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On the Question of ‘Real Modern Art’ in East Germany:

Werner Tübke’s *Fünf Kontinente*.

Jessica Backus

The first generation of the so-called Leipzig School painters—Werner Tübke, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Bernhard Heisig, and, from Halle, Willi Sitte—are largely unrecognized in the United States, due in part to the lack of English-language scholarship on the art of East Germany.¹ This paper focuses on Werner Tübke (1929-2004), a mercurial artist who, during the years of German separation, went from being “one of the most problematic painters” in the eyes of the socialist party’s highest functionaries (Gillen 2002, 141) to one of the most recognized and envied painters in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and German Reunification in 1990, Tübke, like many of his peers, was largely written off as a pawn of the corrupt arts policies of a totalitarian regime. This rampant reassessment was referred to as the *Bilderstreit*, or iconographic controversy, itself part of a larger process of renegotiating the cultural, political, and social dimensions of reunification.

Tübke operated at the nexus of a young generation of progressive artists intent on exercising whatever artistic autonomy they could in a totalitarian state ruled by one party, the SED (Socialist Unity Party). The GDR was a state that simultaneously believed with the utmost conviction in art’s power to change society—hence its common moniker, *Kunststaat* ‘art state’, all the while in fact creating an art system with restrictive, top-down policies (Belting 58). Heisig and Sitte, unlike Tübke, certainly believed in the promise of a socialist utopia and their role as artists in achieving it, but none of them was a pawn of the state, dependent on it as they were for their livelihoods. They each carved out semi-autonomous spaces of artistic production by formulating their own individual realisms, and they shared the ambitious goal to advance developments in painting and create challenging work suited to the contemporary situation. Understanding the source of these artists’ autonomy requires us to first acknowledge the fundamental differences between the role of art in the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany, or the FRG). Uwe Schneede, art historian and curator of Willi Sitte’s major exhibition at the *Kunstverein* in Hamburg in the early 1970s, recognized at the time that modern art in the West was oppositional, marked by the imperative to formal innovation and novelty, and operating in a realm separate from society. Art in the East, in contrast, was characterized by an emphasis on ‘artistic heritage’ *Kulturerbe* and artists’ imbrication in society (Schirmer 2014).

These East German artists, and Tübke in particular, found their autonomy not through opposition to the paradigm of art in the GDR *in toto*, but rather by working within the constraints of the system to highjack the conversations on realism and cultural heritage otherwise dominated by cultural officials. The late 1950s

were an interesting and volatile time in East German history and art, and Tübke and his peers took a leading role in modernist experiments during their emerging careers. As Gisela Schirmer has noted in reference to Sitte, this period of artistic production is widely misinterpreted as modern art's last stand in East Germany before its full capitulation to the SED art dictatorship. This interpretation rests on two assumptions, both of which I will contest: firstly, that the artists were creating modern art; and secondly, that modern art is the natural product of artists seeking creative autonomy.

These issues crystallize around Tübke's first major breakthrough, after falling in and out of favor with the authorities: the 1958 semi-public commission *Fünf Kontinente* [The Five Continents].² This work's import for Tübke's career cannot be overestimated. Not only was it a financial boon for him,³ it also caught the attention of Alfred Kurella, a leading cultural official, who would become Tübke's greatest champion, even securing an additional honorarium for the artist *post facto* (Gillen 2009, 94). Stylistically, this series of five large-scale panel paintings was a culmination of the artist's influences to date, bearing traces of Northern Renaissance art alongside the works of Renato Guttuso, Diego Rivera, and Giorgio de Chirico. Given the high level of artistic referentiality in this work and his oeuvre at large, Tübke's wavering acceptability on the part of the party reveals that, as prominent as issues of artistic heritage were in official discourse, the official stance was complex and not entirely unilateral. By exploring Tübke's interaction with modern art and his particular relationship to the past during the protean decade of the 1950s, I believe we may problematize the Western-centric narrative of Modernism, without abdicating a critical lens on the artist at hand.

From 1953 to 1961, East Germany underwent a series of seismic shifts. When Stalin died in 1953, the new Soviet leadership proclaimed a New Course, ushering in an era of relaxed ideological standards, and bringing new freedom to private business owners, farmers, intellectuals, and artists alike. This turn was accompanied by concrete changes in the state-run commission infrastructure that enabled the spread of stylistic experimentations.⁴ These changes could be observed at the level of the official exhibitions, such as the *Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, later simply the *Deutsche Kunstausstellung* 'German Art Exhibition', a recurring official exhibition that served as a bellwether of the artistic landscape. The 1953 edition had presented a contrived stylistic homogeneity of drab Socialist Realism, but by 1955, exhibitions such as *Ausstellung der Akademie der Künste* 'Exhibition of the Academy of Fine Arts' offered more variety and formal experimentation, as artists revisited stylistic trends of the pre-war period. Twelve years of Nazi iconoclasm had driven modern masters underground, and the arts policies of the Soviet military occupiers (SMAD) and early GDR exacerbated this cultural vacuum, making the New Course and, in particular, the 1955 *Ausstellung der Akademie der Künste*, the first opportunity for many artists of the younger generation to engage with the legacies of modern art.

