

Sand in the Works

Student opposition and protest at the Berlin art academies

1933 – 1989

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”Autonomy is not to be regarded as personal freedom according to the ideals of humanistic education, but as an ability to self-define ones own position towards ones environment as a basis from which to examine and alter existing structures.“¹

Institutional critique and student opposition has to be regarded and analysed within the respective social contexts in which it took place, especially when making historical comparisons. The following accounts of statements, actions and positions from students at the UdK (Berlin University of Arts) and its predecessors, reflect the different stages of emancipatory and, in many cases, political identity of individuals and groups, although they cannot represent the student body in its entirety.

The Berlin “UniMut” strike of '88/'89 is one exception: this long-lasting protest was supported by a majority of students and staff who joined the Berlin-wide university protests and were able to effectively paralyse the workings of the then HfbK (Academy of Fine Arts, Berlin). The history of student opposition at the Berlin art academies will be subject to close investigation in this text, culminating as it did in the winter semester of '88/'89 with the birth of Interflugs² and a rare case of the institutionalisation of student self-organisation.

The archive of the UdK stores numerous documents of student activities since the 1930s. Before and during the *Third Reich*, students of the ‘United Public Schools of Fine Arts and Applied Arts’ and the ‘Public Art Academy’ (the predecessors of the institution later renamed HfbK/HdK/UdK) were organised in a student council, through representatives similar to what would nowadays be ‘StuPa’ and ‘Asta’³, coming together at general assemblies and working with different departments. There was no democratic participation in the general university boards. Instead, concerns were raised directly with the head of the university.

During the late 1920s Berlin saw violent conflicts between organised communist and national socialist students of the major universities, while a völkisch-nationalist⁴ attitude was widely accepted early on amongst students⁵.

The threat of national socialist *gleichschaltung*⁶ the accompanying socialist and communist opposition action made the art academy into the scene of ideological battle.

¹ Statement of the SHFBK (Public University of Fine Art Berlin) student council, 16/06/1969. Information for the the general assembly. [UdK archive]

² Interflugs is a student run arts organisation, active at the UdK Berlin since 1989.

³ german versions of student parliament and student union

⁴ a term first used in the second half of the nineteenth century within Austro-Hungaria and Germany referring to German nationalist, racist and anti semetic ideology

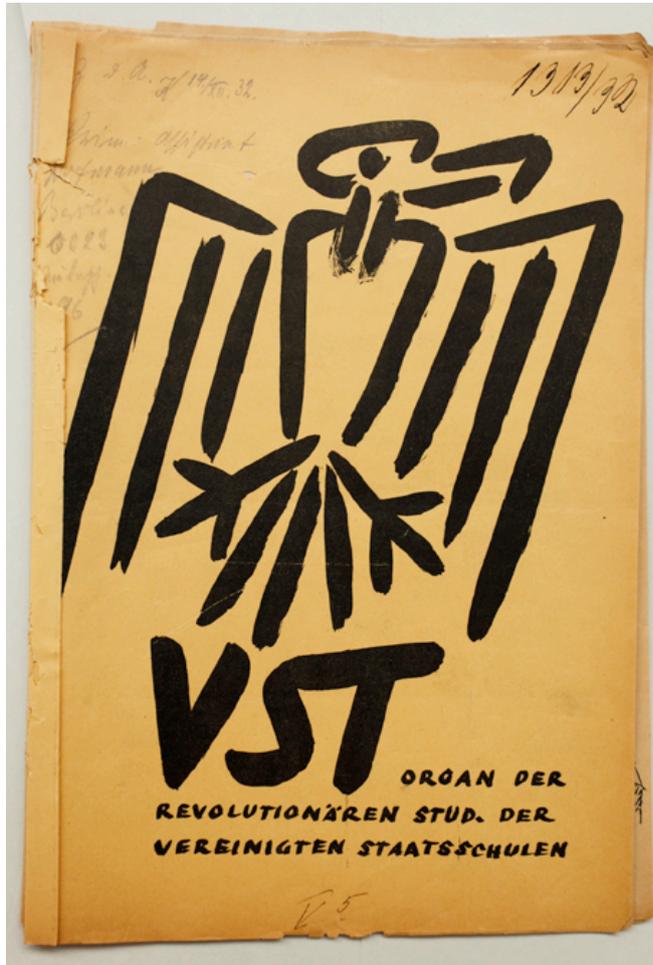
⁵ See also: <http://www.hagalil.com/archiv/2005/02/radau.htm>

