

The Art of Diplomacy: Peter H. Feist's *Principles and Methods of a Marxist Kunstwissenschaft*

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The Problem

According to Peter H. Feist, Marxist scholars in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) were not just advocates for the interests of the working class. After all, as he explained in his 1966 *Principles and Methods of a Marxist Kunstwissenschaft*, the goals of this revolutionary class now “are entirely in line with those of the overwhelming majority of people for the first time. Therefore, no more deception or self-deception, no more false theory is necessary... Consequently, the path is finally free to the full and objective truth that seems to serve no interests at all but is actually in the interest of all.”¹ The 1963 party program of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) stated that East German society, as a dictatorship of the proletariat on the path to developed socialism, had finally reached the stage of fundamentally transforming the ideological superstructure. Therefore, it was also on the verge of consummating the socialist cultural revolution that necessarily followed the implementation of socialist production relations.²

With these theoretical assumptions in the air, it must have seemed inevitable that the discipline of art history would also need to radically reassess its questions, methods, and purposes. After all, art history was doubly embedded within the ideological superstructure—as both a scientific discipline and an interpretative authority on art. Given the historical context, there was no question that such a revision had to be undertaken from a Marxist perspective. However, it was not possible simply to adopt existing art historical concepts that

¹ Peter H. Feist, *Principles and Methods of a Marxist Kunstwissenschaft—Attempt at an Outline*, trans. Tamara Golan and Felix Jäger, in Tamara Golan and Felix Jäger, eds., *Selva* 5 (spring 2024), 26–52, here 30.

² On the historical self-positioning of the SED during this period, see: Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland, *Programm der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands: Einstimmig angenommen auf dem VI. Parteitag der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands, Berlin, 15. bis 21. Januar 1963* (Berlin: Dietz, 1963).

had emerged under different social conditions, such as those formulated by Marxists in the interwar period.³ Instead, the theory's internal logic called for a complete reconfiguration of Marxist art history that was specifically tailored to the evolving socialist society and consistently refined in relation to it.

This is, in short, the theoretical problem at the core of Feist's text. Identifying it, however, is only the first step in understanding and historicizing his *Principles and Methods*. Certainly, this theoretical problem and the basic ideological assumptions derived from it point to Feist's own personal interests that prompted him to write the essay. Yet, at the same time, they also reflect larger political issues instigated by the resolutions adopted in the Party's 1963 program. These resolutions had profound implications for cultural and higher education policy, to which his essay also responds (albeit only indirectly). As Feist wrote, the debate over the character and tasks of art in socialist society had recently been reignited after years of "obstruction and desolation caused by dogmatism," referring to the formalism debates of the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁴ However, following the Party's initiative in the early 1960s to attain a qualitatively new, socialist level of development of the "practical, intellectual, moral, and aesthetic abilities and needs of the working people" and the attendant demand for art to actively shape the "socialist personality," art and cultural policy discussions became increasingly constrained.⁵ This trend culminated in the new stultifying restrictions introduced at the 11th Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in December 1965, also known as the *Kahlschlagplenum* ("the clear-cutting plenum").⁶

The ensuing conflict between the ideological pressure exerted by the Party and artists' aspirations for artistic freedom and diversity directly affected the discipline of art history. On the one hand, the discipline was accused of clinging to "bourgeois" views of art. On the other, it was tasked with using historical analysis, both retrospectively and prospectively, to argue for socialist realism as *the* progressive development of art. Meanwhile, with efforts underway in higher education policy at the time to restructure the humanities, the discipline's autonomy was also called into question.⁷ Thus, it is clear that there was an urgent need in the early 1960s

³ Examples from the German-speaking regions include the works of Max Raphael, Walter Benjamin, and Lu Märten.

⁴ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 36.

⁵ "Kulturrevolution, sozialistische," in Georg Klaus and Manfred Buhr, eds., *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 2, 6th ed. (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1969), 630.

⁶ Günter Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag. Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965, Studien und Dokumente*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2000). For the broader cultural policy context, see: Gerd Dietrich, *Kulturgeschichte der DDR*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 1020–123.

