Art beyond Borders

Published by Central European University Press

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Willy Wolff, a student of Dix, member of the ASSO, former anarchist and early communist (he joined the KPD/Communist Party of Germany in 1929) was firm in his belief that there was no alternative to a socialist society. Although he did not question the political goal, he did take a critical stance on the party and its directives, particularly in regard to the visual arts. He found it impossible to acknowledge aesthetic judgments made by an office; he did not allow himself to be used for politico-cultural purposes; he refused public commissions such as the opportunity in the second half of the 1960s to paint the foyer of the television tower at Alexanderplatz with popular motifs. He followed his own artistic ideas without compromising. As happened with many of his colleagues, this gave rise to a prohibition against exhibiting; in 1968, for example, an exhibition in the Galerie Kunst unserer

1 A volume of poetry and prose by Erich Mühsam was on his work table; Max Stirner (1806–1856) was one of his favorite writers.
3 The construction of the television tower began in 1965.
Zeit (Gallery for Contemporary Art) in Dresden had to be cancelled shortly before the opening on order of the authorities.\(^4\)

Over the years Wolff developed a markedly diverse œuvre, outside the official art scene, producing drawings with bizarre and surrealistic echoes; oils which led, in his confrontation with the work of Poliakoff, to Hard-edge painting; drawings that can be linked to Naum Gabo; abstract cylinder prints; and composite media collages and assemblages made by using banal, everyday objects and items he found.

Integrated into the Dresden artists’ circle around the Kupferstich-Kabinett (Prints and Drawings Collection), the Kühl art gallery and the collector Ursula Baring—all of whom supported nonconformist spirits—Willy Wolff was by no means an exception in regard to the diversity of his works in both content and form. The artistic climate of Dresden was characterized in particular by an output of nonconformist pictures, reflected well into the 1970s primarily by constructivist and abstract compositions. A discernible counterculture developed there, inspired by a lively exchange among artists and by the possibility of reaching a limited public through privately organized exhibitions.

Abstract painting, for instance, was part of this counterculture; it emerged as an independent development in the East and not as a belated plagiarism of the Western avant-garde. Whereas Art Informel was largely based on the abstraction of the prewar era and therefore developed at approximately the same time in the West and the East, it appears that direct stimulation from the West was the source of the version of Pop Art found in the East. Willy Wolff is still considered the master of Pop Art in the GDR as well as its major representative.

The following essay explores the question of how themes and stylistic means that were genuinely connected to the phenomena of the capitalist economic system could find their way into art produced under socialist conditions. At the end of the 1950s, an incursion of representational art had displaced the dominant psychic automatism; with this the reality of mass media and mass culture had become the background reflected by Pop Art. Where,

in this context, did Willy Wolff wish to anchor his own notion of reality? In pursuit of an answer, the first section of this essay will examine the influence of Pop Art on Willy Wolff’s work, and the second section will treat Wolff’s response to socialist realism.

Willy Wolff owed his knowledge and creative transformation of Pop Art to two trips abroad at the end of the 1950s—on this point the secondary literature is in agreement. These trips added to the expressive quality of his repertoire.

In 1957 Willy Wolff traveled for the first time to London and Derby with his wife Annemarie, also an artist who designed tapestries and fabric appliqué. The trip was possible because Annemarie Balden-Wolff, who had emigrated in 1933, was an acknowledged victim of fascist persecution. An initial request for a trip had been refused by the GDR authorities, but an official invitation from the Communist Party of England to both Wollfs—Annemarie was still a member of the party there—was finally granted.

It is no longer possible to reconstruct the trip, so we do not know which artist colleagues the Wollfs met. In unpublished autobiographical notes, Willy Wolff reports on numerous visits to the Tate and other galleries in the city, without going into details, however. It would have been too late for him to see the exhibit curated by Richard Hamilton in 1956 at the London Whitechapel Art Gallery, “This Is Tomorrow” by the Independent Group, which heralded the beginning of English Pop Art and is considered one of the most influential exhibitions of the 1950s in England; it can be assumed, however, that he came across the work of these artists in the galleries. The stimulation provided by the first trip must have been profound because the artist couple returned to England the following year, remaining again for thirty days.