This period proved turbulent for Tübke's fledgling career. In 1954, Tübke left a teaching position at the *Zentralhaus für Laienkunst* 'art school for amateur artists', where he had taught since 1952, to work as an independent artist. Leipzig had never boasted a strong patron class like those of Munich, Dresden, or Berlin, and this reality had only been exacerbated by the war and the Soviet occupiers' policies during reconstruction. At the same time, the state patronage system was not yet in full force, meaning that Tübke, like many other young artists, eked out a precarious existence with few financial certainties. In an effort to create this niche, a network for artists was founded, the *Verkaufsverband Bildender Künstler* 'Artists' Sales Association' that facilitated sales to the few private collectors who were buying art by young artists (Meissner 45). Tübke's early success at the second *Bezirksausstellung* 'District Exhibition' in Leipzig (the City Council of Leipzig acquired a work of his) translated into the ability to make a modest living on the private market. Soon after the *Bezirksausstellung* in 1954, he received two state commissions: a portrait of a professor for Karl Marx University, and a painting of the World Festival of Youth and Students, a massive communist youth rally that took place in Berlin in 1951.⁵

With these modest successes under his belt, he soon caught the attention of Kurt Magritz, director of the *Hochschule für Graphik und Buchkunst* (HGB), where Tübke had studied from 1948 to 1949. Magritz offered him a position as an assistant in basic instruction, and he joined the faculty in 1955. Tübke came to work alongside Bernhard Heisig, who had been called to the HGB in 1954 to work as an instructor in painting, and Wolfgang Mattheuer, who had joined in 1953. Following the recent exodus of progressive artists like Elisabeth Voigt and Max Schwimmer from the school, the appointment of this younger generation of artists, later called colloquially the "Leipzig School" (Behrendt 2008, 103), boded well for artistic experimentation. Leniency towards artistic experimentation was expressed through official proclamations, as well. In October 1954, Alexander Abusch, acting cultural minister, issued a declaration defining the range of practice sanctioned by the ministry:

Auch Künstler mit anderen Schaffensmethoden, also auch Nichtrealisten, die sich aufrichtig bemühen, mit den künstlerischen Mitteln gegen Militarismus und Krieg zu kämpfen, sollten von den Künstlern der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik als aufrichtige Verbündete, als Kameraden gewertet und behandelt werden. (Abusch 4)

In essence, Abusch remarked that different styles of art would be tolerated so long as they upheld the *spirit* of Socialist Realism. This may have been a sound strategy on Abusch's part. Previous attempts to foist Soviet-style Socialist Realism on German artists had been successful only up to a point. The German-Soviet brotherhood and any purportedly shared cultural legacy were entirely a construction. Historically, the arts in Germany had more to do with Western Europe than the

Soviet Union, and this held true not only for the academies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also for modern movements. The SED was well aware of artists' negative attitudes towards the Soviet model, as an unpublished report for the SED Central Committee's Department of Culture reveals:

In der Bildenden Kunst besteht bei einer Reihe Genossen die Auffassung, die Bildende Kunst der SU ist uns nicht das Beispiel, sie wäre sozialistisch in Inhalt, aber bürgerlich (idealistisch) in der Form, und die großen Realisten Italiens, Frankreichs, Südamerikas und Mexikos wären uns viel mehr ein Beispiel und könnten viel eher mit der Entwicklung der deutschen Bildenden Kunst (enge Verbindung in der Entwicklung und Geschichte der Kunst mit Westeuropa) in Verbindung gebracht werden, als die sowjetische.⁶

This report astutely assessed the situation, further underscoring the deep-seated interest on the part of East German artists in their own artistic forbearers. The impetus to look to tradition was thus as much an organic, bottom-up phenomenon as it was a top-down one, revolving primarily around the particulars of specific national traditions.

In the wake of this New Course, the focus in art schools shifted away from Soviet predecessors, and a more modern style suffused exhibitions of contemporary art. One particularly important milestone was Willi Sitte's exhibition of a painting bearing Guttuso-esque qualities, *Bergung, Hochwasserkatastrophe* [Recovery from the Flood] (1954, Fig. 1), at the 1955 *Ausstellung der Akademie der Künste* 'Exhibition of the Academy of Fine Arts' in East Berlin. As one in a series of works inspired by the recent flooding of the Po River in Italy, the painting depicted a group in a pyramidal composition forging ahead in a lifeboat. For Sitte, the color palette was atypically muted, and he later claimed that the use of a gray palette offered a chance to move away from his schooled, academic sense of color and look primarily to form (Schirmer 71). Figures are portrayed in near cubistic planes lacking modeling. Shadows in the background appear independent of physical objects, creating brief passages of abstract geometric forms. The reviewer in *Bildende Kunst* praised the painting for its "modernity" (Lüdecke 275). As the first such prominent display of the lessons of modernism in an official exhibition, it would have a profound influence on artists throughout the GDR, including Tübke.