⁷ The history of art history in the GDR from the 1960s onwards has not received much scholarly attention. See, for example: Christof Baier, "'...befreite Kunstwissenschaft.' Die Jahre 1968–1988," in Horst Bredekamp and Adam S. Labuda, eds., *In der Mitte Berlins. 200 Jahre Kunstgeschichte an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin* (Berlin: Reimer Verlag, 2010), 373–90; Katja Bernhardt, "Kunstwissenschaft versus Kunstgeschichte? Die Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte in der DDR in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren als Forschungsgegenstand," *kunsttexte.de* 4 (2015), 1–19; Sigrid Brandt, "Auftrag: marxistische Kunstgeschichte. Gerhard Strauss' rastlose Jahre," in Bredekamp and Labuda, eds., *In der Mitte Berlins*, 363–72. On the current state of research, see: Oliver Sukrow and Tobias

to position art history in the GDR as a scientific discipline, highlight its methodological timelessness, and demonstrate its scholarly and social relevance.

Marxism had a staunch representative in Peter H. Feist. He was first introduced to the application of Marxist principles to historical and cultural analysis during his studies at the University of Halle/Saale (1947–52), where he attended classes by Heinz Mode (1913–92), a Communist and expert in what was then called “oriental archaeology.”⁸ During his work on *Principles and Methods*, Feist experienced increasing professional recognition and growing stature within the discipline. In 1958, he moved to Humboldt University of Berlin, where he taught as *Oberassistent* (senior assistant) and attained his *Habilitation* in 1967.⁹ Besides his teaching and other institutional responsibilities, he actively participated in art historical events at home and abroad (in both socialist and capitalist countries). For instance, in September 1964, Feist headed the GDR delegation to the International Congress of Art History (CIHA) in Bonn shortly after attending a Michelangelo conference held in Florence that June. Only two months later, he traveled to Munich with Heinz Lüdecke (1906–72) and Eberhard Bartke (1926–90) for a conference organized by students at the Ludwig Maximilian University (LMU), where he delivered the lecture that would form the basis of *Principles and Methods*.¹⁰ The following year, Feist was appointed chairman of the newly admitted GDR section of the *Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art* (AICA).¹¹

As can be seen from this brief outline of his activities in a professional community extending beyond the GDR and its socialist sister countries, Feist operated within an international network and was supported by the GDR political authorities in the lead-up to his book's publication. Later in his autobiography, he wrote that, from the 1960s onwards, he also had increasing opportunities to “intervene in debates with experts from the West.”¹² In so doing, he served as a representative of the GDR and, in a narrower sense, of the discipline of art history in the GDR. Thus, there was a need not only to position art history within the GDR from a domestic political perspective, but also to present it on the international stage, ensuring it was at the forefront of disciplinary conversations and innovative in a manner consistent with socialist principles.

Feist developed his thoughts in a highly focused manner in the slim booklet *Principles and Methods of a Marxist Kunstwissenschaft*. While it stands as a programmatic theoretical argument that extends beyond the immediate context of its genesis, I would contend that Feist's text is best understood as a reaction to the complexities of his moment that I have just

Zervosen, “Bildende Kunst und Architektur in der DDR. Diskussionsstand und Forschungstendenzen. Eine Aktualisierung,” *Kunstchronik*, vol. 68, no. 4 (2015), 178–92.

⁸ See Feist's account in his autobiography. Peter H. Feist, *Hauptstraßen und eigene Wege. Rückschau eines Kunsthistorikers* (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2016), 36.

⁹ Feist, *Hauptstraßen*, 91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 94–95.

¹¹ “Professor Dr. Peter H. Feist im Interview mit Diana Al-Jumaili. Zur Arbeit in der AICA und der CIHA, Auszüge aus den Interviews vom 8. Mai und 13. August 2013 (gekürzt und bearbeitet),” *Sitzungsberichte der Leibniz-Sozietät der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* 132 (2017), 157–60.