The confrontation with such a different lifestyle—according to the tenor of research—led Wolff to completely new pictorial concepts in the following years, although it was not until the mid-1960s that these were to become determinant in his work; the reasons for this will be examined at a later point.

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6 Pan Wolff in a conversation with Sigrid Hofer on 21 September 2009 in Berlin.
7 Manuscript in the Pan Wolff estate, Berlin.
8 Founded by Hamilton and other artists.
9 Pan Wolff in a conversation with Sigrid Hofer on 21 September 2009 in Berlin.
The first collages in which Wolff used colored paper, illustrations from magazines and colored packing materials, as well as fragments of his own work as resources for his compositions date from around 1965; he would later transform these compositions, some of which were very small, into large-scale oil paintings. In an untitled piece from 1965, Willy Wolff combined motifs revolving around femininity and eroticism. A bra, stylized breasts—depicted once frontally and then lined up in a series—and a female torso set off by tomato-red stockings are arranged on the paper together with fabric samples. The artist’s attention was mainly directed to the fabric, which veils and covers the object but at the same time makes it the focus. The bloom of a red rose seems to make it clear that femininity has a positive connotation here.

Femininity and the cult of clothing appear repeatedly in Willy Wolff’s work. The collage *Grünes Ei und Wäsche* (Green egg and lingerie), also dating from c. 1965, again shows a bra; this time, however, there is an erotic charge coming from the model’s corporeality. The dynamic perspective of the almost dazzling white underwear and the formal directing of the gaze toward the green egg link the two motifs in an ironically ambiguous manner. The handling of the motifs in these collages—the recourse to everyday objects and a focus on eroticism in the same way as it was used by the advertising industry—reinforces their proximity to Pop Art, as do the intense colors and the renunciation of the artist’s individual hand.

Moreover, works such as *Ein Bad kann himmlisch sein/Die Mischbatterie* (A bath can be heavenly/mixer tap; Plate 4.1), or *Warnung* (Warning) also seem to be possible only in reference to Pop Art. In *Warnung* from 1967, a car tire dominates the center of the picture, as if it were raised onto a pedestal. In the excerpt-like depiction and the finely detailed execution, the tire is treated like a prized object, one that, moreover is quite new and without any trace of use. The view from below to the hubcap, the stylized depiction of the spokes, the reflections in the chrome, and the detailed treatment of the tire tread reveal the artist’s graphic perception of the object, which celebrates the banal tire like a work of art, like a sculpture.

Roy Lichtenstein, in contrast, filled the picture space with his automobile tires as in an advertisement, concentrating the observer’s attention on only

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the one object. The tire tread, however, was understood as a repeating pattern, which in its obvious simplification invoked paintings of geometric abstraction.\textsuperscript{11} This play with art history and the ironic commentary on the outmoded gestural or intellectual hand of the individual artist, which was characteristic of the 1950s, was among the instruments with which Lichtenstein and others accompanied their aesthetic upgrading of the world of consumption. In 1961 Lichtenstein’s tennis shoes (Keds) reflected Vasarely’s picture Mizzar (around 1956–1960), and with his Sturmfenster (storm window) Andy Warhol had also made reference to color field painting.

Willy Wolff countered the single motif—the strategy followed by advertising—with a more extensive pictorial narrative. His tire is not detached from the context of its use, and the observer’s ability to make associations is challenged by the barely introduced form of a bridge, by the green foreground and not least by the title Warnung. Nonetheless, in his objective depiction Wolff resists any interpretive intent. What kind of warning the tire should evoke is undetermined; is it a warning of the basic danger of driving a car, is it a warning against ruining the landscape through the continued construction of roads, is it a warning that the automobile fundamentally changes the course of life? The mixer tap also remains enigmatic. Although it dominates the surface, its existence is strangely unreal. Partly backed by substantial-seeming tiles, partly illuminating from an immaterial space with clouds, the tap may be meant as an ironic commentary or, just as likely, as a depiction of an ideal or an illusion. Reading the painting as a reference to shortages in the GDR’s economy, which turned tiles and taps into desirable consumer objects,\textsuperscript{12} does not, in my opinion, do justice to the context—but more about that later.