⁶ the standardization of political, economic, and social institutions as carried out in authoritarian states

In the face of the rising fascist take-over of culture and society, the following appeal was made to students of the 'United Public Schools' on a leaflet distributed by members of the German Communist Party opposition in October 1931:

"A non party-political revolutionary university organisation has to be established, as means to fight [the rise of fascism]."

In the years 1932 and 1933, several issues of a magazine produced by the *Revolutionärer Studentenbund* ('revolutionary student league') were published⁷.



Cover of the magazine 'revolutionary student league', 1932. Source: UdK archive

Among the founding members was the communist student and sculptor Fritz Cremer, and by the end of 1932, the group had around 70 members⁸.

These communist students were among the few students who actively worked against fascist repression and streamlining within the art academy. Amongst other things, a resolution and collection of signatures against the dismissal of sculptor and university teacher Käthe Kollwitz was organised. Many of the 91 students who signed the petition later asked for the document to be destroyed.

Fritz Cremer observed:

*"Many students came to us, the Revolutionary Student League, asking for this piece of paper with the 91 signatures to be burned. This was done, in the room of the student union [...] because we couldn't take this responsibility."*⁹

⁷ UdK archive

⁸ see: *Kunst Macht Politik*, Christine Fischer-Defoy, p. 178 ff

Following this action, a protest letter was issued by the student representatives. However, its transmission to local education officials, and a student demonstration demanding Käthe Kollwitz' reinstatement, were both banned by the head of school, Poelzig, stating in a letter to the student representative Siegfried Tschierschky that *"politics, no matter of which persuasion, has no place in art and art education."*¹⁰

Political engagement in universities was banned after the implementation of the *Groener decree* in 1932.

Student representation at art academies during the later years of the Weimar Republic was mainly left leaning. However, it quickly became clear how much conditions would change after the Nazi Party came to power. Once the *'Law against the Overcrowding of [Schools and] Universities'* and the *'Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service'* came into effect (April 1933), numerous university staff and around 50 students (one in six of all students) were suspended, many accused of holding a 'communist attitude'. The laws also justified the suspension of Jewish students and staff.

Organised opposition against institutionalised, state regimented, cultural policy and racial doctrinal art education became increasingly difficult from this point on, resulting, with few exceptions, in little more than passive resistance.

The 'Revolutionary Student League' ceased to exist.

National socialist student body

Acts of terror conducted by NS students, officially 'legalised' from the beginning of 1933, did not remain outside the art academy: an early example was an SA (Storm Trooper) unit¹¹ marching into the Public Art Academy on February 17, 1933.

A uniformed group of SA members headed by the NSdSTB¹² leader Otto Andreas Schreiber raided the building, interrupting an examination board meeting. Five lecturers, denounced as 'cultural bolsheviks', were temporarily held captive and many students were abused. A swastika flag was erected on the roof, though subsequently taken down and torn up by other students after the SA squad left.

Although the raid was initially condemned in the newspapers, it nevertheless resulted in the dismissal of those lecturers who had been attacked. Several of the students involved in the destruction of the flag had to leave the academy.

