
*Neuererdiskussion* (Plate 14.1) represents a meeting of innovators (*Neuerer*), a title that existed from the end of the 1940s to reward workers who suggested improvements in production. If, following an inspection by engineers, the proposal was accepted, the worker would receive a financial reward for their help. The painting thus presents a picture of socialist democracy, in which employees can be involved in the organization and running of the company. We thus see a meeting between, on the right, the workers—the social base of the new regime—and on the left, the engineers, who became increasingly privileged during the 1960s, to the point of becoming one of the most important socialist elites. The painting positions itself in the tension between the ideal and reality, the equal distribution of skills and words at the heart of the world of work, which retains an irremediably hierarchical structure between

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1. From the abundant literature on the history of the world of the worker in the GDR, we mention the most recent synthesis: Christoph Klessmann, *Arbeiter im "Arbeiterstaat" DDR. Deutsche Traditionen, sowjetisches Modell, westdeutsches Magnetfeld (1945–1971)* (Berlin: Dietz, 2007).

workers and engineers, and which continues to distribute social positions unequally, between those at the bottom and those at the top.

Its creator Willi Neubert (1920–2011) worked in Thale, a small industrial town in Saxony-Anhalt in the GDR. His career is representative of that of a number of artists committed to socialist realism. On his return from the war in 1945, this worker’s son took his turn working in the foundries of Thale before becoming a draughtsman following an accident at work. He began spending time in amateur art circles and in 1950 he was assigned by his company to the Burg Giebichenstein Hochschule für Kunst und Design Halle, where he benefitted from the opportunities for social promotion that were offered during the early years of the regime. His attachment to state socialism was, therefore, as much a part of a social path as an intellectual commitment. He became one of the most treasured realist artists. His paintings, representing brigades and party meetings, make him one of the examples of a new generation of artists who shook off bourgeois habits. Although a professor at Burg Giebichenstein and a member of the leadership of the artists’ union of Halle, he nonetheless carried out the most important part of his work in Thale, in the foundries to which he was attached through what is known as a contract of friendship. It is in this context that, in 1969, the union commissioned Neuererdiskussion for the unbelievably high price of 16,000 marks.

Socialist realism, in its requirement that it must speak to all and be of service to the party and the workers, is duty bound to be “close” to the people, “linked” to the people. Its roots in an immediate environment are one of the essential principles of socialist realism, which recaptures here the old claim of nineteenth-century realism to be of its time and in its time. We would like to show, using the example of Neuererdiskussion, how this proximity is not without its links to internationalism, as it is understood in the communist world. The painting thus enables us to understand the link between localism and internationalism, which we consider is characteristic of this type of art.

Following its creation in Thale, the painting is first displayed in the neighboring town of Halle. But in 1969, the National Gallery asks the union to give it the painting so that it can be shown in East Berlin.3 The painting is

thus offered to the National Gallery,\(^4\) whose first decision is to immediately send it to Sweden “for the occasion of the GDR recognition week.”\(^5\)

But the painting is mainly circulated within the Soviet Bloc, as it responds to the issues troubling the bloc in the early 1970s. For example, it is sent to Sofia in 1973 on the occasion of the first triennial of realist painting, an event that brings together 562 paintings by 325 artists from the USSR, Poland, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Cuba, and the Mongolian Republic. The triennial was one of the international meetings to flourish throughout the Soviet world following the Moscow Exhibition of the Art of Socialist Countries in 1958–59.\(^6\) Among many others, we can mention the Krakow festival of graphic arts (founded in 1964), Intergrafik in East Berlin (1965), the Stettin biennial of paintings from socialist countries (1967) or the international meetings in Nyíregyháza. These are events that have been forgotten today, but at the time they were valued by certain artists.\(^7\)

The geographic reach of these meetings is evident: this is about counter-balancing West European and North American events and turning the Socialist bloc into an alternative area for circulation. At the same time, it is about building a new socialist realism. Far from becoming obsolete with the death of Stalin and the thawing of relations, the idea of socialist realism remains in certain countries the object of intense debates, which raise new references—authorized and common to the entire bloc—such as Brecht and Mayakovsky.

