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Artist Collaborations in the Soviet Union and the GDR

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Introduction

The history of art often tells the story of artists laboring in solitude to produce their work—this romanticized notion goes back at least to Giorgio Vasari’s 1568 Lives of the Artists. But art also is the story of collaborations—from the studios of artists like Titian, Rubens, and Rembrandt to the Bauhaus, Black Mountain College, and beyond. And it is the story of individual collaborations such as those between Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Walt Disney and Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol and John Michel Basquiat, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, and the Guerilla Girls.

Film and the performing arts are intrinsically collaborative because making or performing a work typically requires more than one person. The fine arts are more solitary by nature. But in the end, all artists stand on the shoulders of those who came before them—imitating, drawing inspiration from and then innovating.

In East Germany (GDR) and the Soviet Union, artist collectives and other collaborations during the Cold War era (1945-1991) played significant roles in both the creative lives of many artists, in state propaganda and in dissident artwork. The collaborations produced a variety of artistic results: individual artworks made by one artist in a collaborative environment or by several artists who contributed to a single work, joint exhibitions, or portfolios of works initiated by art historians or gallery owners. The collectives included art brigades funded by the state and serving propaganda purposes, dissident artist collectives using art to make anti-government political statements, and unofficial art collectives simply wanting a place for free exchange of artistic ideas, sometimes as a kind of “parallel universe” to the politics of the state.
Purposes and Benefits of Artist Collaborations

Artist collaborations serve many purposes: stimulating creativity through an exchange of ideas; jointly producing art, adding to a work a particular skill an individual artist may not have; bringing art to the public; increasing the artist's income from art; or using art for an ideological purpose.

The benefits to the artist of collaborating are often psychological as well as practical or aesthetic. Working together can alleviate anxieties associated with the creative process, reduce the essential loneliness of the creative experience, help overcome a creative block, inspire greater confidence in one's work, or offer emotional support in a world that often ignores the art and the artist.

Collaborations nurture artists in their everyday work, even when they are creating separate pieces, provide comradeship through shared meals or social experiences, and in some cases offer communal studios or even shared living quarters. Some collaborations are self-supported, others are funded externally by government or private sources.

The psychological benefits of artist collaborations in Cold War environments were particularly significant because of the severe constraints the state placed on art during this time period. To work openly, artists had to belong to a state-sponsored union. Unofficial art often was regarded as a product of bourgeois capitalism and was condemned or suppressed. Official art, on the other hand, was supported by the state. However, not all "state art" was political propaganda. Collaborations by artists were generally encouraged as they were in keeping with the socialist political ideology.


Koch was head of the art department for this electrical device manufacturing company, as well as a recognized free artist in the GDR. This work is also featured on the cover of the Wende Museum's book *Beyond the Wall.*
Sergei & Alexei Tkachev, *Spring*, 1964, oil on canvas, from the collection of Meridee Williams

The brothers Sergei and Alexei Tkachev were among the leading Soviet painters of the 1950s and 1960s, working in the Soviet Impressionist style. They produced individual artworks but consistently collaborated on their major works. Both painters were recognized and highly decorated by the state.
Ferris Poster Collection

The Ferris Poster Collection has 234 original Soviet poster designs by 37 artists, dating from 1977 to 1992. They were acquired by The Wende Museum from Jeri Ferris, widow of the Los Angeles-based teacher and art collector Tom Ferris. The works of Alexander Lozenko, Alexei Rezaev, Mikhail Rozhdestvin, and Alexander Vaganov, make up nearly half the collection.

The artists knew each other and organized exhibitions together, with some works executed by multiple artists. The subjects range from Communism, Stalin and Hitler, The Great Patriotic War, Gorbachev, and Yeltsin, to religion, sports, ecology, health, nuclear disarmament, the August Coup of 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In August 1991 these artists put their posters on top of the barricades that were erected against the rolling tanks, using their art as a contribution in the fight for freedom.
Viktor Konstantinovich Dorokhov and Valentina Egorovna Dorokhova, *The Great Appear Great to Us Because We Ourselves Are Standing On Our Knees*, 1990, tempera on board.

There were numerous models for this work among posters and other artworks of the Soviet era.


This painting warns future generations against the dangers of pollution. The three items hanging on the laundry line represent Lake Baikal, the Yellow Sea and the Red Sea.

Andrei Romanovich Vishnevski and Iurii Panfilov, untitled, 1989, tempera on board.

