



Detail *Trümmerfrau* (Rubble Woman), Walter Reinhold, Dresden, 1952.

TRACTOR DRIVERS, MOTHERS AND NUDES: DECODING THE FEMININE IN EAST GERMAN PUBLIC SCULPTURES

The most common figurative sculptures gracing the open spaces of East Germany were not Marx and Lenin, but the female nude and mother. Male nudes and fathers were also present, but much less so. If the real East German woman was as politically engaged and economically productive as her male counterpart, then why were parks, streets and squares filled with sculptures of naked women and mums? Were these ostensibly “realist” sculptures depicting “women” in one or other art historical tradition, or were they socialist women?

The German Democratic Republic, which existed within the Eastern Bloc of socialist countries under the Soviet sphere of influence from 1949 to 1989, vaunted the economic and cultural advance of women. The arrival in true Communism foresaw the abolition of the traditionally “female” domain through communalisation of domestic labour. In the more pragmatic version of “real existing socialism”, however, equality was predicated on the female matching the productive labour of men alongside her reproductive labour. This asymmetrical model of equality preserved the status of the female as Other to the male norm.

Across the visual arts, from sculpture to graphic design, imagery in East Germany showed women as active builders of socialism alongside men. At first sight this would seem a fresh departure from the centuries-old virgin/mother/whore axis identified by historians of visual culture.¹ But research on GDR visual culture has demonstrated the contradictions of socialist womanhood and its image: popular imagery perpetuated the status of women as second-class citizens and as objects of scopophilic attention.² This duality was not simply the contrast between types of image, such as factory worker or erotic model, but could even exist within the same image.³ Women alone, it was suggested in popular imagery and their textual anchorage,⁴ could deliver the pleasures of beauty, allure, sensuality, grace, and other such feminine qualities.

This gender-coding played out in the figurative sculptures commissioned by the authorities in East Germany. Over the past decade I have researched and documented many hundreds of two and three-dimensional works, which were positioned in public spaces. Why was so much importance, and indeed public expenditure, attached to art within the built environment in East Germany? The reason is that in the ideology of socialist realism, any architectural ensemble had to integrate works of art in order to be faithful to the classical ideal of the “synthesis” of art and architecture. Further, the iconography of art was

¹ Mahony (1975), Parker and Pollock (1983), Bettreron (1987), Pollock (1988).

² Sociological research on gender and patriarchy has identified the contradictions between gender equality and patriarchy in the GDR. See, for example, by Dolling (1990), Geyer (1999), Dieckmann (1994), Kark (2006), Madel (2011), Dolling (1990) notes in her study of the popular women’s magazine, *Die Dichtin*, that these contradictions are evident even within the same images.

³ Dolling, Irene, “Gespieltes Frauenbild in der DDR,” in: M. Hübner (ed.), *Die DDR: 40 Jahre G.D.R. in der DDR*, G. Hübner / H.M. Nickel, *Forum in Deutschland* 1995–92 (Bonn, 1993).

⁴ In the Barthesian sense (1974) the textual anchor orientates the referential function of the image, and as signifying qualities of beauty.

to perform its ideological function of educating the public on socialist values. This art had to be figurative, not abstract, and therefore much of the work in public spaces was charged with portraying ideals of socialist life.⁵

What interests me here is not only the roles for women represented in these works, but also the subtle manifestation within these sculptures of markers of femininity in terms of spatial relations, gesture, stance, and direction of look. Firstly, let's look at the roles assigned to the socialist woman, based on a review of around five hundred examples which I have collected. These all reflect the dominant discourses of political (and thus public) life in East Germany — life in socialism, it was continually stressed, was about work, procreation, good health, collective engagement, leisure, loyalty, and of course, joy. I have classified the sculptures into twelve categories, leaving aside just one artwork that I could not place in any category.

