

A conversation between Julian Irlinger and Jan Tappe

Jan Tappe: Due to the Corona crisis, Galerie Wedding's exhibition operations had to be completely suspended for the time being, as with all other exhibition venues in Berlin. Due to spatial requirements, the district's social welfare office (Sozialamt) also had to move to new premises and was relocated to Galerie Wedding, where it is still operating. Due to the Sozialamt's pandemic plan, the gallery has been converted to include a front desk and waiting area. Nowadays, cases of hardship are managed with in the gallery before regular opening hours from 9 to 11 am on weekdays, and people who are currently falling through social safety nets are receiving consultation and support. Afterwards, Galerie Wedding opens daily in the same rooms. This circumstance greatly interferes with the flow of the exhibition activities. Why did you decide to use the space for your exhibition nonetheless?

Julian Irlinger: Basically my work is an open process in which conscious decisions are made. »Gift« is a donation to the Wende Museum in Los Angeles, and as such enters an institutional process in order to challenge it. The presentation in the Galerie Wedding became part of an institutional process through the temporary use of the Sozialamt. It is a consequence of the pandemic that illustrates the gallery's underlying public structure. The district office is responsible for cultural as well as social services. In the current situation, the social office is being offered space here. From an organizational point of view, it was important that the office's work not be restricted, which we have guaranteed through the differing opening hours. In addition, the Sozialamt asked me to integrate the exhibition into the setting. It would feel wrong to close the door to the office or to move the exhibition in order to simulate the feeling of an intact exhibition space.

Tappe: Nevertheless, the project revolves around questions beyond Corona: It deals with the writing of history using materials that document property transfers and property infractions in the GDR period and afterwards. The material is the object of a donation that you are making to the Wende Museum in Los Angeles, subsequent to this presentation. What is being negotiated here?

Irlinger: In the entrance area, an enlarged document from the Wende Museum in Los Angeles connects that institution with the exhibition at Galerie Wedding. It provides information about the donation and the historical background of the documents and photographs on display. They stem from the context of a house in Schönebeck an der Elbe that was built by my family in the late nineteenth century. The documents detail among other things, my grandmother's inheritance of the property, the expropriation by the GDR, the retransfer of property during German unification and the subsequent sale of the house. The expropriation occurred because before the Wall was built my grandmother moved to Erlangen in West Germany, where I later grew up. When she inherited the house, power of attorney gave her control of the property through an acquaintance. When the house was retransferred, my grandmother sold it immediately.

Tappe: Due to the circumstances at the Galerie Wedding mentioned above, the Sozialamt's furniture is part of your installation. How is the presentation structured?

Irlinger: The pictures and documents are scattered in both exhibition rooms and therefore also surround the office's provisionally installed furniture. All in all, the installation does not suggest completeness because there are many empty spaces due to a lack of historical material. For example, there is only one document regarding the re-transfer of ownership. It provides information about the expropriation, of which there is no other evidence. Furthermore, the pictures only give a fragmentary impression of the

house. They never show the core of the three-story building: a doctor's office. They only record the building's structural condition, as they were taken by a company before the sale of the building in order to estimate the value of the property. The photographs are installed here in such a way that we follow the unknown photographer from the exterior to the roof. While the documents exhibited are originals, the pictures are scans of photographs that form part of the donation, which have been enlarged and pasted on the walls.

Tappe: Later, you'll donate the original material of the exhibition to the collection of the Wende Museum in order to make it available as a historical artifact for exhibition and research purposes. At first, the idea of a GDR museum in the middle of Los Angeles sounds a little bizarre, but your project aims to take a closer look at this fact and takes the museum as a partner very seriously. Why not just hand over the documents to a suitable institution in Germany?

Irlinger: I think that the geographical shift to Los Angeles offers the opportunity to articulate history from the perspective of a different self-consciousness, which could undermine unifying historical narratives. But I'm also aware that this gift carries risks. When I learned that the Wende Museum holds the largest collection of GDR artifacts, I was amazed at how recent history emerges outside of the borders and sovereignty of the German state. After all, the »culture of remembrance« (Erinnerungskultur) in the form of historical museums is important for the representation of a community's past. I wondered how history is represented in the Wende Museum. In LA, relics of the former enemy are exhibited and history is formulated on that basis. Through a travel grant I had the opportunity to get to know the Wende Museum: There is no American victory myth being conjured up there. This is already evident in the international co-operation of the Wende Museum with numerous institutions. The museum contributes to the awareness of recent European history on the American continent.