Within a few weeks, members of the NSdSTB took over the student councils at the two art academies¹³.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.180

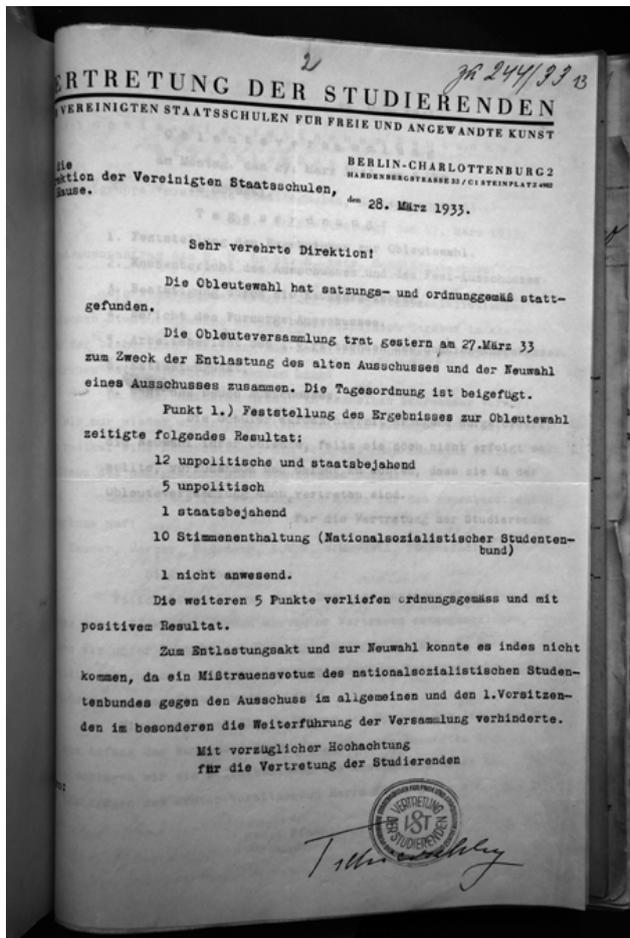
¹⁰ *ibid.*, and UdK archive

¹¹ It is unclear whether this group was made up of students.

¹² 'The National Socialist German Students' League, founded in 1926.

¹³ See letter by NSdSTB, Hochschulgruppe Vereinigte Staatsschulen, Public Art Academy sub-group, to the head of the academy Poelzig, dated March 27, 1933, UdK archive, as well as the account by H. Thoma on: <http://www.helmut-thoma-stiftung.de/Autobiographie/Studium/studium.html>.

In April 1933 the *German Reichs* 'Law on the Formation of Student Councils' came into effect. From this point on, no further elections for student representation are held.



Document informing the head of the art academy of the results for the election of student representatives. The national-socialist students as majority holders had made a re-election impossible by means of a group veto.

Resistance to National Socialism

The involvement of Berlin art academy students in the organised resistance is documented mainly in connection with the activities of the resistance group *Rote Kapelle* (also known as *Harnack / Schulze-Boysen group*)¹⁴.

Kurt Schumacher was a member of the KPD (German Communist Party) and studied in Ludwig Gies' masterclass until his expulsion in 1937. Schumacher left the academy in solidarity with his teacher. His wife Elisabeth was a student in Ernst Böhms' graphic design class. Both were executed in Berlin Plötzensee prison for their participation in the organised resistance.

Other students who took part in the opposition were: Ruthild Hahne, Fritz Cremer, Cay von Brockdorff, Ilse Schaeffer, most of whom were students from the sculpture classes of Wilhelm Gerstel and Ludwig Gies.

¹⁴ A literary account of the groups activities can be found in the third chapter of Peter Weiss' novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance*.

From the Cold War to the Critical University – Reconstruction and Transition

The post-war reconstruction during the late 40s and early 50s was characterised by the political division of Berlin and the marked anti-communism. This also became visible within the art academy in west Berlin, renamed the HfBK (Hochschule für Bildende Kunst, School of Fine Art) - for example in the expulsion of staff members like sculptors Gustav Seitz and Walter Grzimek. In the case of professors Heinrich Ehmsen, Gustav Seitz and Karl Hofer, even the student parliament argued for their dismissal, after the three signed a welcome letter together with numerous other artists for the world peace conference in 1949.

