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Simone Wesner. *Artists' Voices in Cultural Policy: Careers, Myths and the Creative Profession after German Unification*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

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Abstract

Review of Simone Wesner. *Artists' Voices in Cultural Policy: Careers, Myths and the Creative Profession after German Unification*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. xv + 197 pp.

Keywords

German literature, GDR, cultural policy

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The various institutions and support systems that had provided East German artists with existential security, professional identity and long-term perspectives vanished in 1990 along with the dwarf state on the front line of the Cold War, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Berlin Wall, and the utopia of a more just and equitable society. What these changes concretely entailed for individual artists and how their professionalization uniquely equipped them to mitigate their transition to the neoliberalist economy is the subject of Simone Wesner's longitudinal study, *Artists' Voices in Cultural Policy: Careers, Myths and the Creative Profession after German Unification*. Wesner compares cultural politics before and after 1990, i.e., those of the socialist GDR and those of present-day Germany, with special attention to the regional particularity of Saxony and its long tradition of artistic sponsorship. Encompassing seventy years and conducted over a span of twenty-one, her data presents an exceptional resource that pertains beyond her immediate field of cultural policy research and should be of interest to historians, political scientists, art historians, German and Eastern European Studies scholars, as well as transition researchers.

Analyzing the interviews she conducted with artists, Wesner discerns the functionality of myth, memory, and identity in helping artists to negotiate career goals with adverse circumstances. She argues that East German policy—especially with respect to the professionalization of the arts—facilitated the success of East German artists confronted with the economic and ideological challenges of the 1990s. Given the professional training, job security, and recognition East German artists enjoyed before 1990, as well as their active political roles during the 1989/90 revolution, they had forged an identity, which crucially fostered their productivity in the post-unification years.

From the results of her field studies, Wesner deduces the importance of promoting artists' careers. Recommending a paradigm shift, she argues that policy should provide longer trajectory investments as opposed to the short-term, project-oriented funding that dominates current neoliberal thinking globally. While the ever shorter amortization schemes of the neoliberalist economy tend toward sponsoring discreet events, she points to the superior efficacy of fostering professionalism, memory, and experience. The distinct professional identity, which East German artists had developed before the hasty incorporation of their country into West Germany, was a decisive factor in safeguarding their creativity during times of upheaval and loss of funding, according to her analysis. Crucially, it also allowed them to maintain independent perspectives. Given democratic goals, Wesner

advocates investing in artists as a professional class and in institutions that sustain them.

Thereby, Wesner's study affords readers unique access to Eastern European thinking. Her own East German background and her first-hand experience with the Saxonian art scene facilitated her work with the artists, who, shell-shocked by the post-1990 attacks on their artistic integrity in the now Western-dominated media, grew wary of presumptuous Western tutelage and had rebuked similar inquests by West German scholars.

Wesner's grounded theory approach augments that access to Eastern thought by taking the information gathered in field research "at face value" and generating "a theoretical framework of its own" (8). Consequently, she distills and applies the artists' own definitions of art, lending her academic voice to that of her subjects. Echoing Albert Hirschmann's essays on the interrelation of voice and exit in pre-1989 East Germany, voice emerges here as a political category of participation in larger social discourses, and ultimately, co-determination.

While Hirschmann did not discuss what happens in societies that offer neither exit nor voice, Wesner cautiously approaches the problematic in her discussion of artists' experiences post-1990. In a pun on Chris Bilton's 2017 study *The Disappearing Product*, Wesner speaks of "The Disappearing Artist" and quotes Wolfgang Thierse's critique of "cultural casualties" (6, 114). If artists persevered against the odds, it was due to the particular legacy of pre-1989 East German sponsorship of the arts with its strong sense of professionalization and sustained lines of work and distribution systems that endowed artists with an identity that proved instrumental to their survival as art practitioners. By the same token, artists could play a crucial role in recuperating a sense of identity for the larger community.

If Wesner's analysis seems contradictory at times, it is because her application of grounded theory remains incomplete. While she translates her subjects' perceptions regarding their own situation and professional identity into concepts useful for formulating cultural policy recommendations, she neglects to do the same for her subjects' understanding of the larger socio-economic spheres in which they operate(d). Employing instead the political categories of mainstream media, dominated by Western interests and personnel, she cannot translate the artists' perception of their social, economic and political status into a comparative assessment of their respective roles in both systems. Applying grounded theory more holistically would prevent the potential distortion that connecting incongruent concepts entails in a selective application.

Wesner's failure to conceptualize the way artists actually perceive(d) and operate(d) in the two systems ties in with another shortcoming of her study, which is the facile dichotomy of ideological versus economic precarity before and after 1990, respectively. As April Eisman has shown in her recent monograph on

Bernhard Heisig, a prominent representative of Wesner's cohort, artists before 1990 fiercely pursued their own agendas despite—or even because of—ideological pressure. Freedom from economic precarity emboldened artists to ideological transgressions. In turn, economic precarity currently incentivizes ideological compliance, even if East German artists, due to their staunchly ethical socialization, may show more skepticism and resilience towards the neoliberalist commandment of marketability.

Finally, another aspect beyond the scope of her study, but emerging as a desideratum from it, is the question how the 1989/90 caesura played out in other regions of East Germany, and what the overall balance sheet of a specifically Eastern perspective after the unequal union looks like. From Wesner's repeated hints at the specificity of her regional context and the exceptional stature of the visual arts in Saxony, the reader is left to surmise that the outlook for the rest of the former Democratic Republic might be dire indeed.

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