

Sculpture in Reunified Berlin

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ABSTRACT

The goal of my research was to examine the sculpture in Berlin, Germany which pertains to the city's division after WWII. I hoped to find that the sculpture produced before and after reunification in 1990 would reveal how East Berlin and West Berlin have coped with its past as a divided city, and how both sides have greeted the future as a united Berlin.

Exploring the city's districts by foot and photographing the sculpture I found were the means of achieving my goal of discovery. I spent time conversing with a family from East Berlin, and I was able to speak with two professors in order to gain information on art, culture, and life in the divided city.

Through the comparison of the sculpture in Berlin, I have found that, although Berlin is reunited, a lingering division between East and West Berlin and its people still exists. Berlin's largest piece of sculpture and its most significant piece of historical art is the Berlin Wall. The Wall is a lingering scar that has influenced not only Berlin's people, but also the sculpture in east and west, before and after reunification.

INTRODUCTION

This project entailed examining public sculpture in Berlin, the capital of Germany. Berlin is a city with a very turbulent past. After World War I Berlin developed into a cultural and artistic hub, but after World War II the capital city was in shambles. The pre-war vibrance was gone and the city was split into four sectors, the eastern most section belonging to the Soviet Union and the other three belonging to the United States, Britain, and France. Soon Berlin became a permanently divided city when the Berlin Wall was erected in 1961. It was erected by the East German government in order to keep its people from escaping to the west. The Wall actually encircled West Berlin, essentially creating a island city belonging to West Germany within East Germany. The Wall was not only a physical border, but also a cultural border with its western people living in a democratic and capitalistic nation and its eastern people living under communism. In 1989 the East German government collapsed, and the Berlin Wall fell. Once again after nearly 40 years of division, Berlin was one united city with many challenges ahead.

It was my aim to see if the public sculpture in the city represented this division, explained the city's history, and communicated its culture in any way. I was also looking for any remaining differences between East and West Berlin. I expected there to be visible and physical differences within the city, such as differences in urban planning and city landscaping, but I did not expect to find any sort of cultural difference between the people of East and West Berlin.

Today Berlin is a city of the arts, and therefore public sculpture is in abundance. If I had examined every piece I had found, my topic would have to have been much broader. For example, I did not focus of public sculpture related to the holocaust or WWI. My focus was only on sculpture relevant to the city's division after WWII and its reunification.

METHOD

My method of research was simple: explore and photograph. I spent two weeks alone in the city simply wandering around searching for sculpture. I had books and maps guiding me to many pieces, and I let chance and accident lead me to some unexpected and pleasant discoveries. I photographed every piece of sculpture I found that was relevant to my project. In total I photographed 52 pieces or series of public sculpture. I was also able to spend time with an East Berlin family. I talked with them about what it was like to live in East Berlin, what it was like when the Berlin Wall fell, and what it is like living in Berlin now. Two professors, one from Magdeburg University just outside of Berlin and one from Strasbourg University in France, were able to explain to me a little about how

the division of Berlin and Germany affected the arts before reunification and the culture after reunification. Thus I was able to better understand much of what the sculpture communicated.

After my two weeks in Berlin concluded, I took my material and began organizing it. I organized my photographs into four categories: sculpture before reunification in East Berlin, sculpture before reunification in West Berlin, sculpture after reunification in East Berlin, sculpture after reunification in West Berlin. Then I was able to compare and contrast in order to gain some sort of understanding of Berlin's culture and its people.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Through my research I discovered three important themes linked with much of the public sculpture I photographed: Dualism, Socialist Realism, and the Berlin Wall.

Dualism:

The idea of dualism represented in much of the contemporary sculpture in Berlin raises questions relating to the identity of the city, its people, and its culture. Once two parts, the city is now, even fifteen years later, trying to function as one unified city. Some of the dualities symbolized within the sculpture are ideas pertaining to east/west, left/right, communism/capitalism, and rich/poor. These dualities, caused by years of division, are now symbols internalized in a united Berlin. An ever-present question lying within this symbolism: is Berlin a city with clashing cultures or uniting cultures?

Socialist realism:

Living as an artist in East Berlin before reunification came with many restrictions. Any art form, be it film, theater, music, literature, painting, and sculpture was subject to censorship by the government. Most public art was commissioned by the government and was usually created as propaganda. While much of the sculpture from East Berlin was torn down after the fall of the Berlin Wall, some remains. This sculpture is a window into the past. Through it we learn that the working class man and woman were the heroes of East Germany. And it is through the remaining memorials to the Soviet Soldiers, Marx and Engels, and the socialist workers that we learn the values of this eastern culture, and thus are able to better compare one culture with another.

Many East Berliners and East Germans experience Ostalgie or East Nostalgia. This is a positive and fond remembrance of the way things were in East Germany and Berlin before reunification. Regardless of how good or bad life actually was in East Germany, many of its former inhabitants (including the family I visited with) still have positive and happy memories of their old way of living. This idea of Ostalgie aids in explaining the still existing cultural division in Berlin.

The Berlin Wall:

The Berlin Wall is Berlin's largest sculpture and its most significant piece of art. Initially a fresh wound at the time of its collapse, the Berlin Wall has since become an ever-present scar. Pieces of the Berlin Wall stand in their original place, just as they did twenty years ago before its fall. If no physical wall remains, a brick path or a painted line mark the much of the Wall's route through the city. Just as the Wall still marks a border between East and West Berlin, other borders, be it social, political, or cultural, still remain between Germans and Berliners.

The Berlin Wall takes on many important roles in the city. It generates a motivation to create. It is a symbol of the Cold War. It is a memorial to the many who were killed trying to flee from its oppressing existence. The Wall itself stands as a great duality of past and present. Most importantly, it is standing proof of a former division, and it creates a constant awareness of history.

The history of Berlin can be discovered through the city's public sculpture. The sculpture I discovered does speak of the city's past and present division, and it does communicate a stark cultural division that still remains today.

LIMITATIONS

The only limitations that I came across were the limited availability of information on art in Berlin and of any person who could talk to me about the art and specifically the public sculpture in Berlin. I had hoped to have been able to talk with professors of art and sculpture in the city or even with any expert from a museum in the city. Naturally there are differences between two cultures, and the way a university and its professors function in Germany is very different from how they function in the United States. It was very difficult to contact any professors, and even when contacted many were unresponsive or unwilling to offer any sort of assistance.

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