs), 1986

The painting *Fremde Zeichen* (Strange Signs) shows the Berlin Wall from the west side. The sketches for the work were created during a visit by Stefan Plenkers to West Berlin to prepare an exhibition at Galerie Neiritz. Organized through the gallerist Hamid Sadighi and facilitated by the State Art Trade of the GDR, which had a financial interest in the sale of art from the GDR in the West, the exhibition took place from March 30 to May 11, 1988. Sadighi drove the Dresden painter Plenkers through West Berlin, where he found the district Kreuzberg, as well as the view of the western side of the wall particularly fascinating. Unlike the white or gray surface of the east side of the wall, whose neutral coloring made it easier to recognize potential fugitives, the west side was covered with graffiti.

DM

## **DIALOGUE 3.**

### **Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt (1932–2024)**

*Red-y made chair*, 1980

*Red-y made tents*, 1980

*Signs of Signs*, 1983

*o. T.*, 1985

*Fensterblick*, *Edition Contart*, o. J.

Untitled, undated

Customized envelopes, 1980s

### **Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt and Thomas Schulz MAIL ART AS A WINDOW TO THE WORLD**

A third dialogue becomes visible between the collection artist Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, her husband Robert Rehfeldt, and the artist Thomas Schulz, who now lives in Potsdam. As leading protagonists of the mail art movement, the Rehfeldts conducted correspondence from Berlin across the national border and thus ensured that works of art from the GDR reached the world via the postal system in a self-determined and autonomous network. Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt herself said: "I had the ambition, like a spider in her web, to spin my threads to every place on earth." Despite strict travel restrictions, connections were established with artists in Western and Eastern Europe as well as in South America, the United States and Canada, among others, which remained mainly friendships in writing.



On a regional level, mail artists organized numerous exhibitions and congresses, often unofficially and in private spaces. In this context, the Rehfeldts met mail artist Thomas Schulz in the 1970s, while he was still living in Poland. For all three artists, mail art served as a window to the wider world. With projects like *Red-Y-Made* (from 1976) or *MY, MY, MY* (from 1979) Schulz sought international exchange and sent templates or schematic questionnaires to artists across the world, who then responded to them in their respective artistic style—often using typical mail art techniques such as personalized stamps and signatures. Mail art projects and correspondences often had a strongly political impetus, serving as a means of democratic self-empowerment that was often denied to the artists in the daily life of their home countries. The postal service became an outlet for artistic freedom.

LB

### **Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt (1932–2024)**

*In sich gefangen* (Trapped Within Itself), 1973

*Sechs Frauen* (Six Women), 1976

The selected mail art works are presented alongside Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt's paintings *In sich gefangen* (Trapped Within Itself) (1973) and *Sechs Frauen* (Six Women) (1976) from the Hasso Plattner Collection. In the work *In sich gefangen*, the artist illustrates the feeling of an inner tension between restriction and freedom through the means of painterly abstraction. The round forms appear dynamic, but their interaction seems controlled, almost trapped in an invisible order. The painting reflects the psychological pressure of being surrounded by external and internal constraints, an experience that goes beyond the political restrictions of the GDR. The female figures in *Sechs Frauen*, arranged in an almost geometric composition, are symbols of both individuality and collectivity. The depiction touches upon themes such as feminist solidarity and role models for women in the GDR. It can also be read as a sixfold self-portrait of Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, showing the artist in various phases of her life.

LB

**Thomas Schulz (\*1951)***DADA IS ... AS DADA*, 1979

At the end of the 1970s, Thomas Schulz launched his “COOP books” project: a so-called “add & pass” campaign, whereby artistic contributions are added to a delivered work, which is then passed on again. Each copy was dedicated to a different theme and Schulz considered the books to be “a kind of socio-artistic investigation,” with each one forming a separate “exhibition” that would expand until the book was filled, at which point it should be returned to the sender. Only a handful of the twenty or so “COOP books” that entered circulation made their way back to the artist. The last one, *DADA IS ... AS DADA* (1979), returned unexpectedly in November 2024, forty-five years after it was sent out, after traveling through Poland, Germany, and the United States with artistic interventions by around thirty-three mail and stamp artists in the form of drawings, collages, stamps, stickers, fingerprints, and photos.

LB

**IN DIALOGUE****Hasso Plattner Collection: Art from the GDR**

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# DAS MINSK

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