Pop Art had expanded the concept of art through a rigorous introduction of the trivial, together with an emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of the trivial; it had shown that the world of consumption and the mass media not only dominated people’s lifestyles but were also able to stimulate the artistic eye to


the same degree as the highest achievements of cultural history. Nonetheless, Wolff’s stock of motifs for his compositions seems to be based predominantly on personal experiences. The picture of the tap was occasioned by the housing authority’s decision to replace the fixtures in his building.

The motive behind the painting *Terese von K.* was a hike from Dresden to Vienna. Whereas *Mischbatterie* responded to a contemporary event, in *Terese von K.* Wolff treated an episode from his youth. As recorded in his autobiographical notes, on this hike, which took place before the Second World War, he went through the town of Konnersreuth (*K* thus stands for Konnersreuth, which is located between the Fichtel Mountains and the Pfälzer Forest), an important place of popular piety. Therese Neumann (1898–1962), who manifested stigmata on Good Fridays in particular, was venerated there. Wolff’s receptiveness to mystical accounts of this type may have been connected to his spiritual tendencies. There is documentation that he had read not only the *Ashtavakra Gita*, an Indian Sanskrit text which records the dialogue of King Janaka with the sage Ashtavakra and treats the path to happiness, but also that he may have known the accounts of Paramahansa Yogananda (an Indian yogi, philosopher and writer), who wrote about his visit to Therese Neumann on 16 July 1935 in his *Autobiography of a Yogi*. And not least Willy Wolff’s friend Erich Mühsam had memorialized this legendary figure in his poem *Die Resel von Konnersreuth*. Wolff explicitly mentions Mühsam’s poetry in his autobiography. Years later Wolff encountered modern steam-driven machines while hiking, a custom he had retained from his *Wandervogel* days. The many hoses and tubes of these machines had inspired him to connect them with his earlier experience, bringing them together artistically in a bizarre manner.

Linked more to personal impressions than to autobiographical experiences is the painting *Artistenbein (Redam)* (Acrobat’s leg). In 1968 at documenta 4, Claes Oldenburg had exhibited his two-part synthetic sculpture *London Knees 1966*, a play on the length of the new miniskirts. In the course of the 1960s this skirt, coming from the English fashion industry, had shrunk to the format of a wide belt; it heralded the new self-confidence of the emancipated woman, who had freed herself from social conventions and displayed her

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13 See manuscript in the Pan Wolff estate, Berlin.
14 Ibid.
body in a flippant–provocative manner unknown before that time. Leading on the one hand to storms of indignation over immoral behavior, on the other hand it had advanced to a code of behavior for youth culture. Oldenburg ennobled this object of social irritation and voyeuristic desire and confronted the observer with things that obviously affected the public more than the canonized traditional cultural goods.

Wolff’s work, on the other hand, was based on what was known as the *Goldener Mann* (Golden man) on the tower of Dresden’s city hall. Ewald Redam from Meissen, Saxon’s heavyweight and *Achtkampf* competition champion in 1907, and later founder of a variety show, served as a model for painters and sculptors at the Dresden Academy of Art, among others. His virile stature was also sought when Dresden’s patron saint, Hercules (emptying the cornucopia over the city), was to be erected. The sight of Redam’s muscular leg inspired Willy Wolff’s parody, which reduced the heavyweight body to the engaged leg and provided him with a fancy boot that played on the acrobatics of variety theater. Whereas Oldenburg increased the provocation emanating from his motif by equating the legs as anonymous fetishes to desire per se, Wolff did not emphasize the erotic but rather the acrobatic moment. What could slip into voyeurism with Oldenburg, Wolff connected back to the sphere of artistic entertainment.