The Ukrainian text translates as: "Whose sons? Where are the parents?"
Mikhail Nikolaevich Rozhdestvin and Lev Nikolaevich Rozhdestvin, The Return of the Prodigal Son, 1991, tempera on board

This painting depicts Marx consoling and reassuring Lenin, pictured with a footprint on his back. It references Rembrandt’s painting The Return of the Prodigal Son, c. 1661-69, Hermitage Museum, Saint-Petersburg.

Andrei E. Kosolov, Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge, 1990, tempera on board

The work references both Andrea Mantegna’s Lamentation of Christ from c. 1480 in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan, and El Lissitzky’s 1919 propaganda poster Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge, a reference to the Red and White armies in the civil war.

Alexander Lozenko, Ship, 1991, tempera on board

This ship, symbolizing the state, went ashore but its captains, the socialist leaders, still believe that they are sailing to a shining future. They are in pursuit of the old standard slogans claiming that the party and the people are united. The composition is based on a famous scene from Sergei Eisenstein’s iconic movie Battle Ship Potemkin from 1925.
Alexei Rezaev, *Our Road to Communism*, 1991, tempera on board


The composition is based on Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Tower of Babel* from c. 1563 in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.

Viktor Konstantinovich Dorokhov and Valentina Egorovna Dorokhova, *To Each Family an Individual Apartment!* 1990, tempera on board

This poster image alludes to Soviet housing projects, suggesting that the government give each of its republics its own space just as it promised an individual apartment for every family. After the USSR dissolved, the republics became independent. The image portrays a typical entrance to a Soviet building, with a set of doorbells showing the flags of all 15 republics that were part of the USSR. The Lithuanian flag is the only one coming off its hinge, alluding to the fact that it was the first republic to secede from the Soviet Union in 1990. Latvia and Estonia followed soon after, acknowledged by their flags lacking the Soviet hammer and sickle. The other republics still bear their old USSR flags and are nailed firmly to the side of each doorbell. The title of the artwork is placed on a torn piece of paper, reminiscent of rental signs that appeared during the perestroika period.
CLARA MOSCH

The artist collective CLARA MOSCH was active in the GDR from 1973 to 1983. The name is an acronym using the initials of its members Carlfriedrich Claus, Thomas Ranft, Michael Morgner, Gregor-Torsten Schade and Dagmar Ranft-Schinke. The artists all studied in Leipzig and were members of the Künstlerverband, the official artists union. They were later based in Karl-Marx-Stadt, now Chemnitz, in Saxony. The group created performances and happenings. CLARA MOSCH artists distanced themselves from the official art practice, Socialist Realism. They stressed autonomy in their art, although they did not explicitly criticize the GDR. Nonetheless, they were monitored by the Stasi. They transformed their collective gallery (also called CLARA MOSCH) into an environment where artists could be free. They organized 29 exhibitions in the gallery.

Michael Morgner and Ralf-Rainer Wasse (CLARA MOSCH), *Foto Objekt*, 1980, photographs mounted on canvas and cotton fiber

The photos on this pyramid feature Michael Morgner’s performance „Ein Kreuz legen“ (Lying a Cross) from 1980.
CLARA MOSCH, Poster, 1981, offset print on paper

The five members of the group present themselves dressed as women.

CLARA MOSCH, 5 Jahre CLARA MOSCH Ausstellungseröffnung (5 Years CLARA MOSCH exhibition opening), FÜNFTRACHT, 1982, offset print on paper
Autoperforationartisten

The Autoperforationsartisten artist collective consisted of Micha Brendel, Else Gabriel, Volker Lewandowsky and Rainer Görß. The artists all met when they were students of Günther Hornig at the Hochschule für bildende Kunst (Academy of Fine Arts) in Leipzig. They expressed their ideas and emotions mainly through performance art, using provocative materials, such as meat and blood. They exhibited at the Leonhardi Museum but focused their attention on performance art, attempting to break away from the limitations of Socialist Realism practice. Although the artists did not live together, they worked together very closely. Like CLARA MOSCH, there was no manifesto or central philosophy that bound the artists together. Their relationship was not always easy – on three occasions, rivalry led to a restructuring of the collective. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the group dissolved.