*"...the student body is of the opinion that the support or toleration of communist propaganda action and the simultaneous employment at a university in West Berlin are incompatible. [...] The student body sees its endeavor for a democratic reconstruction of the university as being impaired by such activities, and thus demands a prompt and explicit statement from the faculty and senate of the university and the magistrate of the city of Berlin."*¹⁵

This case, which was hotly discussed in the West Berlin press, ultimately led to the dismissal of Heinrich Ehmsen.

However, in the case of the dismissal of Waldemar Grzimek and Oskar Nerlinger, students protested for their ongoing employment. Both were ultimately dismissed from their university posts after participating in an exhibition supporting the victims of the Korean war.

Students of the art pedagogical department pled unsuccessfully for the further employment of Kurt Busse, who had been accused for establishing an SED (German Socialist Union party) oriented cell at the university. The students responded to this, stating that *"...unfortunately we are all quite a-political."*¹⁶

In 1952 student Karl Erdmann, along with 10 other students, was expelled from the university for political reasons.

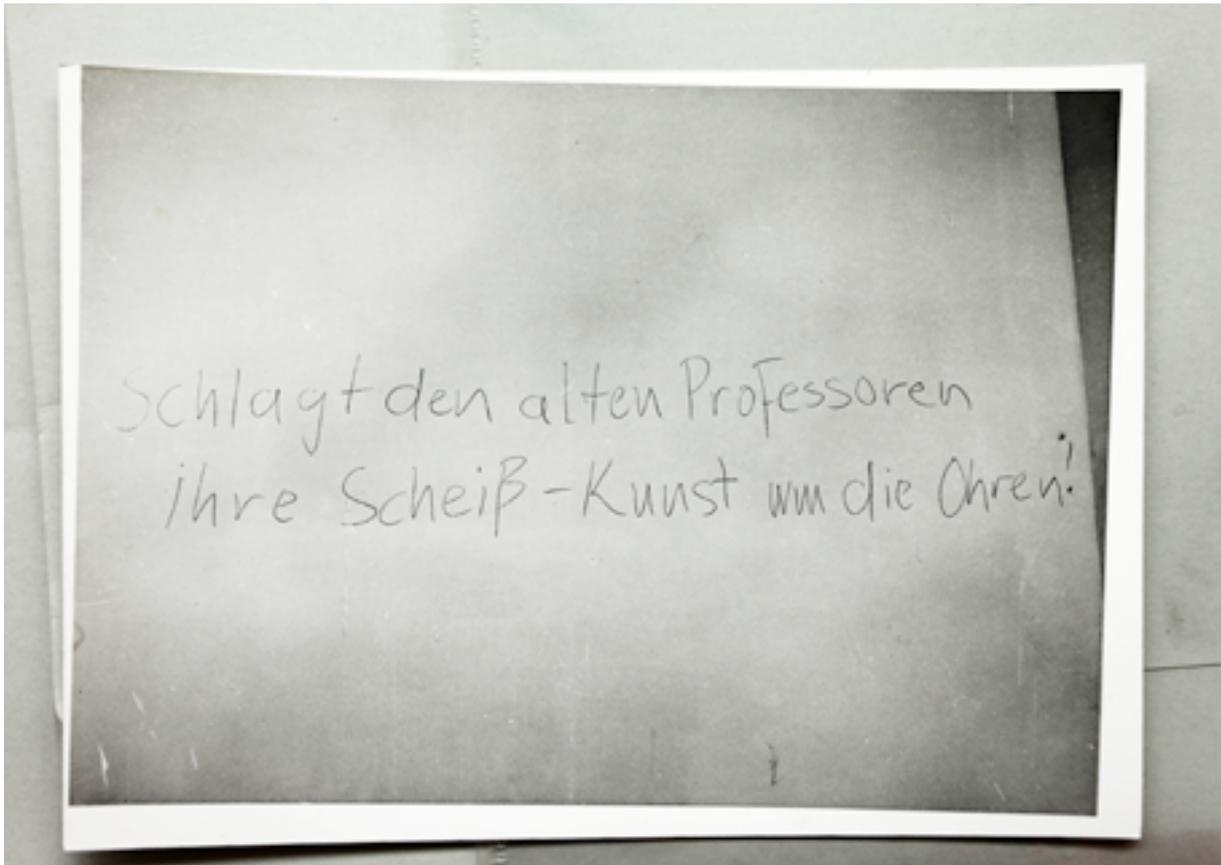
Writer Günther Grass, art student at the HfbK during the 50s, gave his account of the first organised student strike ever, in his capacity as student representative. The architect Karl Otto, unpopular amongst students, had been elected to take over the post of Karl Hofer, who had resigned from his position as head of the HfbK in 1955. The student general assembly called a 24 hour warning strike for 1st November 1955, in which the student body expressed their demands for a successor of equal standing to Karl Hofer, who had passed away.

