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*The Borderlines of the Thaw: Graphic Art from
the Federal Republic of Germany in Warsaw's
“Exhibition Factory” (1956–1957)*

*Granice odwilży.
Grafika z Republiki Federalnej Niemiec
w warszawskiej „fabryce wystaw” (1956–1957)*

Celem artykułu jest zarysowanie politycznych i artystycznych kontekstów dwóch wystaw grafiki z Niemiec Zachodnich, które zostały zaprezentowane w Centralnym Biurze Wystaw Artystycznych w Warszawie w latach 1956–1957. Historycy uznają rok 1956 – podobnie jak 1968 czy 1989 – za znaczącą cezurę czasową, rok przełomowy w globalnej historii politycznej i społecznej. W historii polskiej sztuki nowoczesnej rok 1956 jest również postrzegany jako czas istotny dla przemian w życiu artystycznym – czas Odwilży. Jako pierwsza wystawa sztuki z Niemiec Zachodnich w powojennej Polsce, *Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej* została otwarta w Warszawie w tym samym dniu, w którym w Moskwie Nikita Chruszczow przedstawił swój słynny „tajny referat” (25 lutego 1956). Wystawę *Plakat NRF* zorganizowano w CBWA w 1957 r., po wydarzeniach Polskiego Października '56. Zestawienie wystaw sztuki z politycznymi wydarzeniami tego okresu wpisuje się w refleksję nad zjawiskami równoczesności i nierównoczesności, rozpoznanymi przez filozofów historii, a także w refleksję nad heterogeniczną naturą wizualnego czasu historii wystaw.

Słowa-klucze: historia wystaw, grafika niemiecka, Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, Odwilż, niemiecko-polska wymiana kulturalna



The aim of the essay is to delineate the political and artistic contexts of two exhibitions of graphic art from the Federal Republic of Germany held in the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, the main state art gallery in Warsaw (1956–1957). The historians consider the year 1956 – similarly to the years 1968 or 1989 – to be an important caesura in the political and social history on the global scale. In the history of modern art in Poland, the year 1956 is also perceived as a period crucial to changes in artistic life (Polish thaw). As the first show of West German artists in post-war Poland, the *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany* opened in Warsaw on the same day when Nikita Khrushchev delivered his celebrated “Secret Speech” in Moscow (25 February 1956). The exhibition *Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany* was organized in 1957, after the events of the Polish October (1956). The idea to juxtapose art exhibitions with political events of their era follows contemporary reflections on the phenomenon of noncontemporaneity and on the heterogeneous nature of the visual time of art and exhibition histories.

Key words: exhibition history, German graphic art, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, the Thaw, German-Polish cultural exchange

The *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany* (Polish title: *Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej*) opened on 25 February 1956 in the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, the main state art gallery located in the Zachęta building in Warsaw (Fig. 1).¹ On the same day, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Moscow, Nikita Khrushchev delivered his famous “Secret Speech”, in which he denounced the Stalinist cult of personality.² By 21 March 1956, when the exhibition of graphic art from the Federal Republic of Germany closed, the cadre of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) had already acquainted themselves with Khrushchev’s report. The day before, Khrushchev himself had participated in the 6th Plenary Meeting of the Party’s Central Committee; a few days earlier, on 16 March, he had delivered a eulogy at the funeral of the Party leader Bolesław Bierut in Warsaw.³

The historians consider the year 1956 – similarly to the years 1968 or 1989 – to be an important caesura, a breakthrough year, in the political and social history on the global scale.⁴ Colonial conflicts in North Africa and racial conflicts in the USA exploded. The Poznań June and the Polish October, the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Uprising, cruelly suppressed by the Soviet army, all occurred in the latter half of that year. The concurrence of events in the artistic life of Poland and in the global political history may provide a historian of art with a research challenge: to consider the presentation of West German art in the People’s Republic of Poland in February and March of 1956 as a symptom of the thaw then about to begin behind the Iron Curtain.

In the history of modern art in Poland, the year 1956 is, moreover, perceived as a period crucial to changes in artistic life, even though the date of the breakthrough in this respect is usually set at an earlier time.⁵ The political event that heralded the thaw was the death of

¹ *Rocznik CBWA 1956* (Warszawa: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, [1957]), 20. Note: whereas the name “the Federal Republic of Germany” or the colloquial “West Germany” are used in the current text, the Polish-language titles of exhibitions and quotations from primary sources used the abbreviation NRF, obligatory in the people’s Republic of Poland until 1970 (in contrast to the later one: RFN). The impetus for this article came from a contribution to *Kulturtransfer und auswärtige Kulturpolitik. Akteure und Faktoren polnisch-deutscher Beziehungen 1949–1990*, a symposium organized by Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte München, Deutsches Polen-Institut Darmstadt and the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, held at the Nymphenburg Schloss in Munich in October 2018.

² Andrzej SKRZYPEK, “Od tajnego referatu do autonomii – zmiana zależności Polski od ZSRR w 1956 r.,” in *Przełom Października ’56*, ed. Paweł DYBICZ (Warszawa: Fundacja Oratio Recta, 2016), 57–8; Sheila FITZPATRICK, *On Stalin’s Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015), 245–6. On the political context of the 1956 exhibition and its reception, see Andrzej PIENKOS, *Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej*, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/wystawy/wystawa-prac-grafikow-niemieckiej-republiki-federalnej>.

³ Marta FIK, *Kultura polska po Jalcie. Kronika lat 1944–1981* (London: Polonia Book Fund Ltd, 1989), 230–2. See also “Przemówienie N.S. Chruszczowa,” *Słowo Powszechne*, March 17–18, 1956, 2 and 4.

⁴ Simon HALL, *1956: The World in Revolt* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016).

⁵ Anna MARKOWSKA, *Dwa przełomy: Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2012).



1. Cover of the catalogue (*Walter Herzger, Grape Grower*) for the Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1956. Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

Joseph Stalin in March 1953, which made it possible to articulate critique of Socialist Realism.⁶ Although the symbol of the Soviet domination, the Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, was ceremonially opened only on 22 July 1955, but at the same time it was one of the chief attractions during the 5th World Festival of Youth and Students (31 July – 15 August 1955), an event that brought to Warsaw over 26,000 young people from 114 countries worldwide.⁷ With regards to the social and artistic life of Poland between the years 1953 and 1956, it is precisely this festival, as well as its accompanying National Exhibition of Young Artists *Against War – Against Fascism* which opened in the Arsenal in Warsaw on 21 July 1955, that constitute elements of the thaw-time paradigm. A Polish artist recalled it thus:

The hot summer of 1955 turned out to be a period of the thaw. Ilya Ehrenburg's *The Thaw* was the text of the day. The novel was especially dear to painters, as its hero was one. Warsaw was preparing for the 5th World Festival of Youth and Students. Almost to the last moment it was not certain whether the authorities would give the green light to the National Exhibition of Young Artists.⁸

⁶ Jolanta STUDZIŃSKA, *Socrealizm w malarstwie polskim* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2014), 371.

⁷ Andrzej KRZYWICKI, *Poststalinowski karnawał radości. V Światowy Festiwal Młodzieży i Studentów o Pokój i Przyjaźń, Warszawa 1955 rok: przygotowania, przebieg, znaczenie* (Warszawa: Trio, 2009).

⁸ Jacek Antoni ZIELIŃSKI, "Czym jest Krąg Arsenau," in *Krąg "Arsenau 1955": Malarstwo, grafika, rysunek z Muzeum Okręgowego w Gorzowie*, ed. Jacek Antoni ZIELIŃSKI (Warszawa: Galeria "Zachęta," 1992), 8. On Soviet critics' negative response to Ehrenburg's *The Thaw* and on its Polish translation (with a print run of 20,000), paradoxically approved by Polish censorship in February 1955, see Kamila BUDROWSKA, *Writers, Literature and Censorship in Poland: 1948–1958*, trans. Paul A. Vickers (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020), 314–327.

One more crucial date needs to be added to the catalogue: in April 1956 Włodzimierz Sokorski, the main ideologue of Socialist Realism in Poland, was recalled from the post of the minister of culture and art.⁹

Collecting these observations in the exhibition of art from the Federal Republic of Germany in Warsaw in the years 1956–1957, I consider some of the methodological proposals of art history formulated as a history of exhibitions, not a history of artists' outputs, particular works or sequences of various trends in art.¹⁰ As proposed herein, the update of research perspectives regarding the history of exhibitions includes, among others, a thorough revision of the conception of “context”¹¹, that is, the status of textual historical sources (e.g. the politically conditioned rhetoric of press reviews) in assessing phenomena belonging to the sphere of visual reception. This sphere, in my interpretation, includes e.g. reproductions of works of art that accompanied critical texts, the graphic design of exhibitions (posters, the typography of catalogues), or the surviving photographic documentation of proposed designs for the exposition. The aim here is to delineate the political and artistic context of two exhibitions held in Warsaw: the already mentioned *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany* and *Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Polish title: *Plakat NRF*, 21 November – 5 December 1957). Among the many questions to consider in the process of their interpretation are the following: What was the place of those exhibitions in the art exchange between Poland and West Germany? What was their reception in Warsaw in comparison with other foreign exhibitions organised at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in the 1950s?¹² What image of German art was presented to the Polish audience at that time? What artistic aspects of those exhibitions can be seen as symptomatic to the Polish thaw in the context of the political situation of the era?

The exhibition exchange between the People's Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany, 1956–1957

Both exhibitions: *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany* (1956) and *Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany* (1957) were presented at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, an institution established in 1949, which was dependent on the Ministry of Culture and Art and other political bodies of the People's Republic era. The Treaty of Warsaw (Warschauer Vertrag), an agreement on the normalisation of mutual relations between Poland and West Germany, was signed only on 7 December 1970; however, the calendar of events organised by the Central Bureau indicates that the exchange of art exhibitions between the two states had begun much earlier.

