

Cold War & the Arts

25 October 2019

2-5.30pm

Headley Lecture Theatre

FIRST PART – 2pm-3.15pm

Federica Gigante
Introduction

Lena Fritsch

From Gorbachev to Perry Rhodan: A.R. Penck's painting *Edinburgh (Northern Darkness III)*, 1987

Marcel Thomas

Art Behind the Wall: Limits of Artistic Expression in Socialist East Germany

Jane Pavitt

The Bomb in the Brain

TEA BREAK – 3.15pm-3.45pm

SECOND PART – 3.45pm-4.30pm

John Blakinger

A Cybernetic Avant-Garde

Paul Bevan

Chinese Art of the Cold War Period: Revolutionary Realism

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION – 4.30-5pm

Discussion amongst all speakers and the audience

CURATOR'S TOUR – 5pm-5.30pm

Tour of the exhibition *A.R. Penck: I Think in Pictures* led by Lena Fritsch

ABSTRACTS AND BIOS

Lena Fritsch

From Gorbachev to Perry Rhodan: A.R. Penck's painting *Edinburgh (Northern Darkness III)*, 1987

A.R. Penck's large-sized painting *Edinburgh (Northern Darkness III)* deals with political developments that strongly affected Europe in 1987. Rejected by the GDR establishment for the decidedly un-academic style of his works and their political overtones, the artist had persisted as an 'underground' autodidact in East Germany, before emigrating to 'the West' in 1980. This talk focusses on the socio-political background of A.R. Penck's dynamic and multi-layered work, reading *Edinburgh* as a post-modern history painting.

Lena Fritsch is the Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Ashmolean Museum, working on exhibitions, displays and acquisitions of international art. Recent exhibitions include *A.R. Penck: I Think in Pictures* (2019) and *Ibrahim El Salabi: A Sudanese Artist in Oxford* (2018). Before joining the Ashmolean she worked at Tate Modern, and Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum of Contemporary Art, Berlin. Fritsch holds a PhD in Art History from Bonn University, Germany, and also studied at Keio University, Tokyo.

Marcel Thomas

Art behind the Wall: Limits of Artistic Expression in Socialist East Germany

This paper will outline some of the challenges faced by artists in socialist East Germany. It will discuss how the lives and work of artists were shaped by shortages, state control in the arts and surveillance by the infamous Stasi (State Security). While these and other factors undoubtedly limited artists in their work, many also found spaces of creativity for themselves within the confines of the system. The paper will thus show that most artists do not fit into a binary of conformity versus dissidence. While the focus will be on East Germany, it will offer wider reflections on the role of artists in socialist societies.

Marcel Thomas is Departmental Lecturer in Twentieth-Century European History at St Antony's College, University of Oxford. His research focuses on everyday life in the divided Germany, space and place, memory and oral history. He is the co-editor of *The GDR Today: New Interdisciplinary Approaches to East German History, Memory and Culture* (2018).

Jane Pavitt

The Bomb in the Brain

This presentation explores the pervasive imagery of nuclear threat in the early Cold War Period, and the ways in which it shaped not only artistic visions but also imagined solutions to the designed environment; the home and the city. In particular, it will explore the kinds of Cold War modernity which emerged in the '50s and '60s, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and how visions of the future were inflected with the anxieties and technological preoccupations of the period.

Jane Pavitt is professor of design and architectural history at Kingston University. She was co-curator (with David Crowley) of the V&A's 2008 exhibition *Cold War Modern: Art and Design 1945-70*, which also toured to Italy and Lithuania. She was co-editor of the accompanying book, and also author of *Fear and Fashion in the Cold War* (V&A 2008).

John Blakinger

A Cybernetic Avant-Garde

In the aftermath of the A-bomb and Sputnik, in the early years of the Cold War, science and technology became culturally dominant. Technological discourses like cybernetics—the theory of human and machine communication—and aligned scientific fields like information theory and game theory became pervasive across the academy. This talk explores how these discourses transformed the visual arts at midcentury. It considers the creative possibilities of cybernetics through projects ranging from art-and-technology collaborations to new critical models like systems aesthetics. Cybernetics, however, was not a neutral discourse; it was closely linked to military power. The visual arts therefore became entangled in the machinations of the Cold War not only through their role as soft power and international propaganda, but also through their relationship to weapons and warfare. What were the politics of using these innovative interdisciplinary approaches for aesthetic ends?

John R. Blakinger is Departmental Lecturer in the History of Art at the University of Oxford, where he was recently the 2018-2019 Terra Visiting Professor of American Art. He studies modern and contemporary art, with a particular interest in the intersection of art, science, and technology. He is the author of *Gyorgy Kepes: Undreaming the Bauhaus* (The MIT Press, 2019).

Paul Bevan

Chinese Art of the Cold War Period: Revolutionary Realism

Chinese art of the Cold War period owes much to the USSR, with its reliance on Socialist Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism stretching back to the 1930s. The 1949 Communist victory over the American-backed Nationalist Government, was partly due to the success of their visual propaganda machine. The alliance that existed between the USSR and China in the first years of the PRC - for example during China's "Resist America and Aid Korea War" - saw a strong emphasis on cooperation in the arts. Subsequently, a distinctive Chinese propaganda art arose with the Sino-Soviet split of 1956-1966. During the Cultural Revolution a major ideological shift saw a move away from depictions of the evils of American Imperialism to a rapprochement with the USA with Nixon's visit to China in 1972.

Paul Bevan is the Christensen Fellow in Chinese Painting at the Ashmolean Museum. His primary research interests concern aspects of the impact of Western art and literature on China during the Republican Period (1912-1949). Paul's first book: *A Modern Miscellany*, was hailed as "a major contribution to modern Chinese studies". His second: *"Intoxicating Shanghai"- An Urban Montage: Art and Literature in Pictorial Magazines during Shanghai's Jazz Age* is forthcoming.