The categories are:

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|--|---|
| 1 Rubble woman or reconstruction helper— a heroisation of the women in East and West Germany who manually cleared the rubble of the war ⁶ | 8 Historical figure (Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg, Anne Frank and Käthe Kollwitz) |
| 2 Productive worker: manual/professional | 9 Ethnic “Other” (Sorbian/ from socialist African or Asian countries) |
| 3 Mother: with child(ren)/grieving lost child(ren) | 10 Female child (often pictured with birds/animals) |
| 4 Nude— this category is not mutually exclusive | 11 Figure of Myth, folk tale or allegory |
| 5 Learner, reader or student | 12 Participant in collective socialist struggle or international solidarity and memorial ⁷ |
| 6 Heterosexual partner (almost always youthful, indicating pre-marital status) | |
| 7 Athletic figure (active/at rest) | |

5 See Jessica Jenkins, *Grand art in the urban environment in the German Democratic Republic: formal, ideological and functional change, 1949–1980* (2015) and *Reframing Socialism* (Bloomington, forthcoming 2020).

6 See Laurie Wilson, “The Female Body in Western Art: Abstraction, Ideology, and the Female Figure,” *Monist*, no. 18, 1998, 1–10. See also Thomas Saito, ed., *The Female Body: Inside and Outside* (London, 2013).

7 See more 6. Rubble clearers were not uniquely female workers, but they were the most visible and best signified the sense of renewal after the Nazi era.

8 See Laurie Wilson, “The Female Body in Western Art: Abstraction, Ideology, and the Female Figure,” *Monist*, no. 18, 1998, 1–10. See also Thomas Saito, ed., *The Female Body: Inside and Outside* (London, 2013).

9 See Laurie Wilson, “The Female Body in Western Art: Abstraction, Ideology, and the Female Figure,” *Monist*, no. 18, 1998, 1–10. See also Thomas Saito, ed., *The Female Body: Inside and Outside* (London, 2013).

10 The sporting woman is rare but not unique in the history of art: ancient Greece offered a number of depictions, but the mid- to late 19th-century work of Wilhelm von Diez, *Sportlerinnen*, 1837; Fritz Koelle, *Turnplatzlerinnen*, 1941; and Ernst Seger, *Sportlerin*, a nude allegedly created on special instructions of Adolf Hitler. See <http://www.germanartgallery.eu>.

At first sight, most of these categories of female depiction have a lineage in the history of both Western and Eastern art. Female bodies,⁸ mothers,⁹ working women, sporting women¹⁰ and ethnic Others are not without precedent in pre-socialist realist art historical traditions, from antiquity to Classicism, social realism and romanticism. The rubble woman, heroine of post-war reconstruction, was a joint East-West German venture.¹¹ However, it is fair to say that socialist realism, which was developed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s-30s, elaborated on and re-signified these genres as socialist.

Only “socialist struggle” and the “international solidarity” seem uniquely socialist in subject matter. However, if we consider some of the titles given to many works, or at least the themes as they were proposed by the local planning boards, arguably some of these types created new socialist allegories. Ancient Greek, classical and latter 19th-century allegorical themes such as “Beauty”, “Spring”, “the Arts”, “France” or “Germania” were replaced or re-signified by new allegories within a socialist frame, such as “Youth”, “Friendship of the Peoples” or “Peace”.

The represented categories align with the roles expected of the socialist woman — worker, mother, and ideally active participant in building socialism, but how was a mother or worker signified as socialist? Even more perplexing – what would be a socialist nude?

We can begin to answer this with an overview of some of these female roles and their realisation in public sculptures. Even before socialist tropes—based on realism from the Soviet Union—were adopted in the early 1950s, the rubble woman stood as a uniquely German figure of post-war pride. Walter Reinhold’s *Trümmerfrau* (Rubble Woman, fig. 1) in Dresden shows the sturdy stereotype of the somewhat androgynous heroine of Soviet socialist realism, but in later manifestations the East German construction helper becomes much more of a woman in naturalness of form and stance (fig. 2). Fritz Cremer’s male and female reconstruction helpers are heroic, but they are lighter, more naturalistic figures who in their equivalence appear as a direct demonstration of male and female equality (fig. 3, 4).

