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The Geography of Art in Communist Europe: Other Centralities, Other Universalities

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Abstract

Through the analysis of one woodcut created in the GDR in 1973, the article offers a comprehensive approach to the spatial processes of creation, diffusion, and reception of an ordinary and modest image. In which spaces did actors (the artist, administrators, audience) place an image like this one? The main hypothesis is that realist art in a socialist context is characterised by two trends: on the one hand, the trend to embed art in a very local space, and on the other, the trend to universalise art in a communist way. The two divergent trends produced a special kind of internationalism.

Résumé

A travers l'analyse d'une gravure sur bois créée en RDA en 1973, cet article examine l'ensemble des processus spatiaux de création, de diffusion et de réception d'une image ordinaire et modeste. Dans quels espaces les acteurs (l'artiste, des administrateurs, le public) situèrent-ils une image comme celle-ci ? L'hypothèse principale est que dans un contexte socialiste l'art réaliste se caractérise par deux mouvements : d'une part, un mouvement qui enfonce l'art dans un espace très local, et d'autre part un mouvement qui universalise l'art dans une perspective communiste. Ces deux tendances contradictoires ont produit un type très particulier d'internationalisme.

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To contribute to the discussion about art and peripheries, I would like to present and examine one image. It is a woodcut by Lothar Kittelmann entitled *Chile'73*, created in the GDR in 1973 (Fig. 1). It is found in the Beeskow Kunstarchiv, an art archive in Brandenburg that collects works of art from the socialist era in East Germany. The woodcut was commissioned by the East German union just after Pinochet's coup and Allende's fall on 11 September 1973 – it was an immediate reaction to an international event that drew particular attention in communist countries. The woodcut was one of many images created to condemn this “fascist coup.”

We can consider this work to be “marginal” (or peripheral) for three reasons. Firstly, it comes from the part of Europe that we usually call Eastern Europe. As Larry Wolff shows in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe: the Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*,¹ the geographical category of “Eastern Europe” is the product of a long historical process started in the modern era by Western European intellectuals and observers. When they crossed areas that had not experienced any agricultural or industrial revolution, they spoke of the difference between a civilized Western Europe and a backward and undeveloped Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe, albeit a marginal area, nevertheless became integrated with Western Europe, exporting foodstuffs and importing manufactured goods.² This situation produced what Wolff calls “half-Orientalism” – Eastern Europe was too far away to be considered equal, but it was not far enough away to kindle a taste for the exotic. The geopolitical situation after the Second World War and the rise of the Iron Curtain gave a new timeliness to this division. After 1945, “Eastern Europe” was clearly identifiable: it referred to the people's democracies under Soviet rule, where life in general (and art in particular) was supposed to be dull and poor.

¹ Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

² Ivan T. Berend, *History Derailed: Central and Eastern Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century* (University of California Press, 2005).



Figure 1
Lothar Kittelmann, *Chile'73*, 1973. Woodcut print.

Furthermore, Germany occupied a new place after 1945. Whereas Germans had been active protagonists in the constitution and marginalisation of Eastern Europe before 1945, the socialist half of Germany, the GDR, became a part of Eastern Europe, it became East Europeanised in a way. Secondly, the woodcut can be called marginal because, inside the GDR, it comes from a marginal district; it does not come from artistic capitals such as East Berlin, Dresden

or Leipzig, but from the district of Karl-Marx-Stadt (today Chemnitz). East German sociologist Siegfried Grundmann drew up a map on territorial inequalities in the GDR after a 1987 survey – he defined privileged territories as the areas where incomes were higher and access to goods and service easier. This map shows that the Karl-Marx-Stadt district did not belong to these privileged territories. Thirdly, this woodcut is marginal because within the Karl-Marx-Stadt district, it comes from Werdau, a small town of 20,000 inhabitants to the west of Karl-Marx-Stadt. It was created in one of the factories of this city.

Therefore, it is a little-known image by a little-known artist. One of the consequences of this geographical marginality is that we can find very little information in the archives about the image and the artist. The artist did not write sources himself, nor did he express himself in the archives, which were in the hands of bureaucrats or leading artists. The archives of the factory in Werdau do not give much information, either.