Sitte's influence on his peers cannot be underestimated, and Tübke and Sitte were active in similar circles. They had met at one of the many salon evenings Sitte organized in Dresden, Leipzig, Halle, and Berlin (other regulars included Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer, Gerhard Kettner, and Harald Metzkes). Sitte had first been exposed to currents in modern art during his time in Italy during World War II, where he was stationed as a Nazi soldier before changing sides and joining the partisan anti-fascist forces. He maintained friendships with Communists even after returning to Germany after the war, importing the influence of Picasso and Renato



FIG. 1 - Willi Sitte, *Bergung, Hochwasserkatastrophe* [Recovery from the Flood], 1954, Oil, 125 × 160 cm

Guttuso, both prominent members of the Communist party in their respective countries (see Schirmer 2003 32-40, 71-78).

Oddly, Tübke claimed that except for his stated interest in Paul Klee and Giorgio de Chirico, modern art never influenced him (Dammbeck 8, 10), despite its clear stylistic influence on his work during this time. Tübke would have been exposed to modern art not only through his direct contact to Sitte, but also through the lively discussions in the press on the validity of modern art in service of the Communist cause. The Communist party in both Russia and Europe—and, by extension, the SED in East Germany—had a troubled relationship to modern masters like Guttuso and Pablo Picasso, whose work they deemed too “formalist” to uphold the tenets of Socialist Realism.⁷ But John Berger’s monograph on Guttuso, which appeared in East Germany in 1957 as a virtual culmination of these discussions, argued for the artist’s Communist aesthetics, making him acceptable to the party. Berger extolled Guttuso’s “corporeal realism” as a visual manifestation of the hearty, telluric virtue of the peasant, and described it as the next step in a history of modeling that began in the Italian renaissance (Berger 7).

Tübke's stylistic development from 1954 to 1957 paralleled the public debates and increased interest in modern masters. In 1954, he received a six-part commission depicting the 1951 World Youth Day in East Berlin, which he finished in 1956. A comparison of the two extant works from the series, *Weltfestspiele der Jugend und Studenten (Festliche Szene I)* [World Festival of Youth and Students (Festive Scene I)], (1954, Fig. 2) and *Festliche Szene VI* [Festive Scene VI], (1956, Fig. 3), evidences Tübke's stylistic development and the beginning of his Spanish phase, during which the artist sketched masterpieces by Diego Velázquez and created a number of works in a somber, desaturated color palette. The earlier work is a cheery scene of children dressed in traditional German costume frolicking through a crowd; the sense of exhilaration and optimism is enhanced by glimmering, impressionistic light effects. In its spatial and narrative clarity, its painterly brushwork and superficial cheeriness, it follows all the dictates of Socialist Realism. The later work, in contrast, employs a cool palette of grays, blues, and purples demarcated with thick, dark contour lines. A young woman emerges from a crowd of handsome, youthful figures; she strides forward over a black-and-white checkered floor. Flagpoles crisscross the scene around her, breaking up the space seemingly haphazardly along jagged lines of sight. In place of the spontaneity in the earlier work, the mood here is at once somber, even conspiratorial, and harried.



FIG. 2 - Werner Tübke, *Weltfestspiele der Jugend und Studenten (Festliche Szene I)* [World Youth Day (Festive Scene I)], 1954, Oil on canvas, 87 × 108 cm, Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg, Halle



FIG. 3 - Werner Tübke, *Festliche Szene VI* [Festive Scene VI], 1956, Oil on canvas, 150 × 20 cm, Städtische Kunstsammlung Chemnitz



FIG. 4 - Werner Tübke, *Versuch II* [Attempt II], 1956, Oil on canvas, 150.5 × 200 cm, Tübke Stiftung Leipzig

In 1956, Tübke also created a large canvas called *Versuch II* [Attempt II] (Fig. 4), now in the Tübke Foundation in Leipzig. Attempt II was exhibited at the 1956 Leipzig District Exhibition, marking the artist's most important entrance into the public exhibition circuit to date (Meissner 54). As Meissner has noted, though viewers struggled to decipher the cryptic title, it would have likely been interpreted by many as an allegory for the recent failed uprisings in Hungary. Still working as a teaching assistant at this time, Tübke likely had the luxury to produce the work of his own volition (Meissner's comments corroborate this supposition [Meissner 54]). While the work's color palette draws on Festive Scene VI, stylistically it is distinct. The dark, loose contours around the figures lend a rawness that recalls the woodcuts of the Dresden expressionist group *Die Brücke*. Many members of this group were active after the war in East Germany. The figure in the foreground left of center—a man holding his head in his hands—is indeed a direct quotation from Wilhelm Lachnit's *Der Tod von Dresden* [The Death of Dresden] (1945). This is the only time Tübke so obviously emulated the work of a living German artist of the older generation, indicating the rapid pace at which he undertook and assimilated new stylistic exercises during this period.