Reconstruction on socialist terms was demonstrated through the promotion of female participation in the labour force, both in manual labour and factory work—and here the East diverged from the West, where women were encouraged to return to domestic roles. Whilst the tractor driver and manual worker are well-known tropes from the 1920s

Soviet Union, just a few such figures appeared in East Germany in the early 1950s when Soviet-style socialist realism was asserted as official cultural policy. Exponents of this drive towards art's exemplary function are Walter Arnold's *Jugend—Baumeister der DDR* (Youth—Builders of the GDR, fig. 5) — which was awarded the national prize of the GDR under the theme “Representing the changes in our country”; *Traktoristin* (Tractor Driver, fig. 6) by the same artist, and Eberhard Bachmann's *Schweinepflegerin* (Pig Carer). However, these figures have a childish gait and portray women as girl-like rather than heroic. Jürgen von Woyski's *Die Tänzerin* (The Dancer, fig. 7) offers an interesting contrast to these unworldly characterisations—the commissioner asked for “no heavy busted activist”, but the figure nonetheless has a confident, assertive air.

In the 1960s the reconstruction theme was replaced by a forward-looking emphasis on education, science and space travel. Female workers were more likely to be represented in non-manual labour, such as Eberhardt Bachmann's *Kindergärtnerin* (Nursery Worker, fig. 8) or *Junge Lehrerin* (Young Teacher, fig. 9). Women were being promoted more in traditional, caring roles. An exception, and one of my favourites, is Senta Baldamus' *Chemieingenieurin* (Chemistry Engineer, fig. 10), which was situated within a housing complex in the pioneer chemistry new town of Halle Neustadt. In contrast to Heinz Bebernis' male chemistry workers in the Leuna Park, there are no props to anchor the chemistry engineer's identity, but it would still be hard to imagine such a sculpture in the West.

The procreative function of the family was also integral to socialist values and this too is evident in the formal “mother and child” and “family” genre. In Merten's sculpture, motherhood is even allegorised as “Peace” (fig. 11). The hierarchy of male and female that surfaces in the typical situation of a male child where one child is present, and male and female offspring where two are present, reinforces the unit of production rather than documenting family life (fig. 12, 13). This traditional constellation is evident even in Carola and Joachim Buhlmann's consciously comical 1982 piece, *Familie Grün* (The Green Family, fig. 14). When social moments are depicted, they often suggest the socialisation of gender—rarely does a father play with a female child (fig. 15), although Karl Rättsch's *Vater mit Kind* (Father with Child), where the father actually looks up to the girl child, is a rare exception. The intimacy of close physical love for a child or baby is almost uniquely the privilege or duty of the mother (fig. 16).



Fig. 1 *Trümmerfrau* (Rubble Woman), Walter Reinhold, Dresden, 1952.



Fig. 2

Fig. 2 *Aufbauhelferin* (Reconstruction Helper), Gertrud Claasen, Berlin-Pankow, 1952.

Fig. 3 *Aufbauhelferin* (Reconstruction Helper), Fritz Cremer, Berlin-Mitte, 1956.

Fig. 4 *Aufbauhelfer* (Reconstruction Helper), Fritz Cremer, Berlin-Mitte, 1956.

Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 7



Fig. 6

Fig. 5 *Jugend – Baumeister der DDR* (Youth – Builders of the GDR), Walter Arnold, Gera, 1951.

Fig. 6 *Traktoristin* (Tractor Driver), Walter Arnold, Leuna, 1953.

Fig. 7 *Die Tänzerin* (The Dancer), Jürgen von Woyski, Hoyerswerda, 1956.

Fig. 8 *Kindergärtnerin* (Nursery Worker), Eberhardt Bachmann, Berlin-Niederschönweide, 1965.

Fig. 9 *Junge Lehrerin* (Young Teacher), Ernst Sauer, Cottbus, 1968.

Fig. 10 *Chemieingenieurin* (Chemistry Engineer), Senta Baldamus, Halle-Neustadt, 1970.

Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10





Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Fig. 11 *Frieden* (Peace), Karl Mertens, Brandenburg an der Havel, 1968.

Fig. 12 *Vater mit Kindern* (Father with Children), Ursula Schneider-Schulz, Gera, 1961.

Fig. 13 *Sozialistische Familie* (Socialist Family), Max Piroch, Dresden, 1969.