This undertaking, started in 1959 in Moscow, looks for new ways of combining realism and socialism. This is repeated by the Bulgarian art critic Dimitar Avramov in the speech he delivers at the opening of the Sofia triennial in 1973.\(^8\) “For some fifteen years, since the discrediting of cultural normativism and the pseudo-realist apparatus, research has concentrated on elaborating a genuine realism in a context where realism is no longer the dominant current,

\(^7\) In 1987, an artist sends a petition to the union of artists asking why he was not invited to the Sofia Triennial of Realist Painting and the Stettin Biennial of Paintings from Socialist Countries. The artist orders the union to explain “how it is decided who can exhibit and which festivals we are sent to.” Archiv der Akademie der Künste (AAdK), Verband Bildender Künstler (VBK) Bezeichvorstand Dresden no. 21.
\(^8\) A German translation of this speech was found in the estate of Willi Sitte. Deutsches Kunstarchiv, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nachlass Sitte (VBK, 1973–74).
but a current among others.” *Neuererdiskussion* fits perfectly into this perspective; while it remains within the bosom of socialism (it asserts unambiguously the superiority of socialist democracy), it keeps its distance from the themes of the Zhdanov era, which preferred saboteurs in the dock to discussion groups. Formally, while remaining realist, the painting moves away from the Stalinist canons, albeit in the background where the colors and forms mix indistinctly; the body of the man with the cigarette and the disproportionately long fingers disappear into the background, his right shoulder merging into the red, brown, and white swirls.

There is one point that is not called into question when socialist realism is rebuilt on new foundations, and that is the national question. In tacitly reproducing the Zhdanovist watchword that wanted a realism that was “national in its form and socialist in its content,” the international exhibitions insist on national traditions. Moreover, they are organized into national sections and do not seek to group together works according to transnational themes. This is proof that these international encounters do not necessarily result in national definitions being called into question; on the contrary, they may well confirm them. The other issue addressed by Avramov in his 1973 speech is the distinctive features of each country’s artistic production. He speaks of “the historical destinies, the various stages of economic, cultural, and artistic development, the hegemony of one tradition or the other, the influence of regional models, the different possibilities of knowing about foreign models and making them one’s own.” The taste of Soviet artists for all things monumental, the influence of medieval icons among Bulgarian artists, the legacy of colorism in Poland as well as its opening up to the West, and the renewal in Hungary of the agitation art of the Republic of Councils in 1919 would all be relevant contexts to explain the works. However, on this point, *Neuererdiskussion* does not correspond exactly to what is expected. Whereas the paintings of the other German artists present in Sofia illustrate “German traditions” (verism calling to mind Otto Dix,9 romanticism evoking C. D. Friedrich,10 or expressionism recalling Corinth11), Neubert offers forms that are foreign to the traditions. He is also unaware of what has been built

9 Willi Sitte, *Die Überlebenden*, 1963, polyptych, 325 x 350 cm, Galerie der Neuen Meister Dresden.
up as the German realist tradition (Menzel, Leibl, Liebermann). One East German critic likes to compare his paintings to the work of Max Beckmann (another important starting point for the construction of German tradition in the GDR), however, this is hardly convincing. The drawings of the figures in *Neuererdiskussion* remind us much more of GDR propaganda posters or the large public frescoes, of which Neubert himself is one of the specialists (with the foundries in Thale, he perfected several techniques for painting on enamel, which he uses for major public works in Thale, Halle, and Suhl). The figures’ features are individualized, but this individualization is kept to a minimum (the face of the man who is smoking thus amounts to a few brushstrokes). The composition is simple; it is easy to interpret this one action. The red and blue colors strongly recall the colors of the enamel panels that Neubert developed at the Thale foundries. In an original way in the socialist context, the painting undermines at the same time the idea of national tradition and the idea of grand art created in isolation of ordinary images. By circulating in Eastern Europe, the painting conveys an unexpected understanding of internationalism in art.