The Polish audience was getting acquainted with the works of West German graphic artists in Warsaw in 1956 – and in the same year, the German audience could see the works

⁹ FIK, *Kultura polska po Jalcie*, 237.

¹⁰ See Mária ORIŠKOVÁ, ed., *Curating “Eastern Europe” and Beyond: Art Histories through the Exhibition* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang; Bratislava: VEDA, SAS Publishing House, 2013).

¹¹ I allude here to Norman Bryson's arguments on the “implied opposition between context and the work of art” and “the limitations of the text-context pairing”. See Norman BRYSON, “Art in Context,” in *Studies in Historical Change*, ed. Ralph COHEN (Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 19–20.

¹² On exhibitions of foreign art, including West German art, see Gabriela ŚWITEK, “Heartfield im Zentralbüro für Kunstausstellungen (Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych) in Warschau (1964),” in *Verflechtung und Abgrenzung. Polnisch-deutsche Perspektiven in der Kunstgeschichte seit 1945*, ed. Regina WENNINGER, Annika WIENERT, www.kunsttexte.de/ostblick, no. 4 (2018).

of Polish artists at two exhibitions mentioned in the annual reports of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions. The first of those was an international exhibition of the “Roter Reiter” group (*Internationale Ausstellung – Malerei, Grafik, Plastik “Roter Reiter”* Traunstein, July – August 1956). Nine Polish artists participated, sixty works were on show; the curator of the Polish section was Józef Mroszczak, himself a graphic artist, representing the Polish School of Poster Art.¹³ The second was the exhibition of prints, book illustrations and posters (July – November 1956), shown in, among others, Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne. On show were 484 works by 90 artists; the curator was the graphic artist Andrzej Rudziński, affiliated to the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw.¹⁴ When the exhibition *Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany* opened in Warsaw in 1957, the only sign of the Polish presence abroad noted in the annual report of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions was the participation of 7 artists (including Maria Jarema, Tadeusz Kantor, Tadeusz Mikulski, Jonasz Stern and Alina Szapocznikow, 28 works in total) in the international exhibition of contemporary painting of the “Roter Reiter” group in Munich (January 1957).¹⁵

When seen against the background of the Central Bureau’s activities in Poland and abroad, exhibitions of West German art held in the 1950s are a marginal incident. These were only two out of more than 35 international exhibitions and out of the total of 400 exhibitions presented in the Zachęta building until the year 1960. At this point, it is worthwhile to examine some aspects of the activities of the Bureau, the central “exhibition factory” in the period of the People’s Republic of Poland, and especially to consider the political and institutional entanglements that accompanied the process of organizing exhibitions of foreign art.

In the first decade of its existence, acting under the strict control of the Ministry of Culture and Art, the Bureau – with its nationwide network of the Bureaus of Art Exhibition – had monopolised the organisation of modern art exhibitions in the entire territory of Poland.¹⁶ The main tasks specified in the Bureau’s statute were, among others, organizing exhibitions of Polish art in the country, organizing exhibitions of Polish art abroad and foreign art in Poland, organizing artistic contests and purchasing works of modern art from the funds designated by the Ministry. By 1957, eleven regional branches of the Bureau had been established in Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, Katowice, Cracow, Lublin, Łódź, Poznań, Sopot, Szczecin, Wrocław and Zakopane. The regional branches usually focused on presenting the works of local artists (members of regional branches of the Association of Polish Artists [Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków, ZPAP]). From time to time international exhibitions were sent out there as well, for instance, in 1957, exhibitions of contemporary Yugoslavian art and contemporary Belgian painting (Polish titles: *Wystawa współczesnej sztuki jugosłowiańskiej* and *Wystawa współczesnego malarstwa belgijskiego*) were shown in Gdańsk.¹⁷

¹³ *Rocznik CBWA 1956*, 24. Artists participating in the Traunstein exhibition were Roman Artymowski, Halina Chrostowska, Tadeusz Dominik, Tomasz Gleb, Maria Hiszpańska-Neumann, Mieczysław Wejman and others.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Rocznik CBWA 1957* (Warszawa: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, [1958]), 60; “Plastycy polscy wystawiają w Monachium,” *Życie Literackie*, January 27, 1957, 12.

¹⁶ Joanna KRZYMUSKA, “Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych,” in *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1945–1960*, ed. Aleksander WOJCIECHOWSKI (Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków: Zakład Narodowy imienia Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1992), 253–7; Joanna MANSFELD, “Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych,” in *Zachęta 1860–2000*, ed. Gabriela ŚWITEK (Warszawa: Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2003), 179–182.

¹⁷ *Rocznik CBWA 1957*, 28.

In the first half of the 1950s, the completion of one of the Bureau's statutory tasks, namely, organizing exhibitions of foreign art in Poland, depended on the political decisions of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries (Komitet Współpracy Kulturalnej z Zagranicą, KWKZ, active 1950–1956).¹⁸ Art exhibitions were one of the many areas of cultural exchange supervised by the Committee, which took over the tasks related to foreign cooperation in the Ministry of Culture and Art and the Ministry of Education. The structure, as established in 1952, encompassed separate sections corresponding to the main “political-geographic” areas: Section for Cultural Cooperation with the USSR, Section for Cultural Cooperation with the States of People's Democracy, and Section for Cultural Cooperation with Other States.

The calendar of exhibitions of foreign art organised by the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions until 1956 reflected the priorities of the current cultural policy as expressed by the structure of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries.¹⁹ In 1951, the Bureau organised three exhibitions of foreign art, all shown in the Zachęta building, two of them presenting art from the USSR and one from East Germany: *Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945)*.²⁰ The year 1952 witnessed exhibitions of contemporary French art (*Wystawa współczesnej plastyki francuskiej*) – which mainly included works by artists affiliated to the Communist Party of France – and an exhibition of Romanian art (*Wystawa sztuki rumuńskiej*). An exhibition titled *New Albania on the Path to Socialism (Nowa Albania na drodze do socjalizmu)*, an exhibition of Bulgarian folk art (*Wystawa bułgarskiej sztuki ludowej*) and an exhibition of artistic textiles from France (*Wystawa francuskiej tkaniny artystycznej*) were shown in 1953. In 1954, the Bureau organised no less than six exhibitions of foreign art, also in the Zachęta building, among which were an international exhibition titled *Exhibition of the Works of Progressive Artists (Wystawa prac postępowych artystów plastyków)*, an exhibition of works by Renato Guttuso and an exhibition of Czechoslovakian art (*Czechosłowacka sztuka plastyczna*). The year 1955 opened with an exhibition of art produced in the Socialist Republic of Ukraine (*Wystawa plastyki Ukraińskiej SRR*), followed by, among others, an exhibition of Mexican art of the 16th to 20th centuries (*Wystawa sztuki meksykańskiej XVI–XX wieku*), an exhibition of works by the East German artist Otto Nagel, an exhibition of Chinese woodcuts (*Wystawa drzeworytu chińskiego*) and the already mentioned international exhibition of the works by young artists (*Międzynarodowa wystawa sztuki młodych*) shown within the framework of the 5th World Festival of Youth and Students.

The *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany* was one of three exhibitions of foreign art to be shown at Zachęta in 1956; the other two

¹⁸ On the general activity of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, see Anna LISIECKA, “Działalność Komitetu Współpracy Kulturalnej z Zagranicą w latach 1950–1956,” in *Przebudować człowieka. Komunistyczne wysiłki zmiany mentalności*, ed. Marcin KULA (Warszawa: Trio, 2001), 203–260. On art exhibitions organised within the framework of the Committee's activity, see Karolina ZYCHOWICZ, “The Exhibition-Organizing Activity of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries (1950–1956). Based on the Example of Selected Exhibitions at the Zachęta Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions,” *Ikonotheka*, no. 26 (2016): 63–94.

¹⁹ On the geography of art in the exhibition program of the Central Bureau, see Gabriela ŚWITEK, “*Envisaging Exhibitions*”. *Behind the Iron Curtain: The Warsaw Central Office of Art Exhibitions (1949–1955)*, unpublished paper presented at the symposium *Radiations. European Art and Its Debates during the Cold War, 1944–1955*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 30 April 2015, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/multimedia/envisaging-exhibitions-behind-iron-curtain-central-office-art-exhibitions-warsaw-1949>.

²⁰ “Galeria Zachęta. Kalendarium wystaw 1950–2000,” in *Zachęta 1860–2000*, 329–31.

were *Woodcuts and Sculptures by Robert Hainard* (*Wystawa drzeworytów i rzeźb Roberta Hainarda [Szwajcaria]*) and the exhibition of Bulgarian graphic art and illustration (*Wystawa bułgarskiej grafiki i ilustracji*).²¹ In 1957, in addition to the exhibition of West German poster art (*Plakat NRF*), three other exhibitions of foreign art were shown at Zachęta; they presented Belgian art of the 19th and 20th century (*Wystawa sztuki belgijskiej XIX i XX wieku*), contemporary art in Yugoslavia (*Wystawa jugosłowiańskiej sztuki współczesnej*) and graphic arts in the USA (*Sztuka graficzna USA*).