Rainer Görß (Autoperforationsartisten), Exhibition poster
Galerie Treptow, Berlin, March 1985, offset print on paper
Micha Brendel, Else Gabriel, Rainer Görß (Autoperforationsartisten), Allez! Arrest, exhibition poster Galerie Eigen+Art, 1988, offset print on paper

Micha Brendel, Else Gabriel, Rainer Görß (Autoperforationsartisten), Allez! Arrest, installation photos Galerie Eigen+Art, 1988, photographs
Jazz & Improvisation

This portfolio of photographs and sketches of six Western jazz artists who performed in the GDR was published by art historian Christoph Tannert. The artworks are by Jürgen Jaufe and Claus Weidensdorfer, with texts by Tannert and Matthias Creutziger.

"It is easy to see why free, improvisational jazz, as it is presented in the texts and images of this portfolio, was at once immensely popular and heavily censored in the GDR." -- Matthias Creutziger
**A Drei**

*A Drei* was an art magazine published by Frank Brettschneider, Claus Loeser, and later Bernd Weise. They asked friends to submit artworks, which they assembled in a portfolio that included text, graphic art, and photography. Published from 1983 to 1990, the magazine grew in popularity and issues were collected by major German art museums. The name *A DREI* refers to the size of the portfolios. Each edition consisted of 25 to 30 artworks by different artists. Sixteen editions of *A DREI* were published, with a total of 276 artworks by 85 artists.

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![Gudrun Höritzsch (A Drei), untitled, 1985, various incised print techniques](image1)

![Jürgen Höritzsch (A Drei), *The Eternal Animal*, 1985, screenprint](image2)
Eigen+Art

Eigen+Art surfaced in 1983 as an unofficial gallery project in the private loft of Gerd Harry ("Judy") Lybke in Leipzig. The gallery was well-known and accessible because of its regular opening hours. Though officially illegal, the gallery made posters, catalogues, and invitations for artists to contribute to exhibitions. Most exhibitions in the gallery were not politically driven. The gallery was known as a place for artistic discussion and creative thinking among alternative artists in the GDR, and still exists today.

Eigen+Art, Exhibition poster Angela Hampel, 1986, offset print on paper

Eigen+Art, Exhibition opening poster 1985, offset print on paper
Altenburger Mail Art Show

Mail Art started in the GDR in 1980 with the Collective Collages project by Birger Jesch. He created a picture on the backside of a watercolor drawing block and mailed it to a foreign colleague, who added to the image; this process was repeated multiple times until a collage was created by many different artists. When the collage was completed, it was sent back to Jesch. The final image would always be a surprise because of the many contributors. Mail Artists in the GDR visited each other and had exhibitions throughout the country. Mail Art enabled them to work with each other despite geographical separation. They exchanged artworks with artists in Latin America, Eastern and Western Europe, and America. However, Mail Artists faced problems with the Stasi, who would monitor, and sometimes interfere with, the circulation of artistic materials.

Altenburger Mail-Art-Show, poster, 1982, screenprint
Leonhardi Museum

The Leonhardi Museum was a well-known exhibition center for non-conformist art in Dresden, named after its founder, the Romantic landscape painter Eduard Leonhardi. It was not independently owned; it first belonged to the State Association of Artists in the Graphic Arts and later to the City Council of Dresden. Nonetheless, the Museum’s exhibitions catered to artists who were not part of official art styles.
Behauptung des Raumes - Wege unabhängiger Ausstellungskultur in der DDR / Claiming Space - Ways of Independent Art Exhibitions in the GDR (Germany 2009, Documentary by Claus Löser and Jakobine Motz)

In Claiming Space, filmmakers Löser and Motz document the quest of East-German artists for artistic freedom through collaboration. With a mix of archival footage and recent interviews, the documentary shows how artists organized themselves and what obstacles they faced. The film tells the stories of those who succeeded in creating free spaces for their artwork, but it also documents the fate of those who were denied access to the art world or expelled from the GDR.

Stills from Behauptung des Raumes
The exhibition was organized by Thomas E. Backer, PhD and Wende Museum Chief Curator Joes Segal, PhD with assistance from curatorial interns Karlien Metz and Jori Snels.

Special thanks to Meridee Williams for her generous loan and to Vera Kopecky for object photographs. The Artist Collaboratives catalog was edited by Donna Stein and designed by Amanda Roth.

Learn more about the objects in this exhibition by visiting our online catalog at <http://www.wendemuseum.org/collections/main.php?module=objects>

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