*Neuererdiskussion* invites people to move closer not only to the ordinary images that exist in the GDR, but also to a contemporary work that comes neither from East Germany nor the Soviet Bloc: *La Discussione* by the Italian Renato Guttuso from 1959 (Plate 14.2). From one painting to the next, we see the same discussion group depicted from a slightly high angle, with the same composition around a white diagonal separating the interlocutors. This resemblance comes to confirm the theory that socialist realism from the West was, in brother countries, just as important, if not more important, than socialist realism from the East. But the context into which *La Discussione* is born in 1959 is quite different from that of *Neuererdiskussion*. It is the result of a long series of drawings begun in 1956. These drawings are devoted to political discussions at the core of the Italian Communist Party after the

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Part II · Moving Objects

Soviet army’s repression of the Hungarian uprising, an event that profoundly divided Togliatti’s party. The figure stood to the left is, in fact, a self-portrait of Guttuso who approved of the Soviet intervention and who had great difficulties defending this position before other intellectuals. The painting mixes several debates, as we can see, next to the newspaper headlines carrying the words Mosca or proletario, near to the ashtray a reproduction of Fernand Léger’s La Grande parade sur fond rouge (1953) or the cover of an edition of Isskustvo, the leading Soviet art journal that circulates throughout communist Europe. It is difficult to know how much of the political acuteness of the painting is noticed in the GDR. The fact remains that the painting is well known there and will come to confirm the reputation of its creator, who is considered from the end of the 1940s as one of the most important creators of a realist, modern, antiformalist and partisan form of art. But after having been exhibited at the Venice Biennale, La Discussione was purchased in 1960 by the Tate Gallery in London so that, when the retrospective on Guttuso’s work is exhibited in 1967 in East Berlin and Leipzig, this painting cannot be included, which is lamented publicly by the organizers. Neubert therefore, who has not traveled to the West, only knows the painting from reproductions and through the few studies that come from the GDR, such as Discussione politica.

Art critics in the GDR did not fail to see the similarities between the two paintings, but they tried hard to point out the differences. Guttuso’s painting belonged to a capitalist society under pressure from the interests of the antagonist classes, whereas the second painting was seen as the expression of a socialist society in which the social strata worked together to build socialism. In the first painting, “the discussion serves to strengthen the class front in the fight against the ideological enemy; it is about fundamental class issues. The discussion group in Neubert’s painting, on the other hand, reflects the col-

16 The painting by Guttuso entitled Occupazione delle terre incolte in Sicilia from 1948 is presented in the GDR as the symbolic work bringing together all of these qualities. It is acquired by the Academy of Arts of East Berlin in 1949 and lent to the Museum of Dresden to become part of its permanent collection.
19 Renato Gussuto, Discussione politica, 1957, 39 x 50 cm, study by brush, pen, and Indian ink, Busto Arsizio.
lective effort to strengthen the power of the working class and thus reflects a much more advanced stage in the historical process.20

However, more than the differences, it is the shared problems that we find interesting. Let us consider the white diagonal at the center of both paintings. In both cases, there are incongruous signs that appear: the newspapers in Guttuso’s painting, the industrial sketches in Neubert’s. Guttuso has glued pieces of newspaper to the canvas. Moreover, there are plenty of other elements in the painting that call to mind the cubist aesthetic, such as the depiction of white rectangles of irregular shape in the top right-hand corner, or the grayish-ochre tone of the whole painting. In Neuererdiskussion this kind of aesthetic cannot be found, but the industrial sketches seem nonetheless to be equally strange. They stand out from the untidy mass of papers and the salient angles. In other words, in both cases, the very objects of the debate (international topical events on the one hand and improvements to production on the other) are given special treatment in relation to the realist representation of the whole. The object of the debate is like a stranger to the painting, as though it were breaking away from each of the interlocutors.