Summing up the data yielded by the Bureau's calendar, we must note two aspects of the exhibition policy of the era. Firstly, in the years 1956–1957 not a single exhibition of art from the USSR was on show at Zachęta; this topic returned to the Bureau's exposition halls only in October 1958 with the exhibition of contemporary Soviet art (*Wystawa współczesnej plastyki radzieckiej*). Secondly, the *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany* in 1956 was the first collective exhibition to present the art of West Germany in a state-owned gallery. The Polish art critic Ignacy Witz commented:

The beautiful exhibition of graphic artists from the Federal Republic of Germany is not a representative show of the black-and-white art of that country. It is rather an exhibition of works by a group of artists who wished to acquaint the Polish viewer with their achievements. But it is the first exhibition of West German artists in post-war Poland. No-one, I think, needs to be persuaded as to its worth and impact on the effort of establishing mutual contacts.²²

Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany (1956)

The exhibition of West German graphic art was presented at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions from 25 February to 21 March 1956; drew 23,312 visitors. Before that, it was shown at the National Museum in Poznań (24 January – 19 February 1956), where it was seen by 5,123 visitors.²³ Three of the participating artists came to the opening in Poznań, invited there by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries; those were Otto Pankok, Max Körner and Hildegard Peters.²⁴ They went on a guided tour of Poznań and Rogalin and visited some artists' studios; Körner and Peters went on a visit to Cracow. During a panel discussion at the National Museum in Poznań, "the guests ... talked about, among others, the splendid achievements of Polish graphic artists in the field of poster art. According to the German graphic artists, [Polish poster] enjoys great renown in the west of Europe".²⁵ In Warsaw, the German artists were represented by Peters (Fig. 2); during the exhibition opening, she read out a letter from Pankok.²⁶

The exhibition curator was the painter and graphic artist Roman Artymowski.²⁷ He had taken on the task of connecting the Polish and West German artistic milieus from the Polish side; in the latter half of 1956 he participated in the international exhibition of the

²¹ *Rocznik CBWA 1956*, 20.

²² Ignacy WITZ, "Na ścianach 'Zachęty'. Graficy NRF," *Życie Warszawy*, March 15, 1956, 6.

²³ *Rocznik CBWA 1956*, 20.

²⁴ (PAP), "Artyści graficy z NRF przybyli do Polski," *Trybuna Ludu*, February 11, 1956, 6.

²⁵ (t. h. n.), "Kierunek Kraków–Warszawa," *Głos Wielkopolski*, February 17, 1956, 4.

²⁶ (PAP), "W Warszawie otwarto wystawę prac grafików z NRF," *Trybuna Ludu*, February 26, 1956, 4.

²⁷ *Rocznik CBWA 1956*, 20.

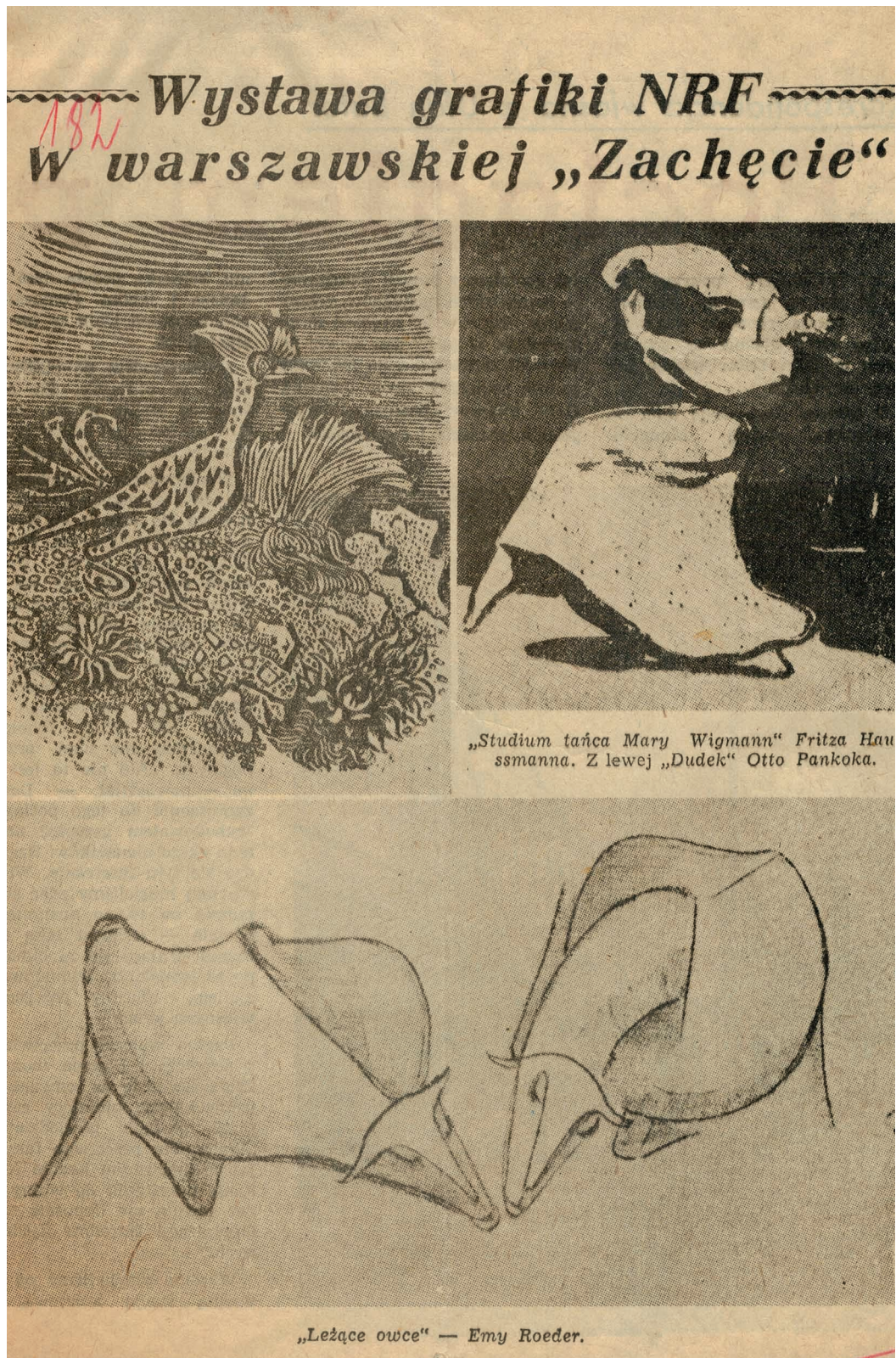


2. Hildegard Peters at the opening of the Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1956.
Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

“Roter Reiter” group in the Bavarian town of Traunstein.²⁸ The function of a curator at exhibitions organised by the Central Bureau had little in common with the status of a curator as we know it today; the curators of exhibitions of Polish and foreign art were usually artists representing the given area of fine arts; for instance, curators of graphic art or poster exhibitions were graphic artists themselves. The “exhibition factory” in Warsaw did employ art historians, but its organisational structure did not include the post of a commissar or curator (this changed only in the latter half of the 1970s). All that was established was the Implementation Section, whose head, working in strict cooperation with the Bureau’s director, the Ministry of Culture and Art and the Association of Polish Artists, would select the outside curators.²⁹ In the case of exhibition of West German

²⁸ *Künstlergruppe “Roter Reiter”. Internationale Ausstellung 1956. Malerei, Grafik, Plastik* (Traunstein-Bad Reichenhall, 1956). See also remarks on Artymowski’s participation in the exhibitions of the “Roter Reiter” group: *Wystawa prac Romana Artymowskiego* [exhibition leaflet], February–March 1959 (Warszawa: Galeria Sztuki Nowoczesnej “Krzywe Koło,” 1959); (grt), “Czego do swej sztuki potrzebuje Roman Artymowski,” *Express Wieczorny*, March 1–2, 1959, 4; *Roman Artymowski, malarstwo* [exhibition catalogue] (Warszawa: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, 1985), no pagination; Jacek MACYSZYN and Józef GRABSKI, eds., *Roman Artymowski. Słońce nad pustynią. Motywy arabskie w twórczości Romana Artymowskiego (1919–1993)* (Kraków-Warszawa: IRSA, 2004), 158.

²⁹ The Zachęta – National Art Gallery Archive, Warsaw. Organisational rules of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, 9 May 1968, signed: Deputy Director Władysław Blinkiewicz, 10. See also Gabriela ŚWITEK, “Czy artysta potrzebuje kuratora? Przyczynek do historii kuratorstwa na przykładzie Centralnego Biura Wystaw Artystycznych w latach 60. XX wieku,” in *Artysta/kurator. Studia z metodologii historii sztuki*, ed. Maria POPRZECKA (Warszawa: Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2019), 75–96.



3. Works by Otto Pankok, Fritz Husmann and Emy Roeder shown at the Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1956. Photo: Trybuna Wolności, March 4, 1956

graphic art the additional body to have a decisive vote on the issue was the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries.

The exhibition encompassed 155 graphic works by 25 German artists (Artur Buschmann, Willi Dirx, Otto Dix, Otto Eglau, Willi Geiger, Erich Heckel, Bernhard Hergarden, Walter Herzger, Karl Hubbuch, Fritz Husmann, Karl Kluth, Alfred Kubin, Max Körner, Alfred Mahlau, Rolf Müller-Landau, Hans Orlowski, Otto Pankok, Hildegard Peters, Emy Roeder, Jupp Rübsam, Werner vom Scheidt, Christa von Schnitzler-Croissant, Eylert Spars, Hermann Teuber and Max Peiffer Watenphul).³⁰ The catalogue included a full list of exhibited works, but only thirteen of them were reproduced.³¹ Reviews in the Polish press were most often illustrated with pieces by Dix, Pankok, Geiger, as well as Roeder and Husmann (Fig. 3). At the same time, it was noted that “the exhibition of West German graphics is by no means an exhibition of young artists”.³² The majority of works were by artists from the older generation, already active before the Second World War (e.g. Dix, Geiger, Heckel, Kubin, Pankok and Roeder).