However, I think we would miss the point if we considered this woodcut only through the angle of peripheries and marginality. Rather than impose categories (“peripheries” and “centres”) that can be misleading and lead to false conclusions, I would prefer to try to understand how the actors involved (the artist, administrators, audience) considered spaces. In which spaces did actors place an image like this one? What is obvious for us (New York, Paris, London were centres, Eastern Europe was marginal) may not have been so evident or framed in such a way by the actual protagonists. With the help of the few sources I have found, I will endeavour to have a comprehensive approach to the spatial processes of creation, diffusion, and reception of an image such as *Chile’73*.

In so doing, and bearing in mind other examples in the GDR or other communist countries, I would argue that realist art in a socialist context is characterised by two trends: on the one hand, the trend to embed art in a very local space, and on the other, the trend to universalise art in a socialist

way. This is a general hypothesis that I am working on in various case studies (in the GDR, Poland, Hungary, Italy, etc.): socialist realism was characterised by a special way of articulating the very local and the universal, of keeping these two trends together.

What did “local” mean in a socialist country?

The word “local” was actually rarely used in the language of that time. Reports of the party, union, or factory spoke instead of “proximity with the working class”, “knowledge of ordinary life”, or, after the Bitterfeld Conference in 1959, “the arrival in everyday life” (*Ankunft im Alltag*). All these expressions referred to the working class and had a social content. Art in socialism had to be embedded in the workers’ lives. This did not mean that art had to represent the actual life of the workers or that it had to satisfy them. It meant, instead, that artistic practices should take place at the very local level, where the communist ideology claimed to operate: in the factory, on the streets, in neighbourhoods, thus at a very grassroots level. The usual local spaces of artistic activities (the workshop, gallery, school of art, museum, etc.) were not seen as local because they did not involve the working class.

Chile’73 fit in with this demand; the image illustrated this “embeddedness” of art in local and working-class spaces. In 1973, the artist, Lothar Kittelmann, was not a professional artist (that is, he did not belong to the artists’ association), he was an amateur in a club in Zwickau.³ He was one of the many amateurs who were supported and encouraged in East Germany. The woodcut was what was expected from an amateur artist: the image is simple, modest, its political message is presented as clear and direct (the Chilean people suffering from the fascist coup) – the only audacity was to put the figure upside down and to

³ Kittelmann was accepted in the artist’s union only later, in 1984, when he was fifty. He then began a second career, an artistic career – at which point he left Werdau and settled in Chemnitz.

represent an undetermined figure (it is hard to say whether the figure is a man or a woman).

As a worker, Kittelmann knew local industrial life very well. In the Karl-Marx-Stadt district, he had held several different jobs successively. In 1949, when he was fifteen, he was apprenticed as a machinist (*Maschinenschlosser*). And then, he worked as a toolmaker (*Werkzeugmacher*), a welder (*Schweisser*), sometimes as a digger (*Bergmann*) in the mines of the Erz Mountains (*Erzgebirge*) – very briefly even as a bath attendant. Like certain East German workers, he changed jobs regularly and had various skills. He did not stay in one place, but he moved around inside the district. A worker staying in the same factory for 40 years was just one possibility among many others. Although there was no job market like in the capitalist world, workers in socialist countries compared wages and working conditions and they moved from job to job – worker turnover was still a reality in the socialist world. I would insist on this point, because it shows that localism did not mean immobility.

When we look at the picture, we see another dimension of localism. Kittelmann obviously appropriated some stylistic features that we can call expressionist: a nude human figure under duress in a narrow space; an angular face with a dislocated shoulder; rough and sharp cuts in the wood. In short, a representation of suffering, an image of *Schmerz*. The body is slightly deformed (but it is not smashed or splintered, unlike in some expressionist images). We can classify Kittelmann's woodcut closer to several others expressionist woodcuts of the first expressionist movement before the First World War (for instance, *Der Tanz* by Erich Heckel, 1905, or *Akt* by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, 1911) or of the second expressionist movement after the First World War (like *Erste Schritte* by Conrad Felixmüller, 1919, or *Zwei Tote* by Käthe Kollwitz, 1919). At the time Kittelmann created his woodcut in 1973, expressionism had been fully rehabilitated in the