¹² Feist, *Hauptstraßen*, 91.

described: the political restrictions on culture, the goals of higher education policy, and the internal necessities of his discipline. And he is deft in tackling these issues indirectly through theory. Therefore, this essay explores how this context and the ensuing discussions profoundly shaped the direction and weight of Feist's theoretical considerations. In what follows, I will first describe the theoretical principles that Feist formulates in his *Principles and Methods*. Next, I will examine the notion of art that he implicitly develops in the text, situating it within the contemporary social and political context of the GDR. As previously mentioned, Feist's text serves as both a reflection of and reaction to the political demands imposed on the field of art history. Accordingly, the third part of my analysis will specifically explore how the text responds to contemporary policies directed at the discipline of art history. Finally, by bringing these different strands together, I will assess the extent to which Feist develops his own Marxist interpretation of art and art history—both from a theoretical standpoint and as a form of political practice.

Theoretical Principles

Following the preliminary remarks to his text, Feist developed a concept of art history with a clear theoretical framework and argumentation. His starting point is the historical self-positioning of the “*Kunstwissenschaft* and society” that was already alluded to in the quote that opened this essay: a Marxist *Kunstwissenschaft*, as it was conceived, practiced, and taught in the GDR, that “ultimately... is carried out on *behalf and in service of society*.”¹³ Referencing Lenin's *Party Organization and Party Literature* (1905), Feist characterized the close relationship between the study of art and broader, overarching interests as a positive one. The insights of Marxism into the necessity of historical development not only place Marxist scholars on the side of the proletariat but also grant them access to objective truth. And just as Marxism generally assumed the “existence of laws” for social development, similar rules were also to be assumed for the history of art.

Following this, Feist defined the “fundamental principles of a Marxist *Kunstwissenschaft*” based on dialectical and historical materialism, which he believed “provides the most effective tools for explaining the art-historical process, the conditions for and causes of the emergence and transformation of artistic phenomena.”¹⁴ Building on this “Marxist conception of art and history,” Feist developed a conception of art that was principally determined by society and the economy. In this regard, he quoted at length from the preface to “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy” (1859), in which Marx succinctly described the relationship between the productive forces and the relations of production that determine human existence, on the one hand, and forms of consciousness that correspond to the superstructure, on the other.¹⁵ Consequently, Feist took up these two central terms—

¹³ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 29. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30–31, 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37–38. Here, Feist draws on the following edited collection of writings by Marx and Engels on art and literature: Michail Lifschitz, ed., *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Über Kunst und Literatur. Eine Sammlung aus ihren Schriften* (Berlin: Henschelverlag, 1948).

productive forces and relations of production—to describe the relationship between art, the economic base, and society.¹⁶ In broad strokes, he outlined the remarkable complexity of this relationship as well as a number of related issues.

Above all, however, he complicated this straightforward theoretical reasoning with a series of nuanced reflections. For example, Feist primarily referred to Engels to argue that economic conditions alone do not determine the superstructure. Instead, the superstructure and the impact of economic processes on people's consciousness and, accordingly, their actions should also be acknowledged as having a "bearing" on historical development.¹⁷ Thus, the relationship between art and society was a *reciprocal* one. Furthermore, Feist repeatedly emphasized the artist's "need for personal expression and creation," which he saw as "one of the guiding principles of artistic practice."¹⁸ Finally, he differentiated between two levels of the "dialectics in art history": (1) the relationship between art and social development and (2) the interplay between the processes of artistic development. With the latter, he sought to describe the relationship between an individual artwork and contemporary styles, thereby isolating a dimension of art and area of study mapped out by the "inner movement of the material," that is, the development inherent in art, which could now be examined on its own terms.¹⁹

The existence of rules, a Marxist understanding of history, the relationship between art (as a phenomenon of the ideological superstructure) and the base, and the application of dialectics to art history: these were the premises that determined Feist's "principles" of a Marxist approach to art historical research. In this regard, he did not resort to facile deductions, nor did he get lost in the theoretical details. He repeatedly broke down the theoretical problem into questions that could be asked about art in general or, more specifically, about a particular epoch or work of art. While he illustrated how theory could serve analytical purposes, he did not develop a Marxist methodology in the strictest sense—not even in the final section of the essay entitled "On the Methodology of Marxist *Kunstwissenschaft*." Rather surprisingly, Feist instead listed and concisely glossed the disciplinary methods and analytical approaches employed from the late nineteenth century onwards.