Tappe: Earlier you mentioned that you work in an open process. Which role did coincidences play in the rather administrative work, which you are taking on as the donor of historical artifacts?

Irlinger: When I was at the Wende Museum, I started to go through the archives to familiarize myself with them and to look for material to work on, which didn't work out. While I was visiting the institution, I saw how donations influence the archive and thus the possibility of a history's formulation. The idea of providing a donation came to me when I witnessed the archivist speaking to her colleague about the criteria that qualify objects for the collection. But at that time I didn't know what I wanted to donate. Later, when my father moved, I happened to find a box containing my grandmother's estate and in it the documents relating to the house in Schönebeck, and considered the idea again. When I approached the museum with the documents, I was told that the institution does not collect such items, as it is assumed that enough of them have been preserved in Germany. However, this assumption is not verifiable. I was astonished because it would be difficult to find something that better illustrates the differences between modern political systems than the contrasting property concepts of the GDR and of the FRG. Finally, it was decided to accept the donation if it were conceived as a work of art, which did not impose any issues for me. The institution has now generated a unique identification number and the objects will be the first of their kind in the collection and will thus challenge the institutionally set boundaries of the archive.

Tappe: Your relationship to the material, which comes from your family, is striking, as is the fact that you grew up in West Germany. How important is it for you, that the material comes from your grandmother's estate?

Irlinger: Personally, it is far from my intention to create a family portrait. I didn't know about the house when I found the papers. My family never talked about a connection to the GDR. I think this was a kind of suppression echoed in process of unification. It reminds me of what the sociologist Daniel Kubiak wrote about the construction of national identity in the post-unification period. He describes how East Germans were brought into line with the norms of the West German majority, which led to the suppression of GDR culture and identity. This process ensured the superiority of West German culture. It's therefore not surprising that connections to the GDR were suppressed by West Germans in many ways. When I work with this found and inherited material from the GDR context, I'm interested in how unifying narratives that assign determined roles can be undermined.

Tappe: This raises the question of what the expropriation by the GDR and retransfer of property in the course of German unification meant.

Irlinger: The logic of assimilation of the East into West that Kubiak describes is also re-enacted on a legal level. The »Law for the Clarification of Unsettled Property Issues« (Gesetz zur Klärung für offene Vermögensfragen) overwrote the socialist property law and became the basis for retransfers of property. Since the GDR was a socialist state, its concept of property differed from that of the FRG, and expropriations of so-called Western property in the GDR occurred in order to generate public property. From the point of view of the GDR, this was not a form of destructive expropriation, but rather an affordance that served the collective as public property. It was a distribution of goods, which, however, only affected the citizens of the GDR due to national borders. Retransfer in the early 1990s was based on the property laws of West Germany. I therefore understand the retransfers not only as compensation for the former expropriation, but also as an economic maneuver. The socialist planned economy was immediately transformed into a social market economy. Following this principle, my grandmother sold the house immediately after it was retransferred to her. The presentation in the Galerie Wedding shows different facets of ownership and does not reduce the GDR to the dispossessing protagonist and neither my grandmother to the dispossessed.

Tappe: Galerie Wedding is the starting point for the project – at least in terms of public visibility. Would you briefly explain the structure of the project, as well as its different stations and levels?

Irlinger: We begin with a presentation at Galerie Wedding, where the material of the donation is negotiated and the gesture of donation can be reflected upon. Then the source material is handed over to the Wende Museum to be registered in the archive as a historical artifact. There will also be another presentation at the Wende Museum, which will demonstrate a different institutional status, since it is a historical museum. So there is a transformation from a discovery of the family archive to an art object that ultimately becomes a historical artifact. The presentation at Galerie Wedding takes on a special role in this context. Here, the material is placed in a more open relationship to the space than in the displays of the historical Wende Museum, allowing for different interpretations.

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