GDR.⁴ It was no longer presented as a decadent, petit-bourgeois and pro-fascist art movement (as it had been in the early fifties). On the contrary, expressionism was considered, sometimes very explicitly, to be a national art movement, a specifically “German” art form. To characterise realism in the GDR, the term “expressive realism” was coined at the end of the fifties. And many East German cities such as Dresden, Halle, and Leipzig were in competition with each other to present themselves as the birthplace of expressionism. Each one insisted on some local facts: that an expressionist was trained in the city or that the city had a collection of expressionist paintings. Karl-Marx-Stadt also participated in this competition to define expressionism as a local tradition. The Karl-Marx-Stadt museum had several expressionist paintings, and the city honoured one expressionist artist born in Chemnitz in 1884, Karl Schmidt Rottluff. The museum owned *Mädchen* (1920) and *Auf die Düne* (1932). After the Second World War, Schmidt Rottluff lived in West Germany. But he was made an honorary citizen (*Ehrenbürger*) of Karl-Marx-Stadt in 1946, and just before he died in 1976, Schmidt-Rottluff came back to the city, which organised an important retrospective. The art gallery created in Karl-Marx-Stadt in 1976 was called the Schmidt Rottluff Gallery. More generally, children at school or amateurs in drawing schools from Karl-Marx-Stadt very frequently imitated Schmidt-Rottluff's style. Therefore, when Kittelmann took his inspiration from him, he placed his woodcut in what was seen as a local tradition.

The socialist *fabrique de l'universel*

Alongside this first trend of embedding art in a local space, we observe a second trend, the process of universalisation. How could this local and modest woodcut be universalised? The

⁴ Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus, die Rezeption der Moderne in Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft der DDR* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 2001). Ulrike Niederhofer, *Die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Expressionismus in der bildenden Kunst im Wandel der politischen Realität der SBZ und der DDR 1945-1989* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996).

archives concerning the image offer a glimpse of the *fabrique de l'universel*⁵ in a socialist country.

The woodcut was not supposed to stay in Karl-Marx-Stadt; the prints travelled (even though the artist rarely moved outside the district and never travelled outside the GDR). Through different archives, we can follow the prints' itineraries. Just after the creation of the woodcut, prints were exhibited in East Berlin at Intergrafik, an important festival in the socialist world. This festival took place from July to October 1973 in the Altes Museum and, after 11 September, it included an improvised exhibition called "Solidarity with Chile", where prints by Kittelmann were on display. Intergrafik was a festival founded in 1965 that took place every two or three years. It was one of the many festivals created in communist countries in the sixties, following the 1958 exhibition *Art of Socialist Countries* in Moscow. In 1958, for the first time, Moscow organised an exhibition that gathered art from all socialist countries.⁶ This exhibition was organised country-by-country (it did not propose transnational topics), but it was really a watershed: Soviet leaders recognised the importance of exchanges and transfers within the socialist bloc; they gave up the idea that Moscow was the only place where artistic matters could be judged and decided. Furthermore, the Moscow exhibition launched several regular international events throughout the bloc: the graphic arts triennial in Krakow (created in 1964), the applied arts biennial in Brno (1964), the Baltic countries biennial in Rostock (1965), the book illustration biennial in Jablonec (1965), the realist painting triennial in Sofia (1973), etc. These events were aimed at counterbalancing Western European and North American events and turning the Soviet bloc into an alternative area for circulation. Although these events have been forgotten today, at the time they were valued by some artists. They also seemed to be appreciated by artists from other parts of the

world that were neither capitalist nor communist: Latin America, Arab countries, Africa, Asia. According to the catalogue for Intergrafik 1973,⁷ 37.5% of the works exhibited came from socialist countries: USSR, Eastern Europe, Cuba, Vietnam. A further 24.5% came from the capitalist bloc (Western Europe including FRG, United States, Japan) – these were artists that were close to communist or at least left-wing movements. And 38% came from other countries: India, Iraq, Mexico, Algeria, Yemen, Jordan, Egypt, Argentina, etc. These countries played an increasingly important role: at the first Intergrafik in 1965, they barely represented 20% of the works. Artists from these countries were therefore more and more interested in participating in this festival, and the GDR gradually opened up to the rest of the world. During Intergrafik, the GDR welcomed all kinds of artists, even those that did not make realist art or art with socialist content; since the first Intergrafik, the East German party gave the order not to speak of socialist realism, but simply of "engaged art."⁸ The GDR endeavoured to offer an alternative network, alongside the networks of Western Europe and North America. Research on the Leipzig documentary film festival has shown a similar strategy.⁹