Bernhard Heisig reviewed the 1956 exhibition in *Bildende Kunst* (1957). Attempt II was one of the few works deemed by Heisig to contain relevant, contemporary subject matter compared with the overall dullness (*Trägheit*) of the rest of the exhibition, which Heisig dismissed as vacation art (*Ferienbilder*)—images of the beach, landscapes, and still lifes. “Der Tummelplatz solcher Gemüter ist ein mit halbmodernen Attributen versehener abgestandener Impressionismus, bei dem der Pinselduktus den inhaltlichen Unterdruck kompensieren soll. In welcher Zeit leben wir eigentlich?” (Heisig 66). Perhaps it was the ambiguity of Tübke's subject matter, or his more linear brushwork and angular figures that earned Attempt II Heisig's respect. In any event, Heisig invited Tübke to participate in an unsanctioned exhibition in December 1957 in the attic of the Dimitroff Museum, where a number of artists kept their studios. Tübke submitted a series of etchings. The exhibition included progressive artists like Tübke alongside the short-lived group of abstract-constructivist artists, *Neue Gruppe Rheinland-Pfalz* ‘New Group of Rhineland Palatinate’.⁸

This course of events signaled a new-found freedom to artists, but it was short-lived, as the 1956 uprising in Hungary led to renewed restrictions on artistic expression, and a more conservative climate in the granting of commissions and acceptance of works to major exhibitions. Nevertheless, Tübke continued producing somber, ambiguous works. In 1957, he finished a painting about the uprising titled *Weisser Terror in Ungarn* [White Terror in Hungary] (Fig. 5).⁹ The title refers to the official interpretation of the 1956 uprisings as a Capitalist (hence ‘white’) counter-revolution. While Tübke's title may align with the interpretation of the events in Hungary according to Soviet propaganda, the work is anything but didactic. It depicts a nocturnal setting painted in the gray scale of Festive Scene or Attempt II. A chaotic throng of figures surges toward the center of the composition



FIG. 5 - Werner Tübke, *Weisser Terror in Ungarn* [White Terror in Hungary], 1956, Oil on canvas, in two parts, 94 × 75 cm each, Private collection Frankfurt am Main

to surround a gray, leafless tree just left of center. Unlike the clear division between friend and foe constructed by the official explanation of the events in Hungary, Tübke presents a worldview in which all actors are both suspect and fallible. In the wake of the renewed curtailing of artistic freedom, this ambiguous treatment was taken as a clear indication of Tübke's lack of commitment to Socialist Realism, and he was terminated from the HGB in September 1957. A difficult year followed. In 1958, he received no state commissions, netted only a few private sales, and the only work he submitted to the *Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, *White Terror in Hungary*, was rejected (Gillen 2009, 156).

The prestige and financial security afforded by *The Five Continents*, the winning entry in a competition for a large commission for the Hotel Astoria, came as a welcome breakthrough for the struggling artist later that year. The fact that the commission-granting entity entrusted such a large work to an emerging artist with dubious aesthetics speaks to the difficulties of propagating homogenous artistic styles in a relatively distributed commission system. It also indicates that artistic supply could barely keep up with official demand, especially when we consider that there were only two to five other submissions to the competition (Nitzer 41-42), thus leaving Tübke with quite good odds.

The call for proposals was issued by the *HO-Hotelbetriebe*, a hotel association that was a subsidiary of the State Chamber of Commerce, making the semi-private framework atypical of most public commissions.¹⁰ The mural was conceived as part of a larger decorative program for a new wing of the Astoria hotel built to accommodate the recent increase in trade fair visitors. The Astoria soon became one of the most

important exchange points for foreign and East German press, high-ranking politicians and businessmen, leaving it all but closed to the general public (Nitzer 34-36).

The specific financial arrangements for the commission are unclear. However, given that new buildings or renovations on the scale of the hotel were required to invest one to two percent of their total expenditures for construction in “realistic art that is ‘accessible to the people’ [*volksnah*],”¹¹ it is likely that the hotel fronted all costs for construction, commission costs for the art, and living expenses for the artists, later to be reimbursed by either the *Kulturfonds* (the GDR cultural funding program), or the Ministry of Culture (Nitzer 38). It is also reasonable to assume that the Leipzig City Council and the local SED party leadership exerted influence throughout the process (36-37). In any event, it was the District Commission Committee (*Bezirksauftragskommission*), together with members of the Leipzig chapter of the *Verband Bildender Künstler Deutschlands* ‘the German Association of Artists’, who made final decisions on such competitions, which usually occurred when the committee could not decide on a suitable artist in advance (39).¹² Furthermore, as final payment to Tübke came from the Leipzig City Council,¹³ the work was essentially a matter of public interest, even if its intended audience was not the average East German citizen.

The Five Continents must be understood within its political context during the rapidly escalating Cold War. From 1955 to 1958, the GDR and FRG pursued their courses of Eastern and Western integration by entering into the Warsaw Pact and NATO respectively. Rearmament of both states and the announcement in 1957 that U.S. troops in West Germany possessed nuclear weapons led to mass protests in the West and significant anxiety in the East. The growing separation of the world into two spheres of influence, which culminated with the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, is mirrored in the project’s ambition as represented by the choice of motif: a global survey that accentuates the superiority of East Germany specifically, and Communism generally. Tübke’s continents, though not personified by any one figure, employ easily recognizable symbols to represent geo-political antagonisms. The ultimate message of the works, however, is ambiguous; East Germany does not emerge as the exemplar of progress, and Tübke’s use of symbolism, which I will discuss below, ultimately serves to undermine the traditional purpose of allegories of the continents: the glorification of a superior culture.

