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Neues Deutschland Report on a Discussion about Realism and Formalism in the School of Applied Arts in Magdeburg (April 24, 1951)

This report on a discussion of certain works of art at the School of Applied Arts in Magdeburg, published in *Neues Deutschland* in April 1951, showed the concrete repercussions of Stalinist cultural policy in the GDR. A peace poster did not meet the demands of Socialist Realism because it missed the political goal of motivating viewers to fight against "warmongers." Likewise, glass windows and book covers reflected an inadequate understanding of social reality and were also dismissed as "formalistic."

If You Pick up a Drawing Pencil, You Must become a Political Person

Recently, at the School of Applied Arts in Magdeburg, during an enlightening discussion by students about Realism and Formalism, fundamental issues were debated on the basis of various student works.

One design by [student] photographers for a peace poster depicted two hands raised beseechingly in a plea for peace. The moderator, *Stadtrat* [city councilor] Germer, commented on this poster: "The point is not to explore what the artist wanted to say, but what his work expresses. The pleading gesture does not correspond to the real situation of the struggle for peace. We know from the study of history that one cannot get peace by pleading for it. To whom should the plea be addressed? We do not have to ask the Socialist nations and the people's democracies for peace. They are leading the struggle for peace. The people of other countries, too, want peace and are fighting to preserve it. Only a small but dangerous band of monopolists, headed by the American Wall Street magnates with their military and agents, are interested in war. They make millions from war. Should we ask them to forego their billions in the interest of humankind, given the behavior they are showing us in Korea? They have to be forced into it by having the peaceful people of the entire world lead the battle against war preparations. The powers of peace are a real force, and it is possible to prevent war. The poster, however, obscures the real power of the camp of world peace and does not call for a struggle against the warmongers."

The artist has thus made a mistake. Does that already make his work formalistic?

Realism is not characterized by the fact that the content is primary, i.e. here the longing for peace, and the form secondary, i.e. the depiction of the desire for peace through two hands and

the words "Help maintain peace," but by the fact that the content must be true and realistic, and that the depiction must express this unmistakably. The desire for peace is no longer the unfulfillable desire of millions of individuals, but the militant demand of the organized global peace camp.

Giving form to the untrue is just as formalistic as giving form for the sake of the form, which also proceeds from the unreal.

The poster is thus formalistic.

There was an animated discussion about a few designs for glass paintings. "What theme was given to the students for the design of this window?," was one of the questions asked. The teacher explained that no theme had been given, since the student first had to learn to master the form and the material before he could proceed to the design of a theme. With the development of artistic skill, the student should then, at a certain level of development, arrive by himself at the design of a theme about realism.

Here we have, first, the false notion that design on the basis of content alone guarantees realism, and, second, the belief that realism will arise "by itself" from the artisanal mastery of the material and the form. But artistic design, the shaping of the characteristics, cannot begin only at a certain level of training, but must be practiced from the first day on. Realistic works of art emerge from the deep understanding of reality, from the awareness of the operative laws and forces in nature and society.

As part of a conversation about artistic book covers, the design for a portfolio of Stalin documents was discussed. The front cover was red from the bottom to the middle, while the upper half was black. The boundary between red and black was not straight, but ran along the edge of Stalin's name, which was written in thin gold letters. This design was universally rejected.

What was the designer thinking? The red is supposed to symbolize Stalin's attitude as he is confronted by the black, the enemy's camp. A typical example of formalistic design. The bringing together of the global peace camp, in which the forces of all ideologies are represented under one color, would, if properly depicted, leave only a narrow black stripe. In fact, the mechanical transfer of social and political opposites into colors contains a dangerous element of vulgarization, and in the present example it misses what is supposed to be designed. The portfolio is supposed to hold documents, pictures, and other valuable materials about the leader of the world peace camp, Stalin. A speaker correctly commented that one must know and love Stalin if one wants to solve the given task artistically.

This discussion shows the urgent necessity of acquainting both teachers and students with the nature of realistic art. However, the students' openness to and gratitude for the helpful critique by no means cover up their astonishing ignorance about basic questions in their own fields of

activity or the carelessness with which their work has been executed to date. The discussion must be expanded and continued on an even broader basis. People of artistic talent exist; developing them into helpers in our struggle for peace and our rebuilding is a necessary task.

Source: "If You Pick up a Drawing Pencil, You Must become a Political Person" ["Wer zum Zeichenstift greift, muß ein politischer Mensch werden"], *Neues Deutschland,* no. 95, April 25, 1951; reprinted in E. Schubbe, ed., *Dokumente zur Kunst-, Literatur- und Kulturpolitik der SED* [*Documents on the Artistic, Literary, and Cultural Politics of the SED*]. Stuttgart: Seewald Verlag, 1972, pp. 193-94.

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