Chile'73 was not only exhibited among other images from the entire world; prints were also sold. Since the first Intergrafik in 1965, there were auction sales, which were apparently very much appreciated. During Intergrafik 1976, 9,500 marks were collected during the first three hours of the auction and, after a few days, total earnings were 1,916,653 marks.¹⁰ In the case of the "Solidarity for Chile" exhibition, when a print was sold, a portion of the proceeds went to the artist (whether professional or amateur) and the rest went to an "account for solidarity with Chile." This account served mainly to welcome Chilean

⁵ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2007).

⁶ Susan E. Reid, "The Exhibition *Art of Socialist Countries* Moscow 1958-9, and the Contemporary Style of Painting" in *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, eds. Reid, Susan E. and Crowley, David (Oxford: Berg, 2000): 101-133.

⁷ *Intergrafik 1973* (East Berlin: Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR, 1973).

⁸ Archiv Akademie der Künste (AAdK) Verband Bildender Künstler Zentralvorstand (VBK ZV) no. 5901, "Protokoll der Parteigruppenberatung anlässlich des internationalen kunstwissenschaftlichen Symposiums zur Intergrafik 65, im Institut für Gesellschaftswissenschaft beim ZK der SED in Berlin."

⁹ Caroline Moine, "Le Cinéma en RDA, entre autarcie culturelle et dialogue international. Une histoire du Festival International de Films documentaires de Leipzig (1949-1990)" (Ph.D Dissertation, Université Paris Panthéon, 2006).

¹⁰ AAdK VBK ZV no. 5956, Bericht Intergrafik 76.

refugees (around 2,000 Chileans came to the GDR after 1973). From the point a view of a local artist such as Kittelmann, sales played an essential role in the international solidarity experience, which was marked by the inextricable mix between disinterested and self-interested considerations.

Kittelmann's prints then travelled to another festival, entitled "Popular Creations from Socialist Countries."¹¹ This festival was created in 1975, at the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War and Soviet liberation. It took place simultaneously in three cities: Görlitz in the GDR, Bolesławiec in Poland, and Liberec in Czechoslovakia. It concerned only the communist world: in Görlitz, 104 images came from Bulgaria, 90 from the USSR, 30 from the Mongolian Republic, 27 from Hungary, and 20 from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Cuba and Vietnam. Conversely, East German images such as *Chile'73* were exhibited and sold in Bolesławiec and Liberec. The festival was an occasion for modest and simple images to circulate outside the local area where they were created. Furthermore, it was typical of many popular events in socialist countries, which mixed political mobilisation (the anniversary of Soviet liberation and the great international causes), what was considered entertainment (popular music, dancing, cabaret), and what was considered high art (exhibitions, poetry readings, opera).

However, the process of universalisation can also be seen in the woodcut itself; the image, with its visual characteristics, took part in its universalisation. German expressionism is not the only artistic model that can be seen in this image; art from Latin America also appears to have been influential. It is very likely that Kittelmann entered into a visual dialogue with art from Cuba and Mexico, bringing Eastern Europe and Latin America closer together.

Of all the images that an amateur like Kittelmann could have seen in Karl-Marx-Stadt, images from Cuba and Mexico represented an important part.

¹¹ Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (HstA Dresden), SED Bezirksleitung no. IV/C.2.9.02/540 "1. Festival des künstlerischen Volksschaffens sozialistischer Länder".