Stylistically, the abstracted, curvilinear and solidly modeled forms from *White Terror* in Hungary carry through to *The Five Continents*, particularly in the preparatory sketches (Fig. 6). These dense sketches, in which figures jockey for space in a flattened composition, depict city life in Leipzig during the four seasons (Michalski 2009, 72). Of particular note is a gray-toned nude sculpture in the sketch for Summer, which resembles some of Henri Matisse’s nudes. It also recalls Fernand Léger’s figures in post-war works like *The Constructors* (1951) by way of Harald Metzkes, whose *Removal of the Six-Armed Goddess* (1956, Fig. 7) garnered significant attention at a 1956 exhibition at the *Berliner Akademie* (Damus 114). The influence of Rivera, in particular his *Agrarian Leader Zapata* (1931), comes to mind

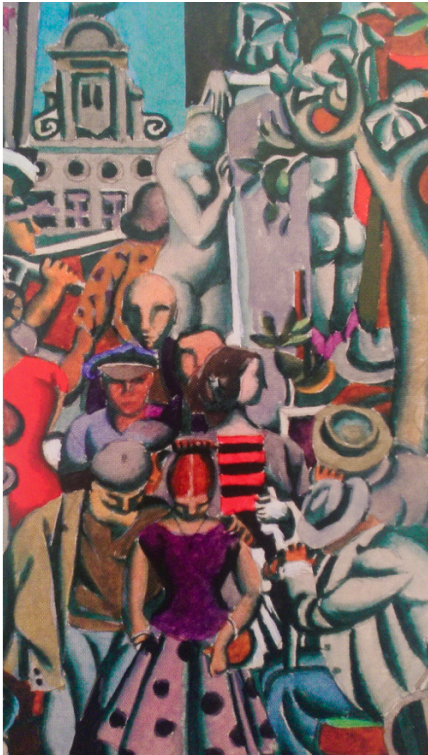


FIG. 6 - Werner Tübke, Erster Entwurf zu den Doppeltafeln der *Fünf Erdteile* im Interhotel Astoria Leipzig [First Study for Diptych Panels of The Five Continents at the Interhotel Astoria in Leipzig] (A 184) (detail), 1958, Watercolor, 28 × 77.2 cm, Tübke Stiftung Leipzig

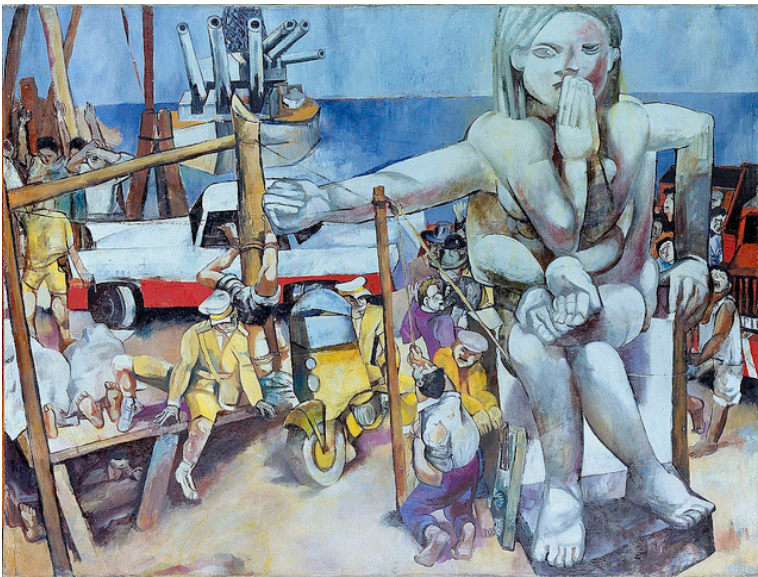


FIG. 7 - Harald Metzkes, *Der Abtransport der sechs ärmigen Göttin* [The Removal of the Six-Armed Goddess], 1956, Oil on canvas, 121.5 × 160 cm, Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Nationalgalerie

FIG. 8 - Werner Tübke, Kompositionsstudie zu Astoria: Afrika [Study for the Five Continents: Africa] (Z 32/58), 1958, Red chalk, 32.6 × 21 cm, Tübke Stiftung Leipzig



in a later sketch for Africa (Fig. 8). Both works rely on the curving anatomy of the horse to structure the composition around prominent, circular contours. The oval brims of the oppressed peasants underscore this compositional rhythm.¹⁴

The final panels departed markedly from the studies both in content and style, obscuring their initial indebtedness to the works of Rivera, Léger or Matisse. The scale and format of the paintings, nearly nine feet tall and arranged as slender panels in diptychs, along with Tübke's choice of medium—tempera on panel—harken back to altar paintings by Northern Renaissance masters. The final panels contain numerous symbolic and iconographic borrowings that begin to reveal the artist's dedication to his national artistic lineage, a dedication that molded the following decades of his career.