*"Such a thing as a strike by students did not exist at that time, it was an exceptional gesture.[...] We were not the least prepared for such a democratic form, which was a mistake. There was a great deal of chaos, and considerable anger about the decision – and basically everything we did came too late anyway."*¹⁷

¹⁵ Protest statement by the student representatives of the HfbK, April 27, 1949, UdK archive.

¹⁶ Statement of the student representatives of the department IV on the occasion of Busse's dismissal, March 27, 1951, UdK archive.

¹⁷ G.Grass in; C.Fischer-Defoy, Im Aufbau ein Stein, p.63, p.48.



Graffiti in the art school, around 1955. UdK archive

The increasing politicisation of the West Berlin students was strongly influenced by groups that had unified in party affiliated university organisations. These were mainly the SDS (Socialist German Student Union), and from the late 60s on the SEW (Socialist Unity Party of West Berlin) and the ADS (Action Group of Democrats and Socialists), as well as the Maoist 'Red Cells' in their respective institutes and departments.

It was particularly the SDS that worked during the 60s towards establishing a sound theoretical basis for a critique of the antiquated, feudalistic and hierarchical university system, campaigning for the democratisation of the university structure and for extensive educational reforms.

In 1967, the year in which student leader Benno Ohnesorg was killed by police officer Kurass, the architecture department at the HfbK hosted courses of the KU (Critical University), a counter university founded by students of West Berlin universities as part of their revolt. This period saw intense engagement in university politics by the student representatives, but also the general assemblies of the various departments were increasingly prepared to be involved in political action.

In the winter semester of '68/'69 students of the SHfbK organised a 'Go-In', occupying the closed meetings of the academical senate in protest. A resolution by the student parliament stated "*The unanimous rejection of the motion for public/open senate sessions is [...] unfounded. [...] the student body [feels] obliged to make the meeting public on its own terms.*"¹⁸

¹⁸ From: Asta HfbK, Informationsblatt Nr.1, WS 1968/1969, UdK archive.

Proposals for democratic university structures, up to date fields of study and concepts for reformed university didactics were developed at the art academy (SHfbK, later renamed HfbK / UdK) and in the professional schools later affiliated with it. Working groups were often made up of students and lecturers, engaging in university politics together.

Bearing in mind the board structure still in place today in the UdK, the advances made in 1969 by the student general assembly seem remarkable. The concept of the general assembly of *all* faculty members holding the decision making power on all questions concerning university structure, staff appointments and finances, was first realised as a pilot project at the department of architecture with support from the head of the department, architect Hardt-Waltherr Hämer. It quickly made the rounds and was demanded by the majority of students. However, the so called 'general assembly model', which led to the de facto disempowerment of the professor-led governing boards, was declared illegal by the Berlin senate while being implemented across the university.¹⁹

The above named objectives became effectively irrelevant when the Berlin University Act of 1969 was implemented.