Tom Wesselmann’s *Seascape* from 1966, with a woman’s leg as the basic motif, was also geared toward pure eroticism, to the anticipation of sexuality; his *Great American Nude* series (ending in 1973) was reduced more and more to the presentation of body parts and, according to Roland Barthes, came close to the observer’s need to act out his lust for looking without fear. Moreover, Wesselmann reported that in these paintings he was seeking metaphors for intimate experiences with his friend and later wife, Claire Selley. In contrast to these comparable works, for Wolff the erotic moment did not play a role; nor was it allowed to claim a place in GDR society. According to Erich

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15 Pan Wolff in a conversation with Sigrid Hofer on 21 September 2009 in Berlin. The commission for the *Goldener Mann* went to the painter and sculptor Richard Guhr in 1907.

16 For Wesselmann it was also a matter of representing the erotic, of the “new sexual openness” at the beginning of the 1960s. See Marco Livingston, “Telling It Like It Is,” in *Tom Wesselmann, 1959–1993*, ed. T. Buchstiener and O. Letze (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1994), 17.

Honecker’s official statements in 1965, “ethics and morals” and “decency and propriety” are “unshakable standards” to be distinguished from the “immorality” of the enemy system.¹⁸

Altogether, Willy Wolff’s erotic motifs are far from the lustful display (scopophilia) of the nudes disseminated by the mass media in daily newspapers and journals, to which Pop Art responded with conscious ambiguity. In contrast to the images spread by the media, Pop Art guided the observer’s view to individual parts of the body. The entire figure was not the subject of attention, but rather the seductive eyes, the kissable mouth, the attractive breasts, which were all disproportionately enhanced and could have an oppressive effect. On the other hand, the erotic motifs were withdrawn from the observer precisely by means of this pictorial strategy. Captured in two-dimensionality and stylized into an artificial figure, they surrender any pretence of vitality and individuality. In addition, the grid on the picture surface underscored the artificial character of the body fragments and decidedly countered the temptations emanating from them.

It is no accident that in addition to the bra, Willy Wolff treated classical sculpture in his work *Antiker Torso* (Antique torso). His artistic view of the female body was guided by a long-established ideal of beauty, which made reference to the torso on the one hand and to depictions from the Renaissance on the other hand. At the same time, he countermanded the reduction of femininity to an emanation of sexual appeal because his erotic motifs were sanctioned by cultural history, and, as with the bra or in the work *Allegorisch* (Allegorical), which altered a female figure by Cranach and confronted her with a hammer and sickle, were updated through an ironic twist.

Important differences between Pop Art’s intentions and Willy Wolff’s work are to be noted not only regarding the choice and understanding of motifs, but also in the artistic execution. Whereas Pop Art used the trivial subject as provocation and to stimulate critical discussion, it was precisely their everyday character that these subjects forfeited under Wolff’s treatment of them. Lichtenstein had reflected the techniques of mass media with his dots, David Hockney loved the clumsy, nonacademic application of paint, in his

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assemblages Rauschenberg carried traditional principles of composition ad absurdum; in contrast, Wolff opted for meticulous, calculated execution. In general, his oil paintings were preceded by collages, which served the preparation, study and development of his pictorial idea.19

This is evident, for example, in the fact that the paper materials he used were not glued on in their final proportions but rather represented larger sections that could be shifted around until the formal goal was achieved. These “designs” were transferred to oils with only minor changes. Thus, in Antiker Torso Wolff retained the tear and the fold, which ran vertically through the black paper as a design element even when the image was transferred to canvas.20 In addition, handwritten notes on these designs or “drafts” described the gradations of color to be applied, in case the paper used did not correspond with Wolff’s vision. Pencil-drawn grids, moreover, document the intended process of transfer to a larger format.21 Notes on the back, in which Willy Wolff recorded the owner of the analogous oil painting, also indicate the direct connection between design and execution.22

The meticulous detailing that generally characterized Wolff’s drawings thus turned up again in his artistic input in the collages: he balanced things exactly, subtly determined the color fields, and laid down the proportions. Skilled manual refinement always remained determinate; an interest in form and the process of analyzing the image characterized his entire œuvre. Thus, his work never goes after the effect, is never intended for the quick impact, even if the color-intense version—before the background of the regulated sale of painting materials in the GDR—must have had a particular fascination. As the quality of the paper—construction paper, colored foil, packing materials—shows, these were generally products from the West.