Thus, a palpable tension emerges in the text, one seemingly rooted in the nature of the subject matter itself. Feist initially juxtaposed the conditionality of art, which was derived from theory and determined by the economy and society, with a notion of "relative autonomy" and the idiosyncrasies of artistic expression.²⁰ However, by granting art a quality of its own, he inevitably questioned the relevance of art historical methods developed to address the specific nature of its subject (i.e., art) and their integration into a Marxist conception of art history. Indeed, despite the brevity of his account, Feist manages to deftly cover a remarkably broad range of established art historical methods. Two interrelated questions thus emerge: first (and most importantly), what notion of art did Feist develop to conceptualize the

¹⁶ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 39–41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

relationship between Marxist determinism and art's "inner movement" (*Eigenbewegung*), and second, how did he situate his idea of Marxist art history in relation to the established methods of the discipline?

The Essence of Art

In *Principles and Methods*, Feist did not explicitly articulate how he determined the essence of art from a Marxist perspective. Nevertheless, it is evident from the concise sketch of his theoretical assumptions that he approached the field of art through dialectical and historical materialism, as well as through the laws of historical development and their parameters, as outlined by Marx and Engels. Feist thus unequivocally linked art to the economic base and social development. Citing Engels, he further characterized the relationship between society, economy, and art as interdependent and reciprocal. Art does not simply "reflect a given social situation; as a creative act, it also works upon society to change it."²¹ Feist never specified, though, which external force had the ability to creatively interpret reality and, consequently, to alter the economic and social basis.

Additionally, Feist formulated not only a materialist understanding of art historical phenomena and developments but also a Marxist or, more precisely, a Marxist-Leninist one. He distinguished his approach from other materialist approaches to art historical research by asserting that Marxist art historians conceive the relationship between art and society as "a rather closed system," recognizing that "art has its *essential roots*" in this inextricable inter-relationship, which is not just "a cultural-historical background that can be disregarded."²² This "rather closed system" led Feist to the related paradigm of progress, that is, the theoretically inevitable progression from capitalism to socialism to communism. Within his theoretical framework, this paradigm appears closely linked to Lenin's doctrine of two cultures in each nation, which made a principled distinction between the social forces under capitalism: a bourgeois ruling group that is essentially conservative and the "toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism."²³ Feist generalized this differentiation in his work, thus making it applicable to other historical epochs.

Accordingly, for Feist, the close relationship between art and society necessitated more than just describing and analyzing the artist in relation to their social existence and the specific preconditions of their work's production. He also applied the dictum of partisanship (quoted at the beginning of this text) to art, albeit in a somewhat mediated form. Simply put, it was a matter of evaluating how a given work of art related to the progressive aspect of historical development based on a Marxist interpretation of the respective historical situation.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²² *Ibid.*, 41. Emphasis in the original.

²³ *Ibid.*, 39. In his text, Feist cites Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Über Kultur und Kunst. Eine Sammlung ausgewählter Aufsätze und Reden* (Berlin: Dietz, 1960), 204–19, here 209. English translation from Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "Critical Remarks on the National Question," in *Collected Works*, vol. 20, *December 1913–August 1914* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), 24.

The premises of his conception of art can thus be summarized as follows: According to Feist, the work of art should be evaluated based on its “ethical criteria and truthfulness,” how it promotes or has promoted humanity, and, in turn, the extent of its transformative effect on society.²⁴ Tellingly, Feist rejected an ahistorical approach to art and its development since it was irrevocably interwoven with its historical context and, thus, with social development.