Art from Cuba was popular among Eastern European amateur artists. Of course, everyone in Eastern Europe was interested in Cuba, the most exotic Soviet country. But exchanges between Cuban and East German amateur artists were particularly intense. One reason was probably because the idea of "popular art" was promoted in both countries. On this point, the GDR found a partner in Cuba that it could not really find in Eastern Europe. Castro's ambiguous declarations about artistic freedom ("Within the framework of the revolution everything is allowed, we don't say what the topic or form should be. Against the revolution, nothing is allowed") were frequently quoted in the GDR and fit perfectly with the context of uncertain liberalisation that the GDR underwent in the sixties and seventies. According to an article in the East German review for amateur artists, Cuba had 85 clubs for 8,000 amateurs.¹² Some East German amateurs went to Cuba – amateurs from the Erfurt club travelled to Cuba in 1964, and there they created 200 images, a third of which were given as gifts to Cuban amateurs, thus starting a series of reciprocal gifts of art that continued into the seventies.¹³ East German amateurs that did not travel could frequently see creations from Cuba, notably the works of the Cuban Engravers Association (*Asociación de Grabadores de Cuba*), which brought together amateurs and professional artists.¹⁴ Kittelmann certainly saw the woodcuts by Carmelo Gonzales that were exhibited many times in the sixties in various East German cities, including Karl-Marx-Stadt. Carmelo Gonzales was presented in the GDR as the genius creator of a huge mural woodcut, *Patria o Muerte* (14 printing plates for an image 420 centimetres in length), which was compared to Dürer's *Ehrenpforte* (1517-1518). And one small woodcut by Carmelo Gonzales recalls *Chile'73*: entitled *Prisoner of the Dictatorship*, it commemorated political prisoners before 1959, under Batista's regime (Fig. 2). Both

¹² "Kubanische Laienkunst" in *Bildnerisches Volksschaffen*, no. 10, 1968: 9-13.

¹³ AAdK Zentralhaus für Kulturarbeit (ZfK) no. 562, "Zirkel für bildnerisches Volksschaffen beim zentralen Klub und des Kombinats Umformtechnik Erfurt an das ZfK Direktor, 6 August 1971".

¹⁴ Gerhard Pommeranz-Liedtke, ed., *Kubanische revolutionäre Graphik* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1962).

are vertical images with a single figure, both figures are victims of political oppression and have a similar movement of crossed arms. Torment is more visible in the Cuban print: with the contorted face, the exposed genitals, the strange veins on the legs and chest.



Figure 2
Carmelo Gonzales, *Prisoner of the Dictatorship*, 1973. Woodcut print.

Mexico was the GDR's other partner in Latin America. Since the fifties, images from Mexico came to the GDR. Some paintings – such as *Nuestra Imagen Actual* by Siqueiros, which was on display in East Berlin in 1955 – were well-known in all of

communist Europe (Fig. 3). At the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies, Mexican art was more present than ever in the GDR. In the East German review for amateur artists, an article about Siqueiros was published in 1969, just before Siqueiros' visit to the GDR in 1970.¹⁵ Amateurs could see a reproduction of the 1952 mural *For the Complete Safety of All Mexicans at Work*. Using vinylite and pyroxaline on plywood and fibreglass, Siqueiros gave here another example of what Mexican muralism achieves: it concentrates spaces, turns figures around, and gives a dynamic sense of movement through perspective. Kittelmann may have had this in mind when he placed his figure upside down.

In Siqueiros' mural and Kittelmann's woodcut, we see dead workers, fallen workers. If we look just at the images, without presuming a political meaning, we see that both actually refer to a wide-ranging condition. Kittelmann's woodcut is general and could be interpreted in many ways; nothing in the image refers directly to Allende's Chile. Siqueiros' mural painting, which is on the wall of the La Raza hospital, represents the general condition of workers. Not only does it denounce capitalist exploitation; more generally, it also shows the result of work accidents that affect workers, wherever they may be, in the United States, in Mexico or in the GDR. Being a victim of an accident is part of a worker's life and is one element that defines workers' social inferiority and sets them apart from the upper classes, who escape manual and dangerous work. Both images are focused on the representation of the fall, the downward movement. Both count on the feeling of solidarity that is supposed to be created by the spectacle of the dead worker, by the spectacle of the alleged shared suffering that the popular classes experience all over the world. The mobilisation around the Chilean coup with *Chile'73* therefore revived a dynamic of universalisation that we find regularly in the communist world: the experience of pain and of enduring social and historical misfortunes (by the way, the fallen figure suffers in

¹⁵ "Begegnung mit David Alfaro Siqueiros," *Bildnerisches Volksschaffen*, no. 6, 1969: 20-23.

silence; he or she does not scream). The iconography of the suffering or dead worker was frequently present in the images that circulated in international socialist festivals, and stands out as one of the laboratories for the feeling of belonging to a socialist universality.