Fig. 14 *Familie Grün* (The Green Family), Carola and Hans-Joachim Buhlmann, Berlin-Potsdam, 1982.

Fig. 15 *Mundharmonikaspieler* (Harmonica Player), Hans-Detlef Henning, Gera, 1962.

Fig. 16 *Mutter mit Kind* (Mother with Child), Ernst Sauer, Eisenhüttenstadt, 1951/1989.

Fig. 17 *Große Schwimmerin* (Large Swimmer), Renew Graetz, Bernau bei Berlin, 1958.

Fig. 18 *Junges Paar* (Young Couple), Klaus Schwabe, Leipzig, 1971.

Fig. 19 Schwabe, Leipzig, 1971. *Sportlergruppe* (Group of Athletes), Heinz Mammat, Cottbus, 1977.

Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Differences between males and females emerge in athletic figures. Whilst females are depicted as confident in their physicality and the athletic potential of their bodies, they are frequently at rest or require physical support in order to display their bodies (fig. 17-19).

The absence of certain subject matter also reflects the ideological scheme: there is no religion, no class distinction or moral deviance, and few women who have outlived their reproductive usefulness, unless in mourning. Interestingly in view of the public discourse on the topic, I found only one representation of domestic work, by Doris Pollatschek.¹² Older women may be also shown almost as curiosities, for example, representing ethnic or historic “Others”, or posited as an “amusing” stereotype (fig. 20, 21).

Dress and hairstyle also point to these values. By the 1960s, the workers’ headscarf is gone but hair is invariably short and clothes are economic in form—these figures are natural and wholesome, well-groomed without any hint of excess or luxury (fig. 22, 23). This sense of ascetic practicality can also be read into the varying forms of bust or breasts. The androgynous figure of the 1950s has a stout bust, but when the figure represents a more humanist, clothed person, the neat contours of the breasts are clearly visible, for example in *Die Lesende* (Girl Reading) and *Chemieingenieurin* (Chemistry Engineer, fig. 24, 25). These indicate a fashionable but practical womanhood. The nudes are rarely voluptuous in form, the exceptions being some cases where the corporeal or erotic is implied in the primary subject (rather than a socialist female), for example in *Der Frauenbrunnen* (The Women Fountain, fig. 26). These observations suggest that excepting examples of the late period, the figures, even nudes are not intended to be timeless, but are socialist nudes.

What about the one sculpture I could not classify? This is the *Bauarbeiter mit schwangeren Mädchen* (Builder with Pregnant Girl, fig. 27). It appears to be a kind of anti-socialist-realist realism in its politically incorrect subject matter. Does the farmer primarily possess or protect the girl? Why is she so extremely diminished in stature? Does this possibly fall under the category “metaphors for state socialist paternalism?”

¹² https://www.dokumentationsstelle.de/documents/obj/30130056_VIII_Kunstsammlung_der-DDR_1972_for_an_unidealised_depiction_of_the_mother_and_child,_see_https://bildart.com/en/find-artist/doris-pollatschek/254974.



Fig. 20



Fig. 21

Fig. 20 *Sorbenbrunnen* (Sorby Fountain), Jürgen von Woyski, Hoyerswerda, 1980.

Fig. 21 *Altweiber-Brunnen* (Gossipers Fountain), Walter Howard, Eisenhüttenstadt, 1953/1980.



Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24



Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

Fig. 22 Detail *Große Schwimmerin* (Large Swimmer), René Graetz, Bernau bei Berlin, 1958.

Fig. 23 Detail *Mutter mit Kind* (Mother with Child), Ernst Sauer, Eisenhüttenstadt, 1951/1989.

Fig. 24 *Die Lesende* (Girl Reading), Heinz Beberniß, Halle, 1961.

Fig. 25 Detail *Chemieingenieurin* (Chemistry Engineer), Senta Baldamus, Halle-Neustadt, 1970.

Fig. 26 *Der Frauenbrunnen* (The Women Fountain), Gerhard Lichtenfeld, Halle-Neustadt, 1974.

Fig. 27 *Bauarbeiter mit schwangeren Mädchen* (Builder with Pregnant Girl), Axel Schulz, Schwedt, 1967/8.

