

Politics

After the Fall: 30 Years On, Germany's Art World Reflects on the Night the Berlin Wall Fell (And What Came After)

Monica Bonvicini, Thomas Scheibitz, and other art-world figures remember the landmark moment in history on November 9, 1989.

Kate Brown, November 8, 2019

The image is unforgettable: Thousands of people clamoring on top of the Berlin Wall, which, until that night on November 9, 1989, had divided the city. For 28 years, it had never looked so small. Now, 30 years after Berliners began tearing down the barrier, they are celebrating the landmark in history. But emotions are mixed as members of the German art world look back on both the hopes and disappointments of reunification. The division created at the end of World War II was never going to be easily or seamlessly healed.

It's worth remembering that a few days before the wall came down, East Germans had gathered in the thousands—some say it was a million—to demonstrate for democratic socialism in their home country. Few could imagine that instead of reform, reunification—and capitalism—were to come. As one former citizen of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) told me ruefully: "I got more than I asked for."

That's just one perspective, but it begs wider questions: what was gained, and what was lost? And how do we reconcile that failed democratic-socialist dream, as artists face increasingly difficult conditions in Berlin today? How should museums and galleries display East-German art and its artists without tokenizing them? One way to grapple with the complexities of the fall of the Berlin Wall for German artists, curators, and gallerists is to hear from people who directly experienced the historic event and its aftermath.

Monica Bonvicini, artist



Monica Bonvicini in 1989 at Schlesische Strasse.

I was a student at the Berlin University of the Arts in the West when the Berlin Wall fell. That night, I went with some fellow students to Brandenburger Tor, where I stayed all night long. At some point I went home but I could not sleep so I went back out on my bike. From the western districts of Wilmersdorf through Tiergarten, everything was crowded with people—it was maybe Berlin’s first Love Parade. Everybody seemed to be so happy, almost in an ecstasy, repeatedly chanting: “We experience history!”

I grew up with two Germanys, but the reason why two Germanys existed seemed historically reasonable to me. While I was glad for the people who crossed freely through the wall that night, it also made me nervous. The wall fell and it was a fact. The GDR was over, also a fact. But did this mean that the idea of a socialist state in Europe was over as well? For the first time, I did not feel the weight of history, but rather what it means to be European.

That night I lost a bet I had with my father: He believed all his life that the wall would fall sooner or later, and he was right. But I can’t say he was reassured when it happened. Now, 30 years later, I can proudly say that I am a Berliner. The city has changed enormously, while retaining its “young” soul and the restlessness and curiosity that characterize it.