The three-page introduction to the small catalogue was by Jan Białostocki, from 1956 the curator of the Gallery of Foreign Art at the National Museum in Warsaw, who stressed that the exhibition was “one of the first, after many years, opportunities to become acquainted with the current output of artists from the Federal Republic of Germany”, even though it did not present not “an all-embracing or complete picture” of it.³³ In 1956 Białostocki had published a monograph on Albrecht Dürer, who became one of the heroes of his introduction to this catalogue. This is because the Polish historian of art, who specialised in the European art of the modern era, outlined the history of German graphic art beginning from the development of book printing, “inseparably linked with the name of Gutenberg”, then mentioned “the culmination of German graphic art in the oeuvre of Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein”, and the graphic techniques used by the German Impressionists, the masters of etching: Max Liebermann, Lovis Corinth and Max Slevogt, as well as the German Expressionists: Emil Nolde, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Pechstein and Erich Heckel.³⁴ This part of the introduction closes with the name of Käthe Kollwitz, which “suffices to make even those readers who are hardly conversant with the subject aware of the importance of graphics in the German art of the last five decades”.³⁵ It must be added that the Polish audience was well acquainted with Kollwitz’s output in the areas of graphics and sculpture after an exhibition held at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in 1951; the works of this artist, who had died in April 1945, were used in Polish art criticism of the 1950s as an argument for the legitimisation of Socialist Realism.³⁶

Moving on to the *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany*, Białostocki emphasised that the show was not “uniform in character”, as it included “graphic artists who in the past belonged to various groups, who originated from

³⁰ *Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej* [exhibition catalogue] (Warszawa: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, Wydawnictwo Sztuka, 1956), 6–12.

³¹ Artur Buschmann, Willi Dirx, Otto Dix, Otto Eglau, Willi Geiger, Fritz Husmann, Rolf Müller-Landau, Hans Orlowski, Otto Pankok, Emy Roeder, Werner vom Scheidt, Eylert Spars, Hermann Teuber.

³² Hanna SZCZAWIŃSKA, “Wystawa plastyków NRF,” *Słowo Powszechne*, March 19, 1956, 4.

³³ Jan BIAŁOSTOCKI, [untitled], in *Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej*, 5.

³⁴ *Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ On this exhibition, see Stanisław WELBEL, “Käthe Kollwitz and Otto Nagel: Two Exhibitions of ‘Progressive Artists’ at the Zachęta in the Framework of Cultural Cooperation with the German Democratic Republic,” *Ikonotheka*, no. 26 (2016): 111–136.

a range of artistic traditions”.³⁷ He mentioned only nine of the 25 participants. He placed the works of Pankok, Herzger and Dirx within the tradition of Expressionism, the works of Roeder reminded him of the oeuvre of Franz Marc and the “Der Blaue Reiter” group, whereas in those by Müller-Landau he saw an affinity to “the disciplined art of the Bauhaus”.³⁸ The most space in his reflections was devoted to Kubin, “that exceedingly individualistic forerunner of Surrealism”, and Dix.

Of this last, Białostocki wrote in a tone typical of the Polish art criticism of the era, highlighting the anti-war message of Dix’s output and its “anti-formalism” and “objectivity”. The name of Dix, argued Białostocki,

is linked with the most severe and drastic incrimination of the First World War the German art has managed to achieve. ... Together with Grosz and his criticism of the way of life, with Brecht and his *Trommel in der Nacht*, with the graphic works of Käthe Kollwitz and the sculptures of Barlach, Dix’s art speaks as much against the war and post-war reality, as against the formal art of Kandinsky and Paul Klee.³⁹

In Polish press, Dix was perceived above all as a representative of the New Objectivity and mentioned, together with Käthe Kollwitz, Ernst Barlach and John Heartfield, as a critic of “social contradictions” in Germany.⁴⁰

Białostocki’s introduction is marked by a tendency to stress the realistic aspects of the current German art as contrasting with “abstraction”. The non-uniformity of the exhibition, in his view, attested to “a variety of explorations in search of a language and an expression – explorations conducted not on the path of abstraction, but on the path of the lived-in reality and its artistic transposition”.⁴¹ Outlines of the broad historical background to German graphics, the emphasis on the preponderance of senior artists among the participants, and the balanced tone of assessments are elements of Białostocki’s introduction that are often found, quoted almost verbatim and sometimes amplified for propagandistic reasons, in the press commentaries to the *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany*. A reviewer from *Głos Pracy* mentioned the impressive tradition of German graphics (Dürer, Holbein), the expressionistic tendencies of the late 19th and early 20th century, and Käthe Kollwitz, well known to the Polish audience; among the participants, he only refers to Pankok, Kubin and Dix.⁴² Ignacy Witz, an artist and art critic affiliated to *Życie Warszawy*, did not hide that he had made use of the observations of the eminent art historian: “The author of the introduction, Jan Białostocki, alluded ... to a most apposite and important issue. Emphatically pointing to the artistic heritage of Germany, he included, in fact highlighted, the singular role of graphics in the history of art [produced] by that nation”.⁴³

The reviewer from *Trybuna Mazowiecka* focused on similar aspects, as she began, like Białostocki, from Gutenberg, Dürer and Holbein, referred to Dix together with Barlach,

³⁷ BIAŁOSTOCKI, [untitled], 4.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Stefan MORAWSKI, “Otto Dix (Z okazji berlińskiej wystawy w maju 1957 roku),” *Przegląd Artystyczny*, November–December, 1957, 32.

⁴¹ BIAŁOSTOCKI, [untitled], 4.

⁴² (K), “Ciekawa, dojrzała różnorodność,” *Głos Pracy*, February 27, 1956, 4.

⁴³ WITZ, “Na ścianach ‘Zachęty’ . Graficy NRF,” 6.

Grosz and Brecht, and mentioned works by Pankok, Eglau and Peters. The most space, however, she devoted to an artist who had not participated in the 1956 exhibition; moreover, she erroneously cited facts from her biography, saying that

at that exhibition, the face that appeared before my eyes ... belonged to Käthe Kollwitz, a revolutionary and the greatest artist of the last five decades of German graphics. Eleven years ago, Käthe Kollwitz was murdered by the German Fascism [sic!]. But if today she could stand before the artists from that side of Germany where Fascism has not died out yet, she would have to ask: What, in essence, does your art serve, what does the beautiful form of your works contain? Because while this art shows human life, it is empty of the life of a nation; while it astutely observes an individual person, it does not observe the masses.⁴⁴

The above review (which was, actually, the only one to be reprinted – twice – in Polish regional press) alluded to the then-worsening political divisions of the Cold War. The *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany* took place a few months after the Treaty of Warsaw – the Eastern Bloc’s answer to the militarisation of West Germany – had been signed; in May 1955, “that side of Germany where Fascism has not died out yet” (as the reviewer argues) joined the NATO. In March 1956 the Polish press frequently published comments referring to that event. In the same issue of *Trybuna Mazowiecka* (the press organ of the Warsaw Voivodeship Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party) in which appeared the review from the exhibition in Warsaw, there is an article condemning West German foreign policy: “While Adenauer’s policy of re-militarisation draws its strength from an alliance with Washington, it meets with a serious opposition in the German society”.⁴⁵

A noteworthy phenomenon in the rhetoric of texts occasioned by the exhibitions of German art at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in the 1950s and 1960s is the fact that they often included hostile juxtapositions between the foreign policies of East and West Germany. For instance, an argumentation referring to the “danger of the West German policy of revenge and militarism” appears, in the year 1964, in the catalogue to John Heartfield’s exhibition. At the Central Bureau, Heartfield was exhibited as an East German artist whose photomontages from the period of the Weimar Republic were, after the Second World War, presented as an anti-war, anti-military and anti-capitalist warnings.⁴⁶

Yet very few comparisons between the East and West German art were made in the comments to the *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany*. One exception is the review in *Słowo Powszechne*, whose author referred to the exhibition of East German applied graphics that had been held in the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw (1956), saying that

the clear picture of a break in aesthetic concepts, which corresponds to the current division of Germany, is interesting. Graphic art in East Germany, while it can boast an outstanding,

⁴⁴ Barbara OLSZEWSKA, “Piękno ograniczone (Z wystawy prac grafików Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej),” *Trybuna Mazowiecka*, March 1, 1956, 5. The same review was also published in *Gazeta Białostocka*, March 1, 1956, 3; *Trybuna Opolska*, March 3–4 [*Głosy z nad Odry*, cultural supplement to *Trybuna Opolska*, March 3], 1956, 2.

⁴⁵ Marian PODKOWIŃSKI, “Czy zmierzch adenauerowskiej ery? (korespondencja własna z AR z Bonn),” *Trybuna Mazowiecka*, March 2, 1956, 2.

⁴⁶ Eberhard BARTKE, Rudolf BERGANDER, [untitled], in *Niestety aktualne. Wystawa fotomontaży Johna Heartfielda NRD* [exhibition catalogue] (Warszawa: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, 1964), [3].

terse poster art evincing a uniformly good quality yet diverse artistic conceptions, in book illustration often refers to the traditions of the German Secession ... A very good grasp of draughtsmanship, based on an excellent knowledge of anatomy, is a feature ... shared by the creative workshops of artists from both the East and the West Germany.⁴⁷

The excellent grasp of graphic techniques is an observation that recurs in the reviews of the West German exhibition; more absorbing, however – especially in the thaw context of the exhibition, which is of interest herein – are the critics’ attempts to present various phenomena as elements of artistic trends preferred in the Polish artistic and historical discourse of the era. In other words, the language of Polish art criticism in the era when the rhetoric of Socialist Realism continued to be promoted but was already contested, remains a separate issue in the history of the reception of the *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany*.⁴⁸ For instance, the exhibition was described as “devoid of a programme”.⁴⁹ “Excellent technique” and “virtuosity of form” were contrasted with the “marginal” set of topics, which “failed to address crucial problems of West Germany’s everyday life”.⁵⁰

The review in *Słowo Powszechne* concluded with observations on Formalism, a concept crucial to the Stalinist aesthetics, used pejoratively as the opposite of Realism: “After the walloping we gave each other [as a punishment] for Formalism it would, of course, be a little ridiculous to postulate a return to the showy manner or even to a literal continuation of any trend in the graphic art under discussion here”.⁵¹ The author of another review praised the absence of tendencies condemned by the doctrine of Socialist Realism (i.e. Naturalism, Formalism, Abstractionism); the exhibition was entirely devoid of “those naturalist tendencies which often, regrettably, still continue to haunt us. Neither do we see – with some exceptions – works that are wholly abstract”.⁵²

The Polish critics’ commendation of Expressionism in German art is a separate issue. Andrzej Oseka, for instance, argued that the exhibition reflected two trends in Expressionism that appeared after the First World War: the “objective” one, focusing on social criticism, and the abstract one.⁵³ At the same time Expressionism, which, in Oseka’s view, prevailed among the exhibited works, was a concept he associated with political history: the exhibition was “exceedingly interesting as a continuation of a thing that the German Fascism attempted to destroy with fire and sword: a continuation of the trend known as Expressionism”.⁵⁴ Oseka argued, therefore, that the most fascinating group of works to be seen at the exhibition were pieces by “the four continuators of Expressionism: Pankok, Herzger, Hubbuch and Dirx, possibly more interesting than the works of the co-creators of

⁴⁷ SZCZAWIŃSKA, “Wystawa plastyków NRF,” 4.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Piotr JUSZKIEWICZ, *Od rozkoszy historiozofii do “gry w nic”: Polska krytyka artystyczna czasu odwilży* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza, 2005); Elżbieta KAL, “*Tego się nie krytykuje, na kogo się nie liczy*”: Polska krytyka artystyczna okresu realizmu socjalistycznego (Słupsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Pomorskiej, 2010).