In the Europe diptych (Fig. 9), intricate costumes reveal telling details about the figures' socio-economic statuses. This scene uses the most metonymic cultural symbols to represent the divisions between the two Germanys, but it was criticized for being the weakest panel, failing to sufficiently emphasize the disparities between East and West (see Jähner).¹⁵ In the right panel, which depicts the GDR, a fresh fruit stand and a woman carrying a full shopping bag represent the recent end of food rationing and new hopes for a prosperous future. In the background, a modern



Fig. 9 - Fünf Kontinente: Europa [The Five Continents: Europe], 1958, Oil and tempera on panel, Diptych. Overall dimensions: 245 × 245 cm, Panorama Museum, Bad Frankenhausen

city rises from the ground, giving credence to Walter Ulbricht's recent declaration that the planned economy of Socialism had triumphed over West Germany's social market economy.¹⁶ A demonstration pours out from the background into the foreground below Vera Muchina's statue *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman*. The centerpiece of the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris, this monumental sculpture was viewed at the time as a symbol of unalienated labor, in particular thanks to its adoption by the film production company Mosfilm as its brand image (Tübke 1959 and Nitzer 66). Tübke's unorthodox means of portraying this icon, however—truncated and relegated to the background—belies a certain hesitance to embrace these imports from a contrived, Soviet image world.

The left panel depicting West Germany shows an impoverished crowd in front of a shop window. An American soldier stands directly in front of a painting by

Wassily Kandinsky, which hangs on a stark black wall behind a dead tree to the left of the composition. This serves as a symbol of 'decadent art,' reminding viewers of the American presence in the West and their dissemination of abstract art and 'cultural barbarism' in the FRG. Mannequins (which resemble de Chirico's marionettes in their simplified form) offer an unattainable vision of aspirational consumerism.

Giorgio de Chirico is one of the few modern artists Tübke ever explicitly cited as an influence, and his use of the dressmaker's dummy in this piece is significant. Beginning in 1914 in the paintings of de Chirico, and later in the works of a wide range of modern artists (including George Grosz, Carlo Carrà, and Mario Sironi), images of dressmaker's dummies, wooden lay figures, and automatons begin to appear (Braun 73-74). As visual manifestations of the new geometric body composed of "mass-produced limbs" (72), these figures became a repository for the anxieties of the technological age of mass production and the resulting sense of estrangement from the past. Especially in the wake of World War I, these figures embodied the sense of humanity-in-crisis unleashed by the Great War.

Following the devastation wrought by the Second World War, it would seem fitting for artists to revive these tropes in the postwar period. Tübke, however, employed them to a different end. His mannequins' ornate garments drape over voluptuous curves. With their feline limbs and lithe, serpentine bodies, these figures represent not mechanized humans, but rather animated dolls imbued with a life of their own. Like séances that sought to conjure spirits, or nineteenth-century magic lanterns that projected ghostly figures, the result is a phantasmagoric scene, steeped more in a sense of the fantastic than de Chirico's enigmatic melancholy.

In Australia, (Fig. 10), we see Tübke struggling again with the lessons of de Chirico, and it is not incidental that he quotes Albrecht Dürer's figure of *melancholia* in this panel (this is the female figure to the front of the group, seated next to an extinguished candle and despondently holding her head in her hands), a mood frequently evoked by de Chirico. While de Chirico paid an erudite tribute to Dürer's legacy in his exploration of melancholy, Tübke was content to cut and paste a conventional symbol without a unified program. To explain the difference in their approaches, and Tübke's superficial homage to the enigmatic quality of de Chirico's work, it is worth exploring in more detail the symbol of melancholy.

Dürer's unique contribution to the iconographic trajectory of this figure lay in his marriage of two separate traditions, that of the *typus geometriae* and the *typus acedia*. The emblematic tradition was represented by the *typus geometriae*, or the artistic vocation associated with mathematical principles and inviolable form. The temperamental tradition, on the other hand, was associated with the *typus acedia*, the bored spirit, lost in a state of contemplative paralysis and weighed down by a saturnine mood (Braun 76).¹⁷ In their interpretations of both the art historical tradition and the mood of melancholy, artists during the interwar period such as Sironi and de Chirico doggedly sought adequate stylistic strategies for making sense of the human condition following World War I, producing profound



FIG. 10 - WERNER Tübke, *Fünf Kontinente: Australien* [The Five Continents: Australia], 1958, Oil and tempera on panel, Diptych. Overall dimensions: 245 × 245 cm, Panorama Museum, Bad Frankenhausen

investigations into the very nature of meaning. For de Chirico the enigma arises from the tension between the symbolic weight of his objects—a weight implied by their pronounced geometry pointing to the eternal truth of Platonic solids—and these objects' ultimate illegibility. The precision of de Chirico's technique, and the accentuated plasticity of his objects, contrasts with the arbitrariness at the heart of his investigations (81). For de Chirico, it is the recognition of the arbitrariness of meaning that gives rise to the melancholic mood in his paintings.

Tübke does little with his iconographic borrowing, and his stylistic inconsistencies undermine the power immanent in the complex allegory of melancholy. He ignores important aspects of the original that have long been associated with the melancholic disposition. The moody and penetrating gaze of Dürer's figure is translated into a look of passiveness and despondence in Tübke's. The shadowed face, geometric solids

representing the *typus geometriae*, and the deadened objects that fall under the melancholic's dispirited gaze, are all absent in Tübke's figure. His melancholia is all gesture and pose: a decontextualized reference that fails to evoke a sustained sense of melancholy. The figure's despondency becomes merely a reflection of her downtrodden, impoverished state, a reading in line with the ostensible overarching intent of juxtaposing the ills of the Capitalist system with the ideal life in Communist countries. Tübke's engagement with the modern masters and the trope of melancholy thus remain emulative.