And it is worth lingering a while over the effect produced by this diagonal. In his studies—some of which were sent to East Berlin and Leipzig in 1967—Guttuso endlessly reworked in various ways the line that separates the interlocutors. In La Discussione, this line is very much a fracture in the composition, casting doubt over the possibility of harmony between the various opinions. On the top left-hand side there is a man who is unaware of the scene, arms crossed and body slumped on the table, perhaps tired of the endless conversations or resigned to the vacuity of the disputes. In Neuererdiskussion, the fracture is less clear-cut and everyone is paying attention to what is being said. The person who is talking, unlike the other protagonists, is not really at the table, his body is out in front, at the center of the attention. Yet the diagonal clearly marks a barrier between engineers and workers; it displays a social frontier within the image of several levels of society in solidarity with each other. The speech is not hindered or thwarted; it is much more the case that it has to cover the entire expanse of the social space. As a result, the diagonal marks, in both cases, the irreconcilable element estranging the interlocu-

20 Kuhirt, Willi Neubert, 14.
tors from one another. Both Neubert and Guttuso thus contribute to the rich socialist iconography of the conflictual discussion, which was already present in the interwar period, for example in the works of Kouzma Petrov-Vodkin\textsuperscript{21} or Lea Grundig.\textsuperscript{22}

If the issue of verbal exchange and its limits is one of the major subjects of realism in socialist countries, this is in part because the exercise of art is linked in these countries to a whole series of discussion practices. “Realism” is not just the name of a form, but also the name of a new economy of art, resting on the involvement of people who are foreign to the worlds of art. This is what has enabled socialist realism to be perceived as eminently modern (and the various avant-gardes as conservative, as they renew the social division of roles). Again, the problem arises both locally and internationally. From one point of communist Europe to another, the imperial and vague views of Lenin are repeated (or, more precisely, those that Clara Zetkin borrowed from Lenin): “Art belongs to the people. It must lay down its roots as deeply as possible in the heart of the working masses. It must be understood and loved by them.”\textsuperscript{23}

The sacred moment for an encounter between artists and workers is the commission. The idea of the commission in socialist countries is to involve factory employees in artistic creation; they thus rise to the status of sponsor that was previously reserved for the powerful. Under the supervision of the union and sometimes the party cell within the company, the commissioned artist has to work in collaboration with a “social partner” to whom he has to present his projects, then sketches, and finally the finished work. A study of how commissions were actually carried out in the GDR shows that artists were often able to evade collaborating with their social partners, as commissions often took the form of disguised sales. But this was not the case with the commissions that Neubert created in Thale in the 1960s and 1970s. The Thale union’s commission contracts reveal the commitment to the “joint work that is carried out through the organization of debates and discussions between the artist and the collective.”\textsuperscript{24} They lay down very clearly the specific condi-

\textsuperscript{21} Kouzma Petrov-Vodkin, Rabwite, 1926, oil on canvas, 97 x 106 cm, Russian Museum of Saint Petersburg.
\textsuperscript{22} Lea Grundig, Diskussion auf der Strasse zwischen SPD-Arbeitern und KPD-Arbeitern, 1930, linocut, 26.8 x 36.2 cm, Deutsches Historisches Museum Berlin.
\textsuperscript{24} AAdK, VBK Bezirksvorstand Halle, no. 52, contract between the union and Willi Neubert, 3 January 1968.
tions of joint work: the associated brigade and the exact dates of meetings are stated clearly. “If the piece is not accepted, because the artist has not heeded the advice given or has not given the work the desired quality, the amount already paid will be the only fee paid for the work” (and the total amount initially planned will not be paid). The accounts of the meetings have not been found, but it may be the case that the profusion of colors in Neuererdiskussion is a response to the requests of the brigade, as the use of color was one of the most frequent requests.

There are numerous accounts of the difficulty in finding a common language between artists and “social partners.” And so it was that in 1971, at the Thale foundries, one of the factory officials wrote a report concerning the creation of a fresco by Neubert, associated to a group made up of eighteen production workers, three foremen, three employees, three engineers and two apprentices.25

The collective to which Neubert is associated has regularly visited him in his atelier and shows an interest in the process of creating the work. . . However, as the discussions have progressed, it has become increasingly clear that a political and ideological conscience is the only thing to rise to the surface here. The capacity for judgment, which must emerge from the commission system strengthened, does not yet include the judgment of taste. . . . Most workers do not claim to be sponsors. Only when they are asked whether they feel involved in the work of Willi Neubert do they agree and speak about the way in which they have participated in the production of the work.