⁴⁹ Mirek KIJOWICZ, “Wrażenia z wystawy grafiki NRF,” *Przegląd Kulturalny*, March 15–21, 1956, 5.

⁵⁰ Elżbieta SZTEKKER, “Wystawa grafiki z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej,” *Żołnierz Wolności*, March 23 [*Horyzont*, a bi-weekly supplement to *Żołnierz Wolności*, March 23], 1956, 1.

⁵¹ SZCZAWIŃSKA, “Wystawa plastyków NRF,” 4. On Formalism, see e.g. Grzegorz WOŁOWIEC, “Formalizm – naturalizm,” in *Słownik realizmu socjalistycznego*, ed. Zdzisław ŁAPIŃSKI, Wojciech TOMASIK (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 70.

⁵² SZTEKKER, “Wystawa grafiki z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej,” 1.

⁵³ Andrzej OSEKA, “Wystawa grafiki zachodnio-niemieckiej,” *Sztandar Młodych*, April 9, 1956, 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

this trend, men mentioned in every handbook: Erich Heckel and Otto Dix”.⁵⁵ At the same time, the Polish critic presented a post-war legitimisation of Expressionism as a trend which in the latter half of the 1930s in Germany had been considered an *Entartete Kunst* (“once obliterated by the Fascists because of its social and emotional contents”) and which at present was getting reborn in West Germany.⁵⁶

From the perspective of the current research on the history of exhibitions, which highlights the political setting to international cultural exchange, the review published in *Przegląd Kulturalny* is quite fascinating. Its author began with a condemnation of the earlier programme of international exhibitions presented at the Central Bureau:

It became a tradition that the overwhelming majority of artistic events at Zachęta sprang from a strict exhibition programme and was deeply involved in the sphere of political issues – in fact, those events constituted a clear ideological and didactic index of those issues. Exhibitions that took place there were either ones of the *Progressive Artists in the Struggle for Peace* [1954] and *The Art of the Mexican National Front in Visual Arts* [1955], or equally determinedly tendentious monographic exhibitions like those of Renato Guttuso [1954], Paul Hogarth etc.⁵⁷

The critical assessment of the earlier “ideological” foreign exhibitions at the Central Bureau, as well as the fact that against that background, the exhibition of West German graphic art was judged as collecting “elements of modern representation”,⁵⁸ can be linked with the peculiar direction of artistic policy followed by *Przegląd Kulturalny* in the period of the thaw. It was a weekly that focused on socio-cultural matters, published in Warsaw in the years 1952–1963 (until 1956 as the organ of the Art Council at the Ministry of Culture and Art). At present, Polish historians of literature as much as Polish historians of art see it as a periodical that reflected the slow collapse of the doctrine of Socialist Realism.⁵⁹ From as early as 1955, *Przegląd* published debates on modernity in visual arts, and from 1956 also essays on Western art.

Thus, on the one hand, critical opinions regarding the earlier programme of foreign exhibitions at the Central Bureau can be interpreted as a sign of the thaw in the sphere of culture. This is the background against which the reviewer from *Przegląd Kulturalny* assessed West German graphic art: “In comparison with those phenomena, the current exhibition of the works of graphic artists from the Federal Republic of Germany is without precedent. This absence of an ideological programme seems to lie at the core of its character”.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the fact that the first exhibition of art from the Federal Republic of Germany was at the same time one of the last exhibitions organised by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, a body active in the Stalinist period, must be considered ironical (Fig. 4). All the exhibitions condemned in *Przegląd Kulturalny* had been organised at the Central Bureau by the Committee for Cultural Cooperation in the period 1954–1955: *Exhibition of the Works of Progressive Artists* (1954), the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

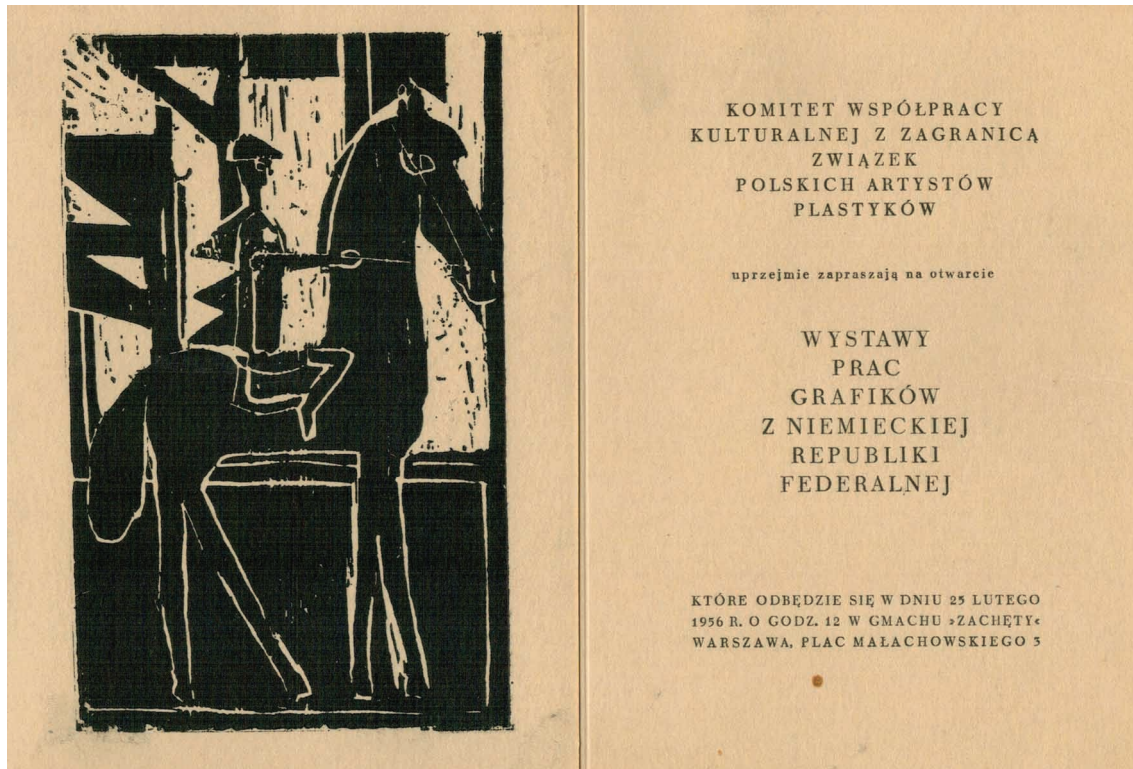
⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ KIJOWICZ, “Wrażenia z wystawy grafiki NRF,” 5.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See Grzegorz WOŁOWIEC, “Przegląd Kulturalny,” in *Słownik realizmu socjalistycznego*, 230; Tadeusz ADAMOWICZ, “Przegląd Kulturalny,” in *Polskie życie artystyczne w latach 1945–1960*, 429.

⁶⁰ KIJOWICZ, “Wrażenia z wystawy grafiki NRF,” 5.



4. *Invitation to the Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1956.*

Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

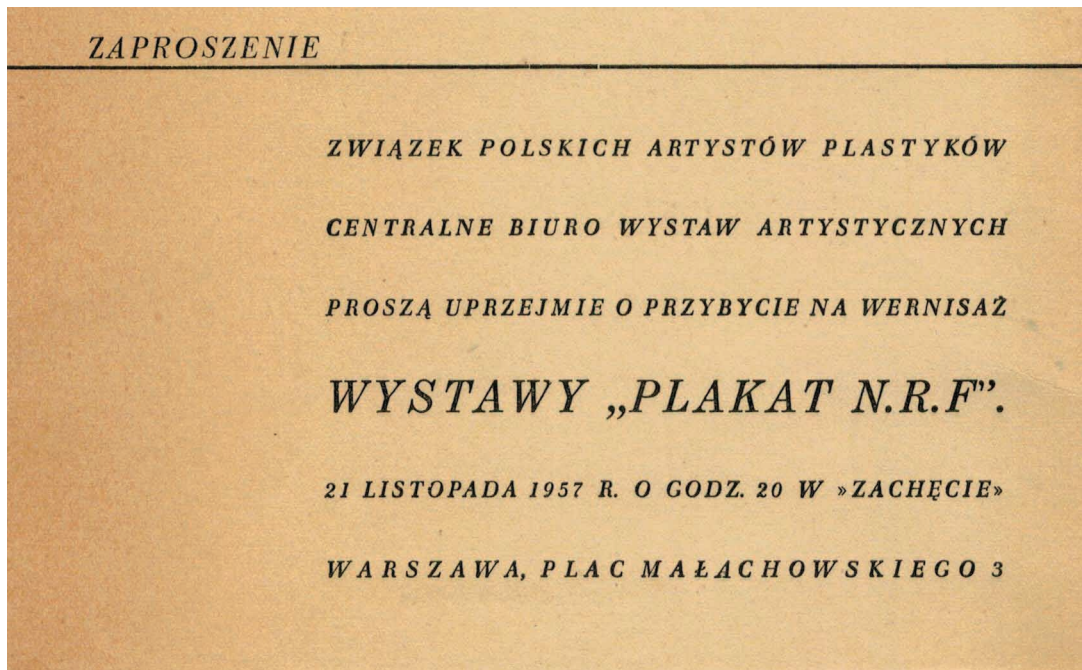
exhibition of paintings and drawings by Renato Guttuso (1954) or the *Exhibition of Mexican Art of the 16th to 20th Centuries* (1955). What is more, the criticism of the foreign exhibition programme at the Central Bureau as published in *Przegląd Kulturalny* was concurrent with the introduction of top-down policy of decentralizing international cultural exchange in the People's Republic of Poland. Liquidation of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries had been suggested already in the last months of 1954; in September 1956 the Committee was disbanded and some of its competencies were transferred to the Foreign Office at the Ministry of Culture and Art.⁶¹

Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany (1957)

The exhibition titled *Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Polish title: *Plakat NRF*) was on show at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions from 21 November to 5 December 1957.⁶² The exhibition was visited by 13,097 viewers. Only the Association of Polish Artists and the Central Bureau were mentioned in the invitation as its organisers (Fig. 5); by then, the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries, an actively Stalinist institution, was no longer in existence. The catalogue stressed that the exhibition resulted from direct cooperation between the Association of Polish Artists and

⁶¹ LISIECKA, "Działalność Komitetu Współpracy Kulturalnej z Zagranicą w latach 1950–1956," 215.

⁶² The Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions annual gives 18 November as the date of the opening; 21 November is given in the invitation. See *Rocznik CBWA 1957*, 22.



5. Invitation to the Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany exhibition, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1957.

Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

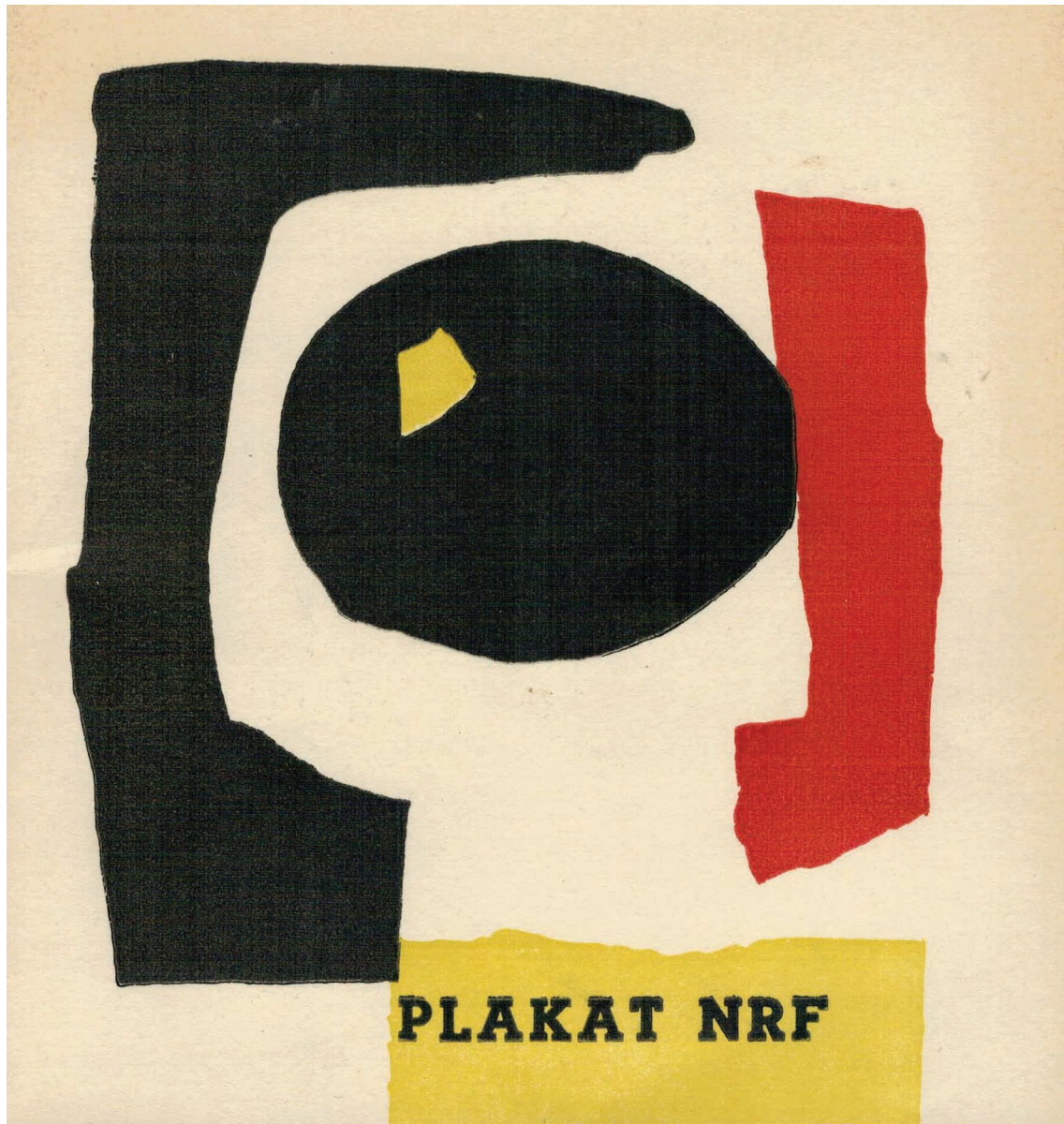
the Bundes Deutscher Gebrauchsgraphiker, especially with Eberhard Hölscher, the chairman of the latter organisation in the years 1948–1965.⁶³

The exhibition consisted of 116 posters by 66 artists. The small catalogue contained only a brief introduction, an essay by Hölscher, and a list of posters. The names of particular artists were given, but the titles or dates of their works were not; only the general category was stated, for instance “theatre poster”; in his essay Hölscher mentioned that most of them had been produced in the course of the past five years.⁶⁴ The following ten posters were published in the catalogue: Felix Müller and Karl Oskar Blase, an exhibition poster (*Haugerät aus USA*); Richard Blank, a tourist poster (*Berlin: sehen, kennen, lieben*); Atelier Lohrer, a tourist poster (*Deutschland, Dome und Kirchen*); Sigrid and Hans Lämmle, a poster of a grocery cooperative (*Konsum, Miteinander – füreinander*); Karl Heinz Gottstein, a carnival poster (*Nachtwandler*); Walter Brudi, an art-exhibition poster (*Graphische Ausstellung “Stuttgarter Schule”, Tübinger Kunstgebäude, 1948*); Alfred Haller, an art-exhibition poster (*Junge Künstler Baden-Württemberg, Kunstpreis der Jugend, 1955*); Alfred Haller, a circus poster (*Barlay*); Walter Breker, an exhibition poster (*Ausstellung Raum+Gerät, 1952*); Hans Förtsch, a theatre poster (*David und Goliath, Maxim Gorki Theater*). Three outstanding Polish graphic artists were involved in the creation of the graphics for the Warsaw exhibition. Henryk Tomaszewski was the author of its poster; the cover for the catalogue was designed by Waldemar Świerzy (Fig. 6) and the modern typography by Wojciech Zamecznik (Fig. 7).⁶⁵

⁶³ *Plakat NRF* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne RSW “Prasa,” 1957), no pagination [3].

⁶⁴ Eberhard HÖLSCHER, “Nowa niemiecka twórczość plakatu,” in *Plakat NRF*, no pagination [6].

⁶⁵ *Plakat NRF*, no pagination [2].



6. Cover of the catalogue for the Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany exhibition, design: Waldemar Świerzy, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1957.
Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

The significance of the poster exhibition exchange between the People's Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany was highlighted in the catalogue:

The exhibition of posters from the Federal Republic of Germany in Warsaw, similarly to exhibitions of Polish poster art organised over the past year in many cities of the Federal Republic, constitute a good occasion for exchanging artistic knowledge and are a sign of the developing friendly contacts between creators from both countries.⁶⁶

An important part in this exchange was played by the already mentioned Eberhard Hölscher, who wrote, among others, the introduction to the catalogues of *Polnische*

⁶⁶ Ibid., no pagination [3].