Following this analysis, there may seem to be little to redeem Tübke's lack of conviction in his deployment of symbols, whether in his toothless emulation of his artistic heroes or his reluctant borrowing of Soviet icons. It is worth remembering that *The Five Continents* nonetheless departed starkly from most commissions of public or semi-public art. Although American and Australian hotel guests discerned the implicit critique of their political-cultural systems (their complaints led the hotel to remove the panels), SED hardliners found them to be insufficiently propagandistic. One review criticized the lack of a unifying thesis in Tübke's critique of Capitalism: "Gerade die Frage des Überganges vom Kapitalismus zum Sozialismus ist nicht consequent [sic] genug beantwortet worden... Das konkrete Kräfteverhältnis der Welt kommt nicht zur Geltung" (Jähner). Both reactions are merited: The works are clearly a function of East German propaganda and the framework of Socialist Realism, but they certainly do not unequivocally lionize the Socialist state. Ultimately, Kurella took action to have the panels rehung (Gillen 2009 94), only further complicating the official reaction to the work.

To return to the question of Tübke's modernist influences in the work, the artist has said little about modernism himself, except to state that, with the exception of a few masters like de Chirico, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dali, he was never interested in modern art.¹⁸ However, a statement he made about his intentions with *The Five Continents* in 1959 tells a slightly different story:

Es sollte eine Malerei sein, die von der Erscheinungsform der Wirklichkeit ausgeht und dieselbe bei der Gestaltung nicht verliert. Denn zwei Knochenbrüche, impressionistische Verabsolutierungen des Lichtes, dicke Konturen, ein Zentimeter Palettendreieck oder Pinselschlenkereie machen noch keine echte moderne Kunst. Zusammenhängend damit ergab sich für mich die Richtungstendenz in Fragen der Tradition. (Tübke 1959)

In his interpretation of this quote, Berthold Naumann assumes that Tübke meant this as a rejection of Modernism (Naumann 141-142). But a closer reading reveals merely the rejection of a purely stylistic definition thereof. Formal elements and painting technique, according to Tübke, do not constitute a sufficient condition for "real modern art." It is worth recalling that *Attempt II* included passages stylistically evocative of German Expressionism, including thick contour lines, exaggerated brushwork and distorted figures, despite the official prohibition of these "ugly" traits. With this statement, Tübke may thus be reflecting on his own work from the second half of the 1950s. His ultimate departure from these styles may have

resulted from the realization that he had exhausted his own Modernist experiments, failing to achieve the status of ‘real modern art.’

Naumann’s assertion that Tübke’s work rejected modern art closely parallels the reception of Willi Sitte in the West after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as Gisela Schirmer has noted (Schirmer 2014). Sitte’s own work followed a relatively similar trajectory to that of Tübke’s: he experimented with a superficially Modernist style in the mid-to-late 1950s before developing a more personal style of Realism. In the quest for an individual realism, Tübke, and Sitte, too, mined modern art for formal lessons and compositional strategies, for certain tropes, and subject matter. Tübke developed his Realism in pursuit of a place amongst his artistic Renaissance and Northern Renaissance forebears, to whom he referred as “quasi-colleagues” (quoted in Beaucamp 74). He believed himself to be continuing centuries’ long investigations into the nature of reality and its relation to the human sensorium, and his experiments with modern art served as lessons in this pursuit.

For Tübke and his peers, growing up under the iconoclasm of the Nazi dictatorship, modern art, when they first encountered it, was truly a discovery. An anecdote of Bernard Heisig’s is telling in this regard: Heisig first discovered Picasso as a young soldier during World War II. The name sounded so improbable to him he, at first, could not believe it referred to a real person.¹⁹ Modern art, then, was neither the operational framework within which this cohort existed, nor was it a teleological endpoint for their own experiments. In this way, their art, judged by the standards of Western Modernism, was never modern; their concerns were of an entirely different nature. There is a common misperception of East German art as anti-modern, as if operating in a Stalinist, Socialist Realist vacuum. But Tübke’s work—similar to that of Heisig and Sitte—progressed from an intensive, if ultimately abandoned, study of modern artists that necessarily made concessions to official aesthetic dictates.

Notes

¹ A welcome correction to this desideratum is the exhibition *The Art of Two Germanys, Cold War Cultures* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and two locations in Germany in 2009, which first brought East German art to the United States on equal footing with West German art. It further provided the historical context of the Cold War and a divided Germany. However, as much as the essays in the accompanying exhibition catalog laid the groundwork for research on East German art, individual artists, including Werner Tübke, were still treated superficially, if at all (Barron et al.).

² All title translations are my own unless there is a canonical English title, in which case only the English title is provided.