Although a frequent change of style was characteristic of Willy Wolff, nonetheless over the years his practices for depicting images were continu-

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19 Blume already pointed out that the collages are not to be seen as independent works. Blume, “Die späten Bilder von Willy Wolff,” 7.
21 Compare, for example, the collage Toscana in the SLUB Mscr. Dresd. App. 2717, 69.
22 See the collection in the SLUB. All of the collages have a note on the back recording the owner of the relevant work in oil.
Part I · Moving People

ously marked by the firm precision of his draftsmanship (*Nadelparade/Parade of Needles* or *Knöpfe/Buttons*). His training as a cabinetmaker and his appreciation of handicraft skills—reflected in the scrupulous neatness of his atelier and on his workbench—as well as the academic training in drawing he received from Richard Müller at the Kunstakademie in Dresden determined his manner of depicting the objects over the years. Attention has been drawn repeatedly to the extremely sharp naturalism of his reed pen works, to his accuracy of observation, and to the concern with fine nuances, which took precedence over a display of the individuality of his own hand. The artist’s gesture as evidence of the creative process and as the expression of an inner composure or an expressive argument were unimportant to Wolff. Only in a brief phase of experimentation with abstract forms in the mid-1960s (Polliakoff and cylinder prints) were spontaneity and accident allowed to express themselves, although they were yoked into predetermined, clearly proportioned arrangements of the picture surface. Thus, Willy Wolff developed and controlled his collages and oil paintings with the same exactness with which he executed the series of his parade pictures.

Based on such artistic premises, under Willy Wolff’s hand the depiction of a mixer faucet is transformed into a sumptuous study of color. The appliance, reproduced in faithful detail down to the reflections of light on the chrome surfaces and placed in the middle of the picture with almost monumental obtrusiveness, is set off from the background, which through finest gradations of blue-gray values creates a subtle painterly transition from the hard structure of the tiles to the filmy cloud formations. In such works Wolff insisted that the artistic character of a picture was not only to be defined by the ideal value it was supposed to convey, but also by the masterly treatment of conventional design methods.

The finely detailed treatment of the motifs thus throws light on Wolff’s specific grasp of Pop Art. Through the decidedly artistic treatment of the picture subject he completely neutralized the difference between high and low. Whereas Pop Art had made the ambivalent relation between high and low its

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23 Dr. Joachim Menzhausen in a conversation with Sigrid Hofer on 29 September 2009 in Dresden.
24 Even the cylinder prints of the later years do not give evidence of a transition to abstract concepts, but rather reflect the beginning of Parkinson’s disease. I am indebted to Dr. Menzhausen for this information given in the same occurrence.
theme (for instance, where Vasarely’s structures turned up again as the pattern of shoe soles), Wolff ennobled all pictorial motifs by giving them the same painterly care as was given to significant picture subjects. This was his way of transforming simple, everyday products into art.

This intent is also reflected in the fact that Wolff—at least in regard to his collages and oils—aspired to the unicum. Since his asking prices were moderate, there was no reason for him to introduce a broader circle of the population to art by means of graphic reproductions, as was the case with Western Pop Art, which also used this approach to take a stand on what was happening on the art market.

If the incorporation of fragments from the real world in his work only shows superficial parallels to Pop Art, the question arises as to why Wolff made use—even if only in a limited way—of such stylistic means. In my opinion, Willy Wolff’s works are to be read in part (not exclusively!) as a subtle commentary on officially imposed art practices in the GDR.