The resolution of the student general assembly states that *"the student body objects to the imminent regulation through the new university act (SPD draft), which will lead to a rigidification (or rather involution) of the present situation. [...] It demands from the academic senate to defend itself against the fascistic assaults through the political senate."*²⁰

In July 1969, protests against the passing of the new university act took place. Small occupations and protest rallies were held, although wider social issues were not brought into the art academy to the same extent as at the FU (Free University Berlin).

On May 9, 1970 a police raid took place on the main building of the academy in Hardenbergstrasse after demonstration against the war in Cambodia. Students later placed a banner on the facade, protesting against the unprovoked violent behaviour of the armed police forces.



HdK building in Hardenbergstrasse, 1970

The student demands for the abolition of the professor-led master-classes and the subject based curriculum in favour of a project based course of study and a stronger orientation towards social issues were broadly discussed.

¹⁹ This decision was provoked by a protest letter to the senate, sent by six lecturers of the pedagogical faculty, thus succeeding in their engagement to stop the 'general assembly model'

²⁰ Protocol of the student general assembly, May 20, 1969, UdK archive.

“The students should be encouraged with the help of the tuition to regard their future professional function not only from a position determined by this function itself. Moreover, the tuition should expand the students ability to express themselves and for social communication, and political participation in a democratic society.”²¹

A model for the renewal of the of the art pedagogical studies - at the time still holding on to (supposedly) out-dated conceptions of ‘the artist’ and artistic profession - was developed by student working groups. The reform was however repeatedly delayed by the board of the faculty, and was ultimately dropped altogether.

During that time, Maoist ‘Red Cells’ were formed in several departments, such as *Rotzkup* –the *Art Pedagogy Red Cell* within department 4 and *Rotzkomm* – the *Communication Red Cell* within the AGDW.

In 1972-73, an ADS (Action Group of Democrats and Socialists) sub-group was formed at the HfBK. It claimed in its manifesto that: *“No other university or professional school in Berlin grants its staff and students as few rights and possibilities for participation as the HfBK.”²²*

As early as 1972, protests against the ‘Löffler plan’ emerged, supported by students and faculty members of the HfBK. The West Berlin senator for education Löffler had issued two unpopular drafts for a reform of the teacher training and reform of the university act which were criticised as being undemocratic.

Another publication issued in February 1973 named the “white paper for the construction of a comprehensive university for art and science”, was the final straw – the students decided to go on strike.

The 1975 unification (and rationalisation) of formerly independent institutions under one oversized administration heralded fundamental problems within the art school, problems still inherent in its structure today. Meanwhile, the continuation of inefficient and undemocratic self-governance structures and the failure to conduct the necessary reforms of art teaching led to a weakening of the structural debates of the time. Progressive political cooperation in working groups which had been formed prior to the amalgamation came to an end.