I want now to look much more closely at the way in which the conventions of femininity are subtly reproduced through spatial relations, gesture, stance, and direction of look in the vast majority of sculptures depicting women. By femininity, I refer to the construction of the feminine in Western society, as identified in 1949 by Simone de Beauvoir¹³ but with a lineage dating back to the Enlightenment,¹⁴ if not the late Middle Ages.¹⁵ In the modern era, femininity can be characterised as enacted display rather than action, physical dependence, eagerness to please, weakness, introspection, self-grooming, modesty, affinity with nature and naturalness¹⁶ and mental withdrawal. The list is not exhaustive.

My assessment of “the feminine” in East German sculptures applies some of the signifiers identified by Erwin Goffman in his 1979 study of advertisements.¹⁷ His work analyses Western consumer advertising of that era, but it has proven astonishingly durable and can be applied here too.¹⁸

1. RELATIVE SIZE

Size—and height in particular—always relates to relative authority. “What biology and social selection facilitate, picture posing rigorously completes,” notes Goffman.¹⁹ In East German sculptures, the male will almost without exception be taller and/or positioned higher than the female. Where male and female figures are similarly sized, they are usually

considerably larger than life-size, and thus somewhat abstracted. The male figure always “encloses” the female figure. He looks at her, she lowers her eyes and sits frontally to the viewer (fig. 28, 29).

In *Junges Paar* (Young Couple, fig. 30) the male and female are of similar size and come close to being equals, but she is placed on a lower platform. She also keeps her knees closed, while his knees are open.

2. THE FEMININE TOUCH

The feminine hand caresses rather than holds. In sculptures this is most commonly in the form of self-touching. The only example of a firm grasp by a female figure I have found is the heroic grasp of the Reinhold’s *Trümmerfrau* (Rubble Woman, fig. 31). By contrast, the hand of Cremer’s female *Aufbauhelferin* (Reconstruction Helper, fig. 32) delicately balances on her spade. Claasen’s reconstruction helper shows nothing of the physical strain of carrying the bricks (fig. 33).²⁰

Mothers too are seen to be offering their hand rather than grasping (fig. 34). Where not delicate or caressing, hands are usually limp (fig. 35).

Female self-grooming has a strong lineage in both mythical depictions of the female and intimate portraits of bourgeois life of the early modern period. These rely on a narcissistic/voyeuristic structure, also used in cinema and soft

porn, where the female seems preoccupied and apparently unaware of the voyeuristic gaze (fig. 36).²¹

In Herbert Burschik’s *Sich Ausziehende* (Getting Undressed, fig. 37) the voyeurist subject position is explicit. The figure is completely delivered to the viewer, in a defenceless position. This disabling of the female look is a genre pose and is suggestive of pornographic imagery that offers the fantasy of total power over the object. At the same time, the crossed and closed legs connote an awareness of the viewer.

3. LICENCED WITHDRAWAL

In “licensed withdrawal” the female is free to mentally and physically submit to the security of male protection. This is most explicit in nudes and romantic pairings (fig. 38, 39).

When the face is tilted upwards, the eyes are normally closed, indicating a sensuousness to the surroundings rather than the claiming of a subject position that is implied by actual looking; the viewer is expected to be enjoying the spectacle of the female (fig. 40, 41).

Withdrawal is also evident in the common positioning of women on the floor or ground. Female figures are frequently sitting or lying, particularly when nude (fig. 42).

There are some interesting exceptions to these conventions where the figure looks directly towards the viewer and/or has a sureness of stance. In fact the closed arms of Cornelia Schulz’s 1982 nude serve not to conceal but rather to emphasise the fullness of the

breasts, giving a hint of erotic charge (fig. 43, 44).

Emerita Pansowovas flat-chested *Schreitende* (Strider, fig. 45) looks and walks straight ahead in a natural, rather than a military or athletic, gait with none of the usual signifiers that she is to be admired. Her femaleness is defined through her bone structure rather than her contours.

Margaret Middel’s *Schönheit des Menschen in der Natur* (The Beauty of People in Nature, fig. 46) reverses the conventional numerical and spatial hierarchy with the male figures lying on the ground. I would like to think this work is playing with Manet’s *Dejeuner sur l’Herbe*.