In addition, Feist also emphasized the effectiveness of art, which he claimed had categorically humanistic and progressive potential. He thus proposed a somewhat different reading of art than what can be inferred from the limited instances where Marx explicitly wrote on the topic. As Otto Karl Werckmeister has pointed out, Marx’s understanding of art was animated by two opposing perspectives.²⁵ The first was an idealistic-utopian one, which—based on Marx’s conception of Greek art—located the essence of art outside of a society structured by the division of labor. The second was a historical-deterministic view, which regarded art as part of ideology once the division of labor had been established. In the case of the latter, art becomes art production, namely, “art produced in accordance with organized feudally repressed or capitalistically alienated conditions of life.”²⁶ Yet, for Marx, it remained unclear why art—when understood in this strictly historical sense—would still exert a special, somewhat timeless appeal beyond its own era. He also questioned why Greek art had already reached its zenith during the earliest stages of social development, contrary to the expected course of societal progress.

Feist did not directly address these problems that Marx had only briefly sketched in his introduction to the “Critique of Political Economy” (1857).²⁷ Nevertheless, certain elements of his argumentation offer possible approaches to overcoming them. Feist saw the artist as key to the path forward. By recognizing in the artist’s work an “intention to interpret the world—which artists sometimes are not fully aware of and cannot formulate outside of their art,” he seemingly assumed an intrinsic force behind artistic creation, one that existed despite all the materialist constraints on art itself.²⁸ Although this energy cannot express itself independently of its historical circumstances, conversely, it cannot be explained solely by these historical circumstances either. Therefore, it appears that Feist identified this force with the creative moment in art that was capable of transforming society.

Feist thus offered a compelling idea, the consequences of which he only hinted at in his study. One possible conclusion is that the connection between the historically bound nature of an artist’s output and the constantly renewed individual “intention to interpret the world” creates the potential for the highest level of artistic and contemporary expression to be reached at *any* moment in time. Consequently, the gauge for artistic quality and its progressiveness should be sought within each historical epoch rather than uniformly applying a

²⁴ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 45.

²⁵ Otto Karl Weckmeister, “Marx on Ideology and Art,” in *New Literary History*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1973), 501–19; Karl Marx, “Einleitung [zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie],” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 13, 7th ed. (Berlin: Dietz, 1971), 615–41, here 640–2.

²⁶ Werckmeister, “Marx on Ideology,” 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 45.

transhistorical scale of progress. It comes as no surprise then that Feist dismissed the question of whether “Goya is a better painter than Raphael because he lived later” as “absurd,” even if he immediately took issue with the implications of this stance and upheld the paradigm of progress by observing that humankind achieves a greater depth of insight through historical progress.²⁹ At the same time, the artist’s ability to penetrate the essence of social conflicts and, thus, the core of human existence is precisely what allows the work of art to transcend its own era, conveying itself to other historical epochs and “beyond to the present day.”³⁰ Therefore, the gap between different historical epochs can be bridged by assuming that the artist has unique access to the world, without questioning the connection of the artwork to its contemporary context.

With these two perspectives, Feist put forward a concept of art that challenged a strict reading of Marx’s statements on art, which regarded all art after Greek antiquity as a product of alienated work and part of ideology. In Feist’s concept, the idealistic-utopian moment is preserved throughout history by the artist’s “intention to interpret the world.” However, he never clarifies how this “intention” relates to the consciousness and being of the artist.

Just as the issues that Marx briefly outlined in his “Introduction” of 1857 were fundamentally rooted in his contemporary understanding of art, Feist’s concept of art must also be situated in relation to the art discourse in the GDR. Feist was well aware of this discussion and actively participated in it.³¹ Even though he did not explicitly reference it in his text, he nevertheless positioned himself with respect to this current discourse on several levels—by way of theory.

In this regard, Feist was walking a fine line. He offered an approach to art that theoretically bolstered the ideas of the SED, which, in its 1963 party program for cultural policy, stated that its goals were to “further develop the socialist consciousness of all workers” and to “achieve a high level of education and culture.” The intent was to create conditions conducive to “the rapid development of productive forces, the increase of labor productivity, and the continuation of social progress.”³² Moreover, art would be tasked with giving expression to insights and emotions to serve “the moral transformation of people in the spirit of socialism.”³³ The 1963 program thus revitalized a more positive concept of ideology, one that was grounded in the Party’s self-conception as the vanguard of the working class (as per Lenin’s theory of the party of a new type). As the consciousness of the ruling working class, the socialist ideology was—unlike its predecessors—a “truly scientific ideology.” It expressed

²⁹ Ibid., 47.