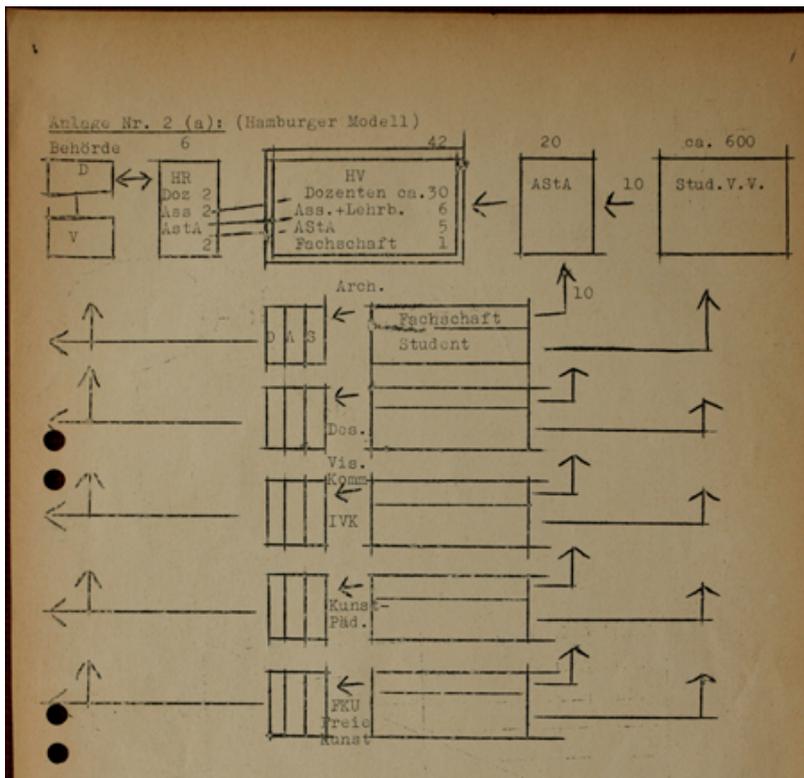
Initially there was talk of unification and re-profiling as a ‘comprehensive university for art and science’. The scientific side of things was however postponed due to the problems with integration. If and to what extent this aim was ultimately realised in the HdK/UdK is debatable.

²¹ From “Guidelines on the tuition of the general scientific subjects at the professional schools/academies in the federal city-state of Berlin” in: Official bulletin of the senate of Berlin, part III, 9th May, 1969.

This discussion took place at the level of the senate and within the various university departments that were yet to be fully affiliated with the art academy, such as the Academy for Graphic, Print and Advertising, AGDW. It was at the AGDW during the winter semester of 1971/72 that the first attempt for ‘project-based studies’ was agreed on. Source: Project-based studies Visual Communication, NGBK Berlin 1976/1977.

²² Source: Projektstudium Visuelle Kommunikation, NGBK Berlin 1976/1977, p.10.

The student demands for participation in the university structure and the development of the curriculum can in retrospect be regarded as having failed. In the course of the widespread politicisation during the 1960s a strong demand for structural participation emerged, which in turn found its way into the numerous working groups and committees. Yet this mode of participation was not to be found in the new university act, which had the effect of making structural initiatives temporal and instable as they lacked the necessary power to implement change. Furthermore, the structure of student representation, the temporal absence of the constituted students' union representative committee and parallel activities of leftist university groups eventually resulted in stagnation rather than enabling strong student self-positioning.



Drawing of the so called 'Hamburger Modell' for democratic university structures, around 1970. UdK archive

The winter semester of 1976/77 saw a strike in all universities in Berlin, in which the HfbK participated as well. These were precipitated by the government decreed occupational bans (in conjunction with the 'Decree Against Radicals'), and student demands for the re-instatement of the Asta (the constituted students' union representative committees) and higher rates on federal student support (BaföG).

Besides these structural struggles one can assume that students engaged in resistant artistic practice (beyond courses offered by the art school). Concrete examples are however rarely documented, as the university, as to be expected, has primarily archived documentation of works by students working in the 'classical' disciplines such as painting and sculpture.

Stagnation, carelessness and the reunification – the ‘unpolitical 80s’

With the demise of the student revolt and the recognition that engagement in university politics to oppose stagnating structures was not effective, the art students willingness for protest entered into a new phase.

The situation of art students itself changed, with the growth of the art market. Many students turned more intensively towards their individual work as the prospect of a career as an artist became more tangible, rather than dealing with power struggles within university politics.

After most of the political groups at the HdK ceased their activities, many students found a new focus for action in the housing struggle. Student existence in West Berlin of the 80s was characterised by housing scarcity and vacant buildings were squatted en masse.