As it sanctified the working class and defined the lower classes as the centre of society, communist ideology deeply affected artistic production and perception, and also artistic geography. The articulation between the local and the universal, between modesty and immoderation, was a feature of realism in the socialist era and produced a special kind of internationalism.

Mobilisation in State socialism can be placed within the history of “internationalism from below”, which scholars are starting to write about.¹⁶ Within the bounds of political orchestration, under constant surveillance of the authorities, without revolutionary enthusiasm and passion, internationalist solidarity was still a reality in a country such as the GDR.

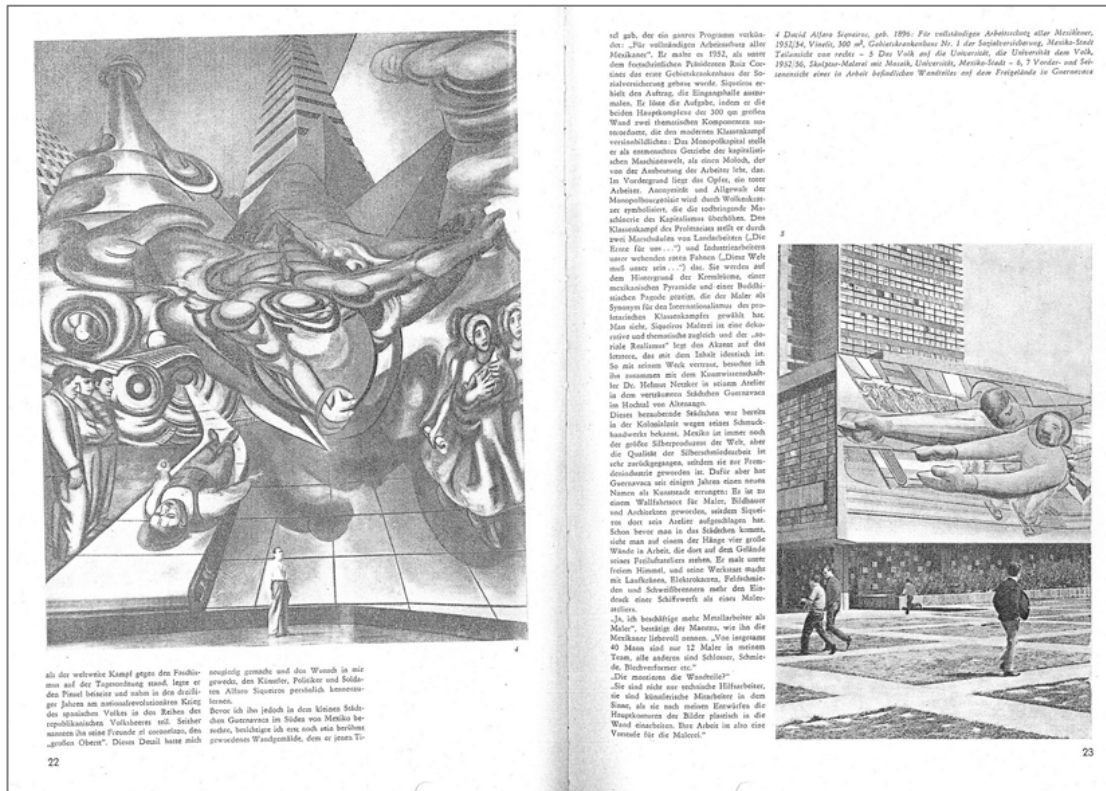


Figure 3
 “Begegnung mit David Alfaro Siqueiros” in *Bildnerisches Volksschaffen*, n°6, 1969, p.22-23.

¹⁶ David, Featherstone, *Solidarity: Hidden Histories and Geographies of Internationalism* (London: Zed, 2012).