7. Centerfold of the catalogue for the Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany exhibition, typographic design: Wojciech Zamecznik, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1957. Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

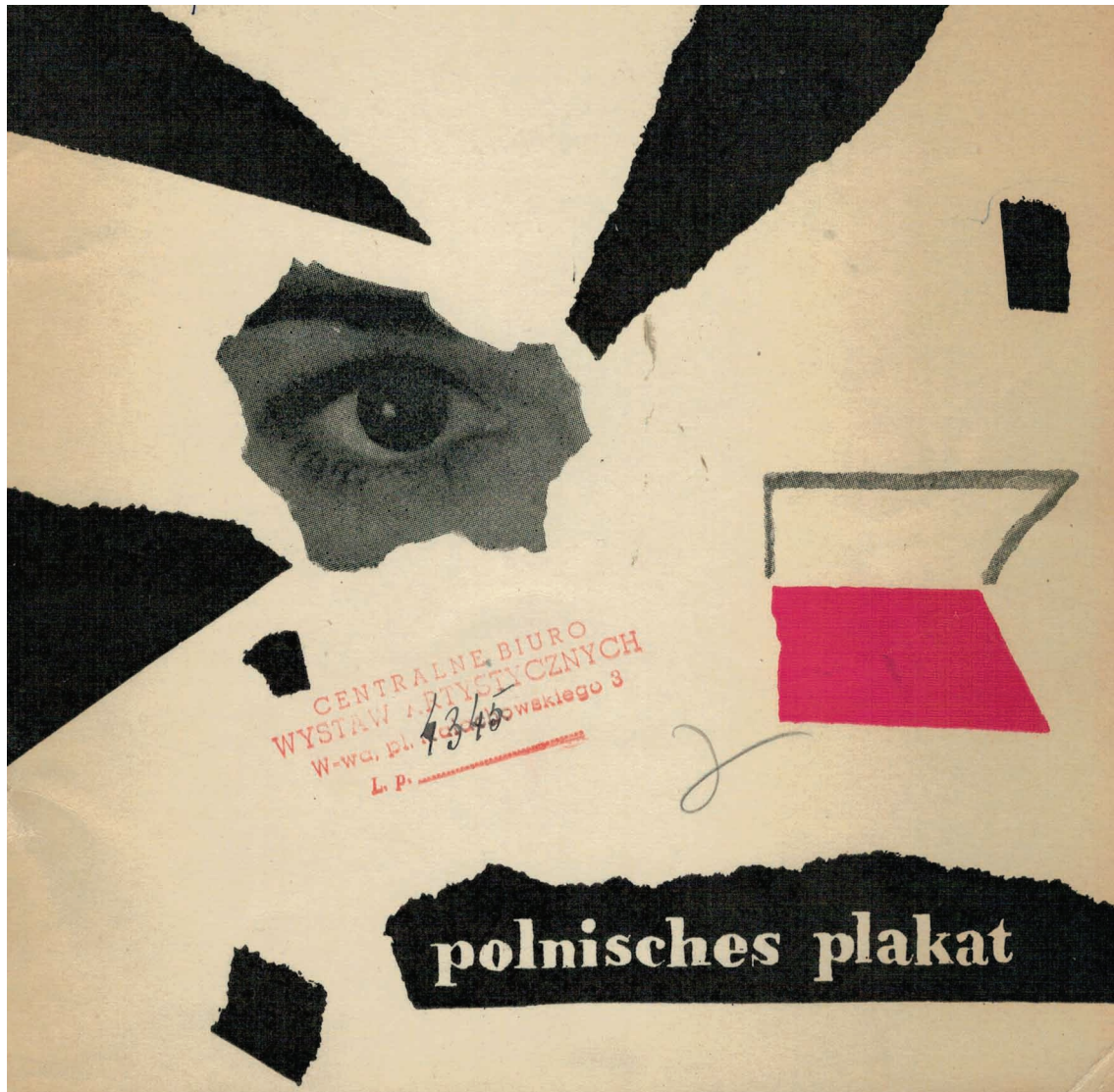
Plakate (1956) and *Polnisches Plakat* in West Berlin (1957, Fig. 8).⁶⁷ It is, therefore, not by accident that in his catalogue of the Warsaw exhibition he highlighted the fact that “in Germany we many times had the opportunity to express our admiration for the extraordinary achievements of Polish poster artists”.⁶⁸ Hölscher also outlined the post-war history of German poster art:

In the era of Hitler the German artistic poster, which belongs to the tradition of German art, lacked prospects of development, and after the catastrophic results of the Second World War it fell into complete decline. ... Only when life began to take a normal, more ordered course, were artists again able to create posters, initially those of cultural character, later also other ones. For more or less eight years now, we have been observing the emergence of a new German poster art.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Both exhibition catalogues contain the same introduction by Hölscher and an essay by Józef Mroszczak. See Eberhard HÖLSCHER, “Zum Geleit,” in *Polnische Plakate* (Nürnberg: Buchdruckerei Georg Göbel, [1956]), 1; Józef MROSZCZAK, “Über das Plakat,” in *Polnische Plakate*, 2–4; Eberhard HÖLSCHER, “Zum Geleit,” in *Polnisches Plakat* (Westberlin, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne RSW “Prasa,” 1957), no pagination [3–4]; Józef MROSZCZAK, “Über das Plakat,” in *Polnisches Plakat*, no pagination [5–8]. The exhibitions travelling to the FRG encompassed mainly film posters, but also theatre posters, posters oriented on social issues, and posters of exhibitions, produced by such artists as Roman Cieślewicz, Wojciech Fangor, Tadeusz Gronowski, Jan Lenica, Eryk Lipiński, Jan Młodożeniec, Józef Mroszczak, Julian Pałka, Olga Siemaszkowa, Jerzy Srokowski, Waldemar Świerzy, Henryk Tomaszewski, Tadeusz Trepkowski, Ignacy Witz and Wojciech Zamecznik.

⁶⁸ HÖLSCHER, “Nowa niemiecka twórczość plakatowa,” no pagination [6].

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, no pagination [5–6].



8. Cover of the catalogue
for the *Polnisches Plakat* exhibition, West Berlin, 1957.
Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

Published sources, such as the annual of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, recall only one large review and two mentions in the Polish press.⁷⁰ Comparing this with the quantity of reviews commenting on the 1956 exhibition of West German graphic artists, it may be assumed that the official reception was minimal. Szymon Bojko, an art historian and critic whose knowledge of contemporary poster was extensive, stressed the fact that the was “already the second (after the exhibition of workshop graphics last year) overview of contemporary West German art to take place after the war”, and his review was illustrated with reproductions of posters by Hans Förtsch and Sigrid and Hans Lämmle.⁷¹ Bojko appreciated posters designed for trading or industrial companies and praised works by Walter Brudi and Walter Breker as evincing “an outstanding graphic culture” and “successfully continuing old traditions of German graphics and exquisite

⁷⁰ *Rocznik CBWA 1957*, 22.

⁷¹ Szymon Bojko, “Pomiędzy tradycjonalizmem a nowoczesnością,” *Trybuna Literacka*, December 1, 1957, 3.

lettering”.⁷² He dedicated most space to general reflections on the high technical quality of German poster art, including comments on the use of “glittering paints”: “Put up such a poster on a grey, rainy day, and it will act like a neon”.⁷³ Also, he praised the German system “of annual prizes and commendations for artists and publishers” who contributed to the development of poster art, as well as the popularising role of specialist periodicals: *Gebrauchsgraphik* and *Graphik*. He stressed that those periodicals “several times published large reports on Polish poster art, evincing considerable esteem for our artists and appreciation of [their work]”.⁷⁴

The exhibition documentation extant in Zachęta contains eight surviving photographs showing the modern design of the exposition, which thus noticeably differs from the practice established at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in the 1950s (Fig. 9). Interestingly, in the Central Bureau’s annual a photograph from the *Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany* exhibition is brought together with the *Graphic Arts in the USA* exhibition shown at the Central Bureau in the same year (9 December 1957 – 6 January 1958).⁷⁵ The first exhibition of drawings, prints and watercolours from American collections (including the Metropolitan Museum of Art) to be shown at Zachęta, which included works by such artists as Mary Cassatt, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Edward Hopper or Georgia O’Keeffe, seems visually less attractive (as exhibition design, Fig. 10) than the dynamic display of West German posters. The exposition of American works was criticised for, among others, unclear arrangement of the works on the walls.⁷⁶

The exposition of German poster art was designed by Stanisław Zamecznik (1909–1971), an outstanding Polish architect and exhibition designer famous for, among others, the project for the Coal Pavilion at the Recovered Territories Exhibition in Wrocław in 1948. The exhibition at Zachęta in 1957 was one of the first for which Zamecznik envisaged walls of curved fibreboard (Fig. 11). Later, Zamecznik used curved fibreboard for his other ground-breaking projects: the touring *Exhibition of sculptures and drawings of Henry Moore* prepared by British Council (Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, 1959, Fig. 12) and in the Warsaw edition of *The Family of Man*, the famous touring exhibition presenting photographs from the American periodical *LIFE* (“Reduta” Rooms of the National Theatre, 1959).⁷⁷

Conclusion

Graphic arts, including poster art, played a special role in the activity of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions. For instance, the *1st Polish Exhibition of Poster Art (Pierwsza polska wystawa plakatu, 1953)* was shown at Zachęta. The *2nd National Exhibition of*

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *Rocznik CBWA 1957*, Figs. no. 26 and 27.

⁷⁶ See the reviews quoted in Petra SKARUPSKY, “Sztuka graficzna USA,” accessed April 29, 2019, <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/wystawy/sztuka-graficzna-usa>. On the selection of American art in this exhibition see Bohdan URBANOWICZ, “O sztuce amerykańskiej,” [unpaginated leaflet] in *Sztuka graficzna USA* (Warszawa: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, 1957).

⁷⁷ On Zamecznik’s exhibition designs, see Tomasz FUDALA and Marianne ZAMECZNIK, eds., *Przestrzeń między nami* [exhibition catalogue] (Warszawa: Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej, 2010). On the Polish editions of *The Family of Man*, see Kamila LEŚNIAK, “The Family of Man in Poland: An Exhibition as a Democratic Space?,” *Ikonotheka*, no. 26 (2016): 213–38.



9. *The Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany exhibition, exposition design: Stanisław Zamecznik, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1957. Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw*

Illustrations, Posters and Small-Format Graphics (II Ogólnopolska wystawa ilustracji, plakatu i grafiki małegoformatowej) took place in 1955, and the *1st National Exhibition of Graphic Art (I Ogólnopolska wystawa grafiki)* – in 1956. The exhibition of Bulgarian graphic art and illustration (*Wystawa bułgarskiej grafiki i ilustracji, 2–21 March 1956*, Fig. 13) was on show in the Zachęta gallery halls concurrently with the *Exhibition of the Works of Graphic Artists from the Federal Republic of Germany*. Also, suitably prepared sets of posters and graphic works were sent abroad; for instance, in 1956, *Exhibition of Polish Graphic Art* toured the USA, Canada and other countries; Jan Białostocki wrote the introduction to its catalogue (Fig. 14).⁷⁸

That area of exhibition policy sprang from official directives coming from the Department of Agitation and Propaganda at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, in which the ideological and artistic merits of posters were repeatedly accentuated. Exhibitions of graphic art made it possible to focus on “safe” aspects: the

⁷⁸ Jan BIAŁOSTOCKI, “Polish Contemporary Graphic Art,” in *Exhibition of Polish Graphic Art / Exposition de l’art graphique polonais* [exhibition catalogue] (Warsaw: Sztuka, 1956), 3–7.