In this context the (symbolical) squatting of the HfbK building in Lietzenburger Strasse in the summer of 1982 bears some significance. The building had been used by the art pedagogy department, and was designated to be converted into a home for asylum seekers (despite the availability of several other suitable buildings in the area) after an intransparent decision making process in the Berlin senate.

Ulrich Roloff-Mommin, head of school at the time, took part in the ‘squatting’ and the re-design of the street facade, which resulted in a criminal procedure against him.



Facade of the squatted art school building in Lietzenburger Strasse, 1982. UdK archive

The period was also marked by a university wide debate on gender equality, raising particularly fierce discussions when it came to appointing new lecturers and professors.

After a failed attempt to appoint performance artist Ulrike Rosenbach (a male applicant was appointed), the following statement was published in the university magazine: *“The prevention of the uncritical acceptance and adoption of misogyny in the arts requires women to expose their discrimination [...]”*²³

Gender equality and the appointment of female professors were also among the key demands in the *UniMut Strike* during the winter semester 1988/89.



Student protesters demanding 'participation', 1988/89. Qcine archive

This Berlin wide strike shortly before the fall of the wall addressed the closed and patriarchal university governance structures and the dire state of equipment in the universities. At the HdK specifically, the teaching of anachronistic concepts of art in hierarchically structured, male dominated courses and master classes was criticised. As result of the prolonged and widely supported pressure from the students for an interdisciplinary faculty at the HdK, the university president and the senate finally offered a budget of 300,000 DM²⁴ for 'autonomous student projects', something of a windfall. Out of this process, the organisation Interflugs with its various sub-projects eventually emerged, providing a platform for student led initiatives. At the same time the Freie Klasse (Free Class Berlin) was founded as a counter-model to the professor-led artist classes in the faculty of fine art.

²³ Source: HdK Info, '81, UdK archive.

²⁴ 154,000 €

A commission for the promotion of women's rights, composed of equal numbers of faculty members and students, as well as a Womens' Commissioner were also established.

These institutions within the university, although today often simply regarded as parts of the 'official' university structure, are the results of concrete demands by students and staff of that time.

Here the core question of critique from within the institution presents itself: can critical positions in the face of the institution be sustained, when 'grass roots' pressure is dissipated through selective and measured accommodation of the complaints? Is the monolith of the university actually changing, or is it just us ranting in the padded cell of short lived protests, project grants and under-paid teaching posts for gender studies?

Today, as before, students of the UdK are faced with the question of how art education can be an expression of an autonomous and independent positioning in regard to society; and if the course of study during the students' limited time at the university should be little more than consumed, or rather self determined.

Of the few artistic works dealing with the institutional context in which they were produced, I wish to mention Yeliz Palak's video *MeisterInnenschülerInnen*, exhibited at the master class graduate exhibition at the UdK in 2010. The conditions of teaching and production are underscored and commented by an observation of the university's 'architectural heritage'. Amongst the architectural details shown in the video are the former art academy building next to the Gropius building (later used as Gestapo headquarters), the *Monument for the Dead Soviet Soldier* in Treptower Park, (reputedly produced in the art academy) and elements of the main UdK building's historical facade. The narration deals with the political function of the art academy during the Nazi regime and the Cold War, and later the reluctance to accept women in art education.

*"It is not solely about the history of the institution, but rather the analysis of architecture/images and their cross reference with representative or non-representative history. Putting the images and places into relation can enable a different approach to the events."*²⁵



Videostill, Yeliz Palak: *MeisterInnenschülerInnen*, 2010. HDV, 16:9, 9 min

²⁵ Citation Yeliz Palak.

In reflecting on the realities defined by the institution lies a chance for a more profound understanding of structures of heteronomy and autonomy, and the opportunity to bridge the chasm between education and identity formation. As illustrated by several Freie Klasse projects, if the momentum of action is core to the programme, another notion of art making can be rendered tangible, at least for a split second. What is imaginable is a form of art no longer dependent on defining itself as art, in order to legitimise itself as action.

Text: Naomi Hennig, 2010