4. INFANTILISATION

The last of Goffman’s categories which can be applied here is infantilisation. The paternal state—the dictatorship—effectively infantilises all of its citizens, however, the male-to-female infantilisation possibly offers a form of playful retreat. Goffman points out that this playfulness also hints at the latent overpowering potential of the male (fig. 47).

¹³ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 1949. ¹⁹ Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, p. 28.

¹⁴ Carol Duncan, see note 9.

²⁰ The stance has the hip swing, which Kenneth Clark in his study of the nude claimed made the female body more suitable and beautiful for this subject matter.

¹⁵ Williams, Tara, *Inventing womanhood: gender and language in later Middle English writing*, Ohio State University Press, 2011.

¹⁶ Young girls with animals is also a common theme.

²¹ The concept of the gaze in second wave feminist writing defines the gaze as belonging implicitly to the man.

¹⁷ Erwin Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, Harvard University Press, 1979.

¹⁸ See Sut Jhally, *The Codes of Gender*, Media Education Foundation; and “Advertising, Gender and Sex: What’s Wrong with a Little Objectification?”, <http://www.sutjhally.com/articles/whatswrongwithalit/>

Fig. 28 *Liebespaar (Lovers)*, Martin Wetzels, Halle-Neustadt, 1973/4.

Fig. 29 *Liebespaar (Lovers)*, Axel Schulz, Schwedt, 1965.

Fig. 30 *Junges Paar (Young Couple)*, Klaus Schwabe, Leipzig, 1968.



Fig. 31



Fig. 32



Fig. 33

Fig. 34

Fig. 35



Fig. 28

Fig. 29



Fig. 30

Fig. 36



Fig. 37



Fig. 31 Detail *Trümmerfrau (Rubble Woman)*, Walter Reinhold, Dresden, 1952.

Fig. 32 Detail *Aufbauhelferin (Reconstruction Helper)*, Fritz Cremer, Berlin-Mitte, 1956.

Fig. 33 Detail *Aufbauhelferin (Reconstruction Helper)*, Gertrud Claasen, Berlin-Pankow, 1952.

Fig. 34 Detail *Frieden (Peace)*, Karl Mertens, Brandenburg an der Havel, 1968.

Fig. 35 Detail *Traktoristin (Tractor Driver)*, Walter Arnold, Leuna, 1953.

Fig. 36 *Inge auf der Freundschaftsinsel (Inge on the Island of Friendship)*, Walter Arnold, Potsdam, 1949.

Fig. 37 *Sich Ausziehende (Getting undressed)*, Herbert Burschik, Schwedt, 1976.



Fig. 38



Fig. 39



Fig. 40



Fig. 41



Fig. 38 Detail *Liebespaar* (Lovers), Martin Wetzels, Halle-Neustadt, 1973/4.

Fig. 39 Detail *Liebespaar* (Lovers), Axel Schulz, Schwedt, 1965.

Fig. 40 *Hockende* (Squatting), Eberhard Bachmann, Gera, 1984.

Fig. 41 *Mädchen* (Girl), Karl-Günter Mäpert, Berlin-Lichtenberg, 1965.

Fig. 42 *Liegende* (Lying), Wieland Förster, Eisenhüttenstadt, 1958.

Fig. 43 *Stehende Weibliche Akt* (Standing Female Nude), Cornelia Schulz, Erfurt, 1975-78.

Fig. 44 *Kleine Stehende* (Small Standing), Cornelia Schulz, Schwedt, 1982.

Fig. 45 *Schreitende* (Strider), Emerita Pansowová, Berlin-Marzahn, 1980.

Fig. 46 *Schönheit des Menschen in der Natur* (The Beauty of People in Nature), Margret Middell, Potsdam, 1973-74.

Fig. 47 *Liebespaar* (Lovers), Wilfried Fitzreiter, Rostock-Warnemünde, 1979.