10. *The Graphic Arts in the USA exhibition, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1957–1958. Photo: Zacheła – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw*

purely artistic values of the pieces or the excellence of techniques applied in their making. On the other hand, those exhibitions were perceived as demonstrations of the propagandistic and practical aspects of applied arts.⁷⁹ It may also be assumed that the quantity of graphic-art exhibitions resulted not only from political conditions, but also from logistics. Large, comprehensive exhibitions of painting and sculpture from museum collections (Fig. 15) were – and still are – much more complex organisational enterprises than the touring exhibitions of prints or posters, that is, pieces easier and cheaper to transport, and ones that can be reprinted, reproduced, in many copies.

The importance of graphic arts in the official exhibition policy of the People's Republic of Poland makes it possible to precisely determine the status of the two exhibitions of graphic art and poster art from the Federal Republic of Germany shown at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in the years 1956–1957. While in some aspect they can be perceived as comprehensive – in the sense of collective exhibitions presenting various generations and a range of tendencies in graphic arts in West Germany – it would be much more difficult to regard them as representative to the entirety of West German artistic life in the post-war period. It must also be remembered that researching post-war exhibitions at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions constitutes an example of historiography that is not synchronised with the great narratives created in the Western cultural centres.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Katarzyna MATUL, "The Transition to Art: Poster Exhibitions at the Outset of the Poster's Institutionalisation," *Ikonotheka*, no. 26 (2016): 239–51.

⁸⁰ See Katarzyna MURAWSKA-MUTHESIUS, "Remapping Socialist Realism: Renato Guttuso in Poland," in *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe [1945–1989]*, ed. Jérôme BAZIN, Pascal DUBOURG GLATIGNY, Piotr PIOTROWSKI (Budapest-New York: Central European University, 2016), 139–150.



11. The Poster Art in the Federal Republic of Germany exhibition, exposition design: Stanisław Zamecznik, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1957. Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw



12. Exhibition of sculptures and drawings of Henry Moore, exposition design: Stanisław Zamecznik, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1959. Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw



13. *Exhibition of Bulgarian graphic art and illustration, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1956. Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw*

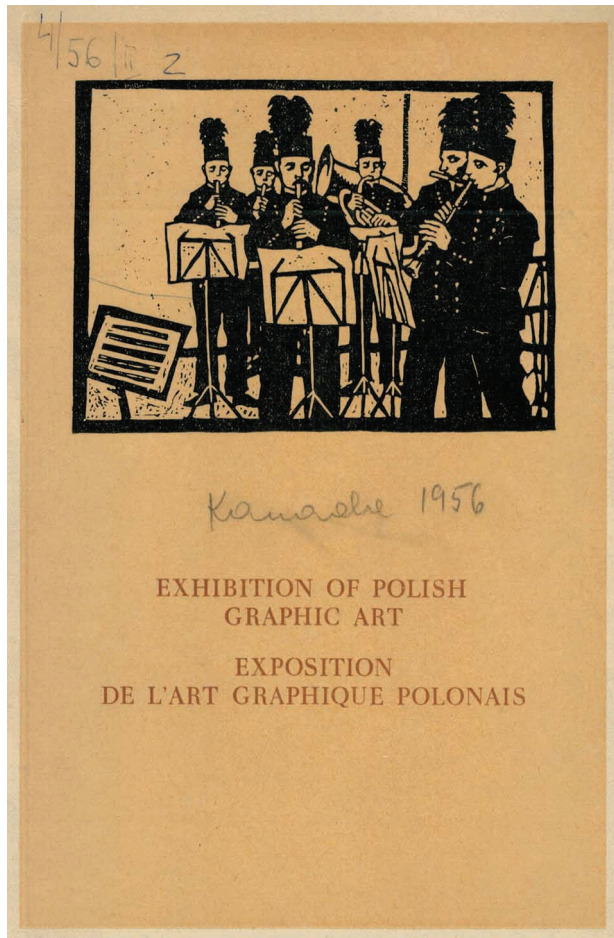
In 1955 the major international exhibition Documenta was organised in Kassel, “only miles from the East German border.”⁸¹ It presented, among 148 participants, a selection of the works by German artists (e.g. Joseph Albers, Willi Baumeister, Max Beckmann, Max Bill, Ernst Barlach, Otto Dix, Max Ernst, Lyonel Feininger, Hans Hartung, Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Oskar Kokoschka, Wilhelm Lehmbruck, August Macke, Gabriele Münter, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Emil Nolde, Max Pechstein, Emy Roeder, Oskar Schlemmer, Kurt Schwitters, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Hans Uhlmann, Fritz Winter).⁸² The first Documenta were intended to mark the post-war return of German art to the international world; in fact, the exhibition staged many works that had been labelled *Entartete Kunst* in 1937. Otto Dix, Erich Heckel and Emy Roeder (the generation active before World War II) were also the artists presented in the 1956 exhibition in Poland, but none of the discussed Warsaw shows included examples of German abstract painting of the 1950s exhibited in Kassel (e.g. Willi Baumeister, Fritz Winter).⁸³

The first exhibitions of West German art to be shown at a state-owned art gallery in Poland are inscribed on the period of global turbulences that shaped the official relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the People’s Republic of Poland. The first

⁸¹ John J. CURLEY, *Global Art and the Cold War* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2018), 52. On this context of the 1956 exhibition in Warsaw see also Andrzej PIENKOS, *Wystawa prac grafików z Niemieckiej Republiki Federalnej*, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://zacheta.art.pl/pl/wystawy/wystawa-prac-grafikow-niemieckiej-republiki-federalnej>.

⁸² See Documenta 1955 archive, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta#>.

⁸³ On the immediate postwar period of German art, see Lynette ROTH, ed., *Inventur: Art in Germany, 1943–1955* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Art Museum, 2018).



14. Cover of the catalogue (*Stanisław Wójtowicz, Miners: Instrumental Ensemble Rehearsing*) for the Exhibition of Polish Graphic Art, touring exhibition, USA, Canada, 1956. Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

– and not fully exploited – attempts to end the impasse in the relations between Bonn and Warsaw occurred in 1956, in the atmosphere of de-Stalinisation and liberalisation in Poland.⁸⁴ However, as has already been stressed here, reviews of the exhibition of West German graphic art held at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in 1956 appeared in Polish press parallel with the People's Republic's official reactions to the Federal Republic's joining the NATO.

Two exhibitions of art from the Federal Republic of Germany are cases that make it possible to establish the timeframe for the thaw in the culture of Poland with more precision. In Polish art historiography, the dates of two exhibitions are often given as those opening and closing the thaw era. The National Exhibition of Young Artists *Against War – Against Fascism* (1955) is considered to be its beginning; the end – as proposed by, for instance, Piotr Piotrowski – would be the exhibition *Metaphors (Metafory)* prepared by Ryszard Stanisławski, presented at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in 1962.⁸⁵ Considering the meanders of the Central Bureau's exhibition policy, a fact that must be highlighted is that West German art was shown twice in the period when the Bureau did not organise even one exhibition of art from the USSR – until the year 1958.

⁸⁴ Dieter BINGEN, *Polityka Republiki Bońskiej wobec Polski. Od Adenauera do Kohla 1949–1991* (original title: *Die Polenpolitik der Bonner Republik von Adenauer bis Kohl 1949–1991*), trans. Janusz Józef WĘC (Kraków: Kwadrat, 1997), 49–58.

⁸⁵ Piotr PIOTROWSKI, "Odwilż," in *Odwilż. Sztuka ok. 1956 r.*, ed. Piotr PIOTROWSKI (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej, 1996), 24.



15. *Exhibition of Belgian art of the 19th and 20th century, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Warsaw, 1957. Photo: Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Warsaw*

The idea to juxtapose art exhibitions with political events of their era was inspired by reflections on temporality in historical sciences, including the phenomenon of noncontemporaneity in today's historiography and social sciences,⁸⁶ as well as reflections on the heterogeneous nature of the visual time of art history.⁸⁷ Making use of the technique of periodisation, presupposing the cultural coherence of a certain era or a “breakthrough moment”, historians – including art historians – often ignored the co-occurrence of heterogeneous phenomena. Two shows of West German art in Warsaw indubitably took place in the period of political tensions and breakthroughs – but a question that needs to be asked is whether they also played an important role in the (Polish) art history or visual culture of the era. As it has already been pointed out, these exhibitions were of marginal importance in comparison with the statistics of the official cultural exchange at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions. Art from the Federal Republic of Germany was shown in Warsaw in the years 1956–1957 – the fact itself can be considered a sigh of the thaw in the sphere of Polish culture; but it is also necessary to consider the broader context, e.g. the priorities of cultural exchange policy as defined in the organisational structure of the Committee for Cultural Cooperation with Foreign Countries. However, art exhibitions should not be interpreted solely as direct answers to historical events or political directives. Exhibitions

⁸⁶ See e.g. Bernhard GIESEN, “Noncontemporaneity, Asynchrony and Divided Memories,” *Time & Society* 13, no. 1 (March 2004): 27–40.

⁸⁷ Keith MOXEY, *Visual Time: The Image in History* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2013); Dan KARLHOLM and Keith MOXEY, eds., *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony* (New York-London: Routledge, 2018).

of West German art held at the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in the period of the thaw constitute one of the many visual components of a complex network of contacts, both strictly artistic ones and those resulting from connections within the milieu, with United Workers' Party directives in the background – in the same way as the rhetoric of art criticism that accompanied them was consequent on a range of aesthetic idioms that overlapped in the given historical moment.

Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz

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