³ Tübke received 14,250 GDR marks for the commission (see “Werkvertrag”, op. cit.), the equivalent of more than twice an average year’s salary in the GDR. The average monthly salary for full-time workers in the GDR was 432 GDR marks in 1955 and 555 GDR marks in 1960, according to the *Statistisches Amt der DDR*. “Durchschnittliches monatliches Bruttoarbeitsentgelt der vollzeitbeschäftigten Arbeitnehmer in der Deutschen

Demokratischen Republik (DDR) von 1949 bis 1989 (in DDR-Mark),” available online at <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/249254/umfrage/durchschnittseinkommen-in-der-ddr> [accessed August 1, 2013].

⁴ In 1952, a Central State Committee for Commission Affairs (*Zentrale Staatliche Auftragskommission*) was founded, replacing the *Kulturfonds* that had operated since 1949 to oversee, but not fund, the iconographic programs of commissions. The *Zentrale Staatliche Auftragskommission* would now grant and oversee commissions. Following the New Course of 1953 this central commission decentralized these duties to districts, where artists were often involved in decision making, leading to an increase in “formalist” art being commissioned (Schütrumpf 16-21).

⁵ The painting purchased by the City Council of Leipzig has since been lost. It was titled *Mutter und Kind* (‘Mother and Child’). See Meissner 45.

⁶ H. Boock. II (2/2026/1, Bl. 215-218), quoted in Meissner.

⁷ Pablo Picasso joined the party in 1944. In a series of decrees in 1945, the Soviets made quite clear that Zhdanovan realism would thenceforth not tolerate formalism (Bown 223-224), and the party never accepted Picasso’s images of suffering in such works as *Le Charnier*, despite its declared antifascism (Utley 76; c.f. Johne).

⁸ Although a renegade move, Heisig and his fellow exhibitors escaped censure when the VBKD retroactively sanctioned the exhibition, declaring it an official event of the association after the fact (Gillen 2002, 84).

⁹ Compositional studies for *Weisser Terror in Ungarn* exist from 1956; the work was finished in 1957 and Tübke submitted it for consideration for the *Fourth German Art Exhibition* in 1958. It was rejected by a committee that included Tübke’s former teacher, Wegehaupt, German Expressionist artists Otto Nagel, Hans Grundig, and Wilhelm Lachnit, the Dada artist John Heartfield, and other progressive artists like Bernhard Kretschmer and Max Schwimmer (who had been dismissed from his post at the HGB in Leipzig). The jury’s decision must have seemed to be a particularly arbitrary exercise of conservatism to the young artist, perhaps even explaining why he split the painting to create a diptych. See Kröner et al.; on the creation of a diptych, see Gillen 2009, 156.

¹⁰ This was the HO-Hotelbetriebe Leipzig, which fell under the aegis of the Staatliche Handelsorganisation.

¹¹ “Verordnung zur Entwicklung einer fortschrittlichen demokratischen Kultur des deutschen Volkes und zur weiteren Verbesserung der Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen der Intelligenz vom 16.3.1950,” Gesetzblatt Nr. 28, pp. 185 ff. Quoted in Nitzer 38.

¹² Founded in 1950, the VBKD was in many ways an ideological continuation of the pre-war Communist artist group ASSO (Assoziation revolutionärer bildender Künstler, or the Association of Revolutionary Artists). It was one of the few official bodies that could organize exhibitions. Membership in the VBKD was *de facto* necessary for a successful career in the arts, as the VBKD also managed access to professional art supplies, exhibitions, publishing opportunities, state commissions and teaching posts. At its height it counted 6,000 members. Beginning in 1953, it also published East Germany’s primary arts publication, *Bildende Kunst*. In theory, the VBKD operated independently of the SED and official ministries for the arts, but in practice it answered to them and executed on their agenda.

¹³ A commission contract that stipulates Tübke’s compensation exists in the archives of the Panorama Museum. Commission Contract (“*Werkvertrag*”) between Werner Tübke and

HO-Hotelbetriebe Leipzig, signed February 2, 1958 (copy). Werner Tübke file, Panorama Museum, Bad Frankenhausen.

¹⁴ It bears mention that Rivera's reception in the GDR was somewhat less contested than other Communist modern artists, due in part to his relationship with Alfred Kurella, who became something of a mentor to the Mexican painter during his time in Moscow in 1927 (Behrendt 2006, 79).

¹⁵ A clipping of the article can be found in the uncatalogued Tübke archive (Tübke Nachlass, Deutsches Kunstarchiv, Nuremberg). No page number could be ascertained.

¹⁶ Ulbricht's campaign ran under the slogan "Der Sozialismus siegt" ('Socialism triumphs'). The term 'social market economy' had been coined by FRG Finance Minister Ludwig Erhard.

¹⁷ Braun is drawing on Panofsky, Erwin, and Fritz Saxl. *Dürers Melencolia I: Eine Quellen Und Typengeschichtliche Untersuchung*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1923.

¹⁸ "Mich persönlich hat [die Moderne] nie interessiert, meine Quellen sind immer die alten Künstler und Künste gewesen, ausgehendes Mittelalter und in der Gegenwart habe ich mich nie orientiert, hat mich nicht interessiert." / "Mit der klassischen Moderne habe ich nichts am Hut, höchstens wenn man älter wird, den hohen Respekt vor der Leistung einzelner" (in Dammbeck 8, 10).

¹⁹ Quoted in Gillen [2002], 65.

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