The years in which Wolff devoted himself to Pop Art were characterized by tough politico-cultural discourses, with vehement efforts going into establishing a socialist national culture. The goal of the second Bitterfeld Conference in 1964 was to shape the socialist personality and the socialist consciousness in a lasting manner, with artists participating more strongly in this task. The Eleventh plenum of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany/Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED), meeting from 16–18 December 1965 to handle questions of culture, was, according to Wolfgang Engler, a “perfectly staged tribunal” which mercilessly settled accounts with all the “progressive tendencies in the arts and in intellectual life altogether,” frightened the “protagonists of East German modernism and their allies in the cultural offices for many years” to come, and banished “unvarnished reality from public discourse.”

In a particularly perfidious charge, intellectuals and young criminals were seen to have affinities, and the artists were made to share responsibility for

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25 The First Bitterfeld Conference took place on 24 April 1959, the Second Bitterfeld Conference on 24–25 April 1964. In April 1967 the Bitterfeld Path was to be activated once again at the Seventh Party Conference of the SED. The goal of the program was to support and form the socialist personality through participation in the production of art. See G. Feist and E. Gillen, Kunstkombinat der DDR (Berlin: Nishen, 1990), 68.

the existing state of things. The consequences of this “clean-sweep plenum” were dramatic, peaking in numerous prohibitions of plays, books and music groups.

Willy Wolff reacted to this politico-cultural climate by pitting his own personal view of reality against socialist realism. The question “What is reality?” was answered by the cultural functionaries within the context of a historical and a philosophical (geschichtsphilosophisch) approach, according to which art was always evidence of the temporary state of society’s development. On the one hand, realism meant a naturalistic way of depiction, which was treated as a *conditio sine qua non* in regard to the working population’s ability to comprehend it; on the other hand, the essence of realism was understood as an art which—according to Peter Pachnicke—“should make reality visually recognizable, move the imagination, and activate a change in reality.”

Transferred to content, this led to the support of affirmative pictorial topics and to a narrative documentation of society’s progress.

Willy Wolff confronted this reality, which had to comply with the dictated political will, with another reality that existed almost in parallel: the reality of the personal life experience. It was not surprising that the functionaries took offence at such individualistic designs by Wolff, since the interest of the individual was to be subordinate to the collective need. Moreover, the state and the party defined what popular art was to be, and this excluded as illegitimate a focus on everyday life with its very private experiences—which was what Wolff elevated to his pictorial theme.

Thus the recapturing of the world of objects—a central aspect of Pop Art—was not the starting point for Willy Wolff’s aesthetic considerations; as a meticulous draftsman he had never become estranged from an object-oriented approach anyway. Rather, the new content of his pictures demanded a new vocabulary. Up until that point, Wolff’s affinity for representational art had been expressed in surreal constructions; although these did possess critical potential, they were no longer suitable for his changed intentions. Now it was a matter of arguing on a level of reality that laid open the dialectic relation to socialist realism. Willy Wolff countered the declared socialist reality (in theme and style) with the reality of everyday life; he supplemented the

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socialist mass culture, which had arisen from the influence of state and party on art production, through his individual perspective.

The enigmatic combinations of pictorial motifs in Willy Wolff’s work have been emphasized again and again, and the artist himself also confirmed that he took a certain pleasure from bringing things that apparently did not belong together into resonance with one another. How these fragmentary slivers of life are to be interpreted, Willy Wolff did not explain. He left the observer free to follow his own associations. However, his refusal to give explicit answers can also be understood as a response to the party and the state, which unremittingly claimed sole authority for explaining reality and punished opposing points of view. Willy Wolff’s standpoint, however, made it clear that one reality as such does not exist, that reality is merely formed in the head of every individual, and thus countless realities can coexist.

This standpoint ultimately also explains why Willy Wolff, who was very well informed about prevailing currents through the magazine *Kunstwerk* and his supply of English art literature, did not take these up; op art, minimal art and similar movements must have been unimportant to him. His lifelong theme was confrontation with reality, and the means that guided him were verism, surrealism, and a specific form of realism whose pictorial strategy he owed to Pop Art.

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28 Willy Wolff’s library is preserved as an estate under Pan Wolff.