Fig. 43



Fig. 44



Fig. 45



Fig. 46



Fig. 47

Although gender significations can be found across the time periods of the GDR, it is not the case that gender was ahistorical in its manifestations. In the 1950s the androgynous-looking female worker existed alongside the manifestations of the feminine. In the 1960s these ambiguities were replaced by a modern image of the confident adult female.

In the 1970s and more so in the 1980s, the liberalisation of the arts in East Germany and perhaps the exhaustion of existing ideal images saw forms of postmodern expression such as the unreal, fantasy, kitsch and generic historicisation. This opened up a space for the ethereal/mythical long-haired woman and for a kind of mannerist erotic display in the guise of art-historicity (fig. 48).

A further reason for this later liberalisation in public art forms, which opened up a space for more erotic visions of womanhood, can be explained by the

monotony of standardised architecture. As the built environment risked monotony, art operated as a kind of optical and sensual relief. The abstract ideological function of art to induce “joy in socialism” receded and was replaced by the ambition at least to be pleasurable.²²

Undoubtedly these works, taken together, represent a womanhood that differs from a bourgeois, class-inflected model and as such can be described as a socialist womanhood. This is evident not only in the themes, but also in a number of works proposing assuredness in public roles and hinting at heterosexual equality. However, the majority of female figurations reproduced Western norms of femininity to a greater or lesser extent. In conclusion I will offer some suggestions as to why this was the case.

The first point is quite obvious, that the regime of gender has a much greater longevity than any passing dictatorship.

The ideological apparatus that left normative gender categories untouched was also politically and economically expedient, as it helped to guarantee women’s reproductive and domestic labour. Through retaining and reinforcing gender myths, the potential threat to the patriarchal political hierarchy posed by female economic emancipation was neutralised.

Secondly, whilst there was limited public discursive space in which to challenge gender constructs, we can’t assume that the gender regime was non-consensual. The sustaining of familiar masculine and feminine identities may have offered a sense of normalcy where the present consisted of a perpetually suspended better future.

I asked at the outset why there were so many female nudes and mothers. These far outweigh the numbers of workers or athletes.

It is significant that this is the art of public spaces, which has the highest significance in terms of representing the state and its social functions, as theorised by Silke Wenk in her analysis of nudes and mother figures in Western Germany. Mothers and nudes are 20th century allegories for the social state.²³

However, I believe that perhaps more importantly, in order to qualify as “art” and not entertainment, reportage, or propaganda, artworks had to fit within the dominant Western historical discourse of “art”. Socialist realism was not a radical practice: it appropriated existing genres and articulations from Western art with its transcendent

pretensions and implicit gender codes, and inflected these with socialist ideals. East German artists varied in their commitment to socialist realism or their aspirations towards modernism, however, they practised as artists, not propagandists. The figuration of femaleness in East German public sculptures embodied an assertion of the state, an assertion of art, but also an assertion of artists.

The discourse of “art” helps to explain the predominance of the nude and mother. The female nude and mother figure in art play a coercive role in the socialisation of women’s bodies but, as Lynda Nead has demonstrated, they also define what Western art is, at least until the fragmentation of that discourse in postmodernism. Whereas the female stands for nature and physicality, the nude is “pure nature transmuted, through the forms of art, into pure culture.”²⁴ Therefore, to fashion a nude is to be an artist, not a propagandist. The same argument can be applied to the depiction of procreative relationships: nature becomes culture, and so becomes art.

Were these socialist female bodies? I believe so. They encapsulated the progress towards equality in the socialist state as well as its contradictions.

²² See Jessica Jenkins, “A System of Joyful Colour and its Disruptions: Architectural Colour in the German Democratic Republic,” *Architectural Theory Review* 19:2 (2014), p. 221-242.

²³ Wenk, Silke, “Der Öffentliche Weibliche Akt: eine Allegorie des Sozialstaates,” in *Frauen - Bilder - Männer - Mythen: kunsthistorische Beiträge*. Berlin: Reimer, 1987, p. 217-238.

²⁴ Nead, Lynda, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, 1992, p. 18.



Fig. 48 Sieben Stolze Schwestern Küßt das Eine Meer (Seven Proud Sisters Kiss One Sea), Reinhard Dietrich, Rostock, 1970.

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