To explain why these exchanges between the artist and the collective are often laborious, the report also highlights the workers’ inhibitions before the pictures, and their reluctance to make judgments concerning taste (the possible political reluctance to take part in an activity organized by the union is not mentioned here).

Confronted by such problems, artists such as Neubert can look beyond their country’s borders for points of comparison. The international scene be-

comes a space where answers to supposedly common problems are sought. This opportunity is provided by delegation exchanges (in which Neubert participates as a member of the local leadership of the artists’ union and the local leadership of the party). The goals set for delegation exchanges were to establish links between artists’ unions in different countries and to gain a better understanding of the art of like-minded countries. These trips involve presents and purchases, which establish an economic circulation of art within communist Europe.

These exchanges take the form of twinnings between regions that become institutionalized during the course of the 1960s and 1970s. The Bezirk of Halle is thus twinned with the Republic of Bashkortostan, the województwo of Katowice in Poland, the Veszprém megye in Hungary and the West Slovak kraj in Czechoslovakia. But the trips can also be used by artists and officials to observe how the confrontation with workers is organized in other countries. In 1974, for example, an East German delegation travels to Katowice in Poland (where they present a gift of a cycle of engravings entitled Lenin and the unions), then to the Felix Dzerzhinsky factory in Tarnow, to which the German factory in Leuna is associated. A company exhibition is organized here bringing together 6,900 employees who are shown socialist realist works (by Willi Neubert, Willi Sitte, Dieter Rex, Hans Rothe, etc.) and works belonging to a less partisan realism (Carl Marx, Otto Möhwald, etc.). One official from the Halle district council reports that the East Germans “immediately sought to organize a discussion—in which our delegation was to take part—of Polish artists and the factory workers.” But the Polish officials are reluctant. “The president of the artists’ union did not take seriously this desire to hold a discussion. She declared essentially that Polish artists paint as they see fit, in a realist or abstract manner.” We cannot know the extent to which the East German official, in his translation, distorts the views of the union president and why the latter puts a stop to any exchange. It is true that the GDR and Poland, geographical-

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26 The archives of the VBK in Halle, for example, provide the details of the organization of an exhibition in Bulgaria of five young East German artists who were still little known in 1972. The five painters decide which works can be sold and determine the prices. The five artists can expect earnings of 2,780, 7,900, 9,100, 9,730 and 13,700 marks respectively. AAdK VBK Bezirksvorstand Halle, no. 5.
ly close but opposed in the spectrum of cultural socialist policies, offer situations that are not easily compared in reality. However, this case is a testament to a desire on the part of East Germans, such as Neubert, to observe in other countries things that pose problems at home.

In many ways, the international uses that are given to a painting such as *Neuerer Diskussion* (its circulation in international exhibitions in the bloc, the dialogue in which it engages with a painting by Guttuso, its use in discussions with workers in other countries) rest every time on the local context in which it is born. We can thus follow the various paths that lead to the universalization of the image of a company meeting. But we must look carefully at what is universalized: in each case, the relationship between the social groups is at the center of attention, the breakdown of social relations, heavy with tensions and conflicts.

In 1970, Neubert is coeditor of a book devoted to socialist realism. Alongside the usual considerations concerning the Marxist–Leninist aesthetic, socialist humanism, or indeed the decadent art of late Western bourgeoisie, the issue of conflict in socialist realism is addressed. The excerpt really tries to justify the conflict and social contradictions for artistic creation, including in the socialist world; “all realist art is carried by genuine conflicts.” However, the text remains politically very orthodox and reaffirms the importance of the party through which the conflicts are supposed to be resolved and thanks to which the antagonisms will disappear. The persistence of antagonisms: Neubert cannot write about this, and he would certainly not have used these words, but he experiments with it, he paints it and he makes it resonate with other works and other artistic practices in communist Europe.
