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An Environmental Art History of the GDR

At the centre of my research is a belief that by using ecology as a framework, it allows us to discuss both the international as well as the local aspects of art making in the GDR. Many artists and activists in East Germany saw the GDR's reliance on open pit mining, the overwhelming pollution and the rapid forest death, as visible signs of their own government's failure and incompetence. Yet, there are also many instances of international interactions and collaboration initiated by East German artists that recognise the global dimension of environmental problems. It is by allowing both locality and internationalism in my research that I aim to create a more accurate art history of East Germany. I explore artistic responses to the environmental problems in the GDR through three lenses: landscape painting, land art actions and paper projects.

Throughout the 1970s, the areas around Leipzig and Halle went through huge changes. By the time the wall fell in 1989, lignite-fired power generation plants met 83% of East German electric power demand. Brown coal was extracted from huge areas of land day and night. These changes in the landscape were depicted by Wolfgang Mattheuer and Peter Sylvester. While Mattheuer was a very successful artist in the GDR and one of the key figures in the Leipziger Schule, Sylvester's work has faded into obscurity. Both encountered the mining landscapes in their walks around Leipzig and were struck by the impact that technology and science had on our relationship to nature. Mattheuer would make subtle environmental critiques in his large landscape paintings. Meanwhile, Sylvester was interested in how the natural world is mediated by techno-science and was one of the only artists in the GDR to generate images using a computer called the Densitron. Artists attempting to find space outside of the official art culture would find themselves in nature. Several day outings called 'Pleinairs' became a key meeting place for artists, intellectuals and writers to experiment with new ideas and push the boundaries of art past the cultural policies of the GDR. In the section of my PhD about Land Art Actions I look at how artists used nature as a backdrop for their work and to discuss the unique conditions of making art in East Germany, where the move into nature was often one of necessity and the interaction with a destroyed environment often circumstantial.

An advantage of using ecology as a framework for my PhD, is that it allows me to expand the boundaries of the GDR, because it naturally spills out of the borders of countries and nations. While an artist like Peter Sylvester already proposes a global view of ecology, in this section I look at examples of ecology as a means of borderless exchange. An example is artist Erhard Monden and the art critic Eugen Blume "Parallel Performance" with the West German artist Joseph Beuys. Monden attached chalkboards with red string to

three trees, the trees were meant to act as antennas, which would radiate his message over the wall to Düsseldorf on the other side of Germany.

Finally, Mail Art perhaps best visualises the idea that the framework of ecology can transcend borders and nations, in specific a project initiated by Joseph W. Huber, titled "Nature is life, Save it" reflects this. Huber started to send post cards to fellow mail artists, often attaching a packet of sunflower seeds, and asked his correspondents to send him back postcards to this theme. Huber was able to collect 339 entries from artists from nineteen countries. The entries stemmed from all over the world — while various themes are explored, a global interest in nature conservation was shared.

Ultimately I aim to show how an environmental history of art in the GDR resists ghettoisation but allows for a detailed analysis of the unique conditions of art-making in the GDR.

(My proposal may be published on the forums website)