³⁰ Ibid., 39.

³¹ Around the same time as the publication of *Principles and Methods*, Feist initiated a controversial discussion about the direction and quality of art in the GDR in an article for *Bildende Kunst*. See: Peter H. Feist, “Muß unsere Kunst intelligenzintensiv sein,” *Bildende Kunst* 8 (1966), 435. For his numerous publications on art in the GDR, see: Peter H. Feist, *Nachlese. Aufsätze zu bildender Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft*, ed. Peter Betthausen and Michael Feist (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2016), 137–98.

³² Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, *Programm*, 121.

³³ Ibid., 135.

“the historical mission of the proletariat as the liberation of society as a whole” and provided “guidance for action.”³⁴

If the Party interpreted art as a progressive, influential element of an equally progressive, socialist ideology, Feist provided a general theoretical framework that would help the Party achieve its goals. He proposed a concept of art that could be distinguished from art production (i.e., an alienated activity) in any class-based society—and socialism was just such a society—and that inherently possessed a progressive potential. As such, Feist’s concept of art and the Party’s concept of ideology fit comfortably together. Yet the proposition that art should be measured based on its “contribution to advancing humanity” came with certain risks.³⁵ This rather vague criterion was highly subjective and, therefore, could be instrumentalized for or against artistic concepts, works, or persons, depending on the objectives of art policy debates.

At the same time, Feist’s understanding of art also diverged from the Party’s more utilitarian conception. He believed the primary creative impulse was located in the artist’s disposition, meaning it could not be generated by ideological demands imposed upon the artwork. Here, Feist shifts gears to latently address another issue in contemporary discourse. As he would later recall in his autobiography, a “fierce dispute” broke out at the Fifth Congress of the Association of Visual Artists in 1964 after the sculptor Fritz Cremer (1906–93), the art historian Hermann Raum (1924–2010), and the painter Bernhard Heisig (1925–2011) openly criticized the SED’s art policy.³⁶ In a manifesto-like speech, Cremer fervently attacked the centralized state [*dirigistische*] control of artistic creation through party guidelines, denouncing it as a false ideology and rejecting the assessment of art based on abstract concepts. Instead, he advocated for politics, economics, and art to be understood as “a relative dialectical unity.” Cremer argued that only this confluence of “the various creative forces and this spiritual penetration and fertilization” could advance societal development. He saw art as an effective form of “skeptical criticism” and called for a willingness to experiment in order to uncover solutions to dialectical contradictions through artistic means.³⁷

Pressure on visual artists and art historians continued to mount in the period between the congress and the publication of Feist’s text. In 1965, a debate was initiated during the preparations for the Sixth German Art Exhibition (1967/1968), which led to further reinforcement of the already narrow definition of socialist realism and the orientation of art entirely toward the social tasks set for it by the Party.³⁸ This increasingly narrow focus height-

³⁴ See the entry on “Ideology,” in Klaus and Buhr, eds., *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, 504–6, here 505–6.

³⁵ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 45.

³⁶ Feist, *Hauptstraßen*, 94.

³⁷ Fritz Cremer, “Diskussionsbeitrag auf dem V. Kongreß des Verbandes Bildender Künstler Deutschland 1964,” in Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 165–74, here 167–68.

³⁸ In 1965, the Tenth Session of the Politburo of the SED decided to make long-term preparations for the 6th Art Exhibition. See Kathleen Krenzlin, “Die Akademie-Ausstellung ‘Junge Kunst’ 1961 – Hintergründe und Folgen,” in Agde, ed., *Kahlschlag*, 66–78, here 66. For the source, see: “Ziele und

ened the risk that the Party's ideologically-motivated definition of art would drive artistic endeavors deeper into crisis rather than rescuing them from the impasse brought about by the state's authoritarian control that Cremer had so vehemently denounced.

While Feist did not explicitly address these debates in his text, it is striking that he repeatedly emphasized in various ways the artist's need for personal expression and creation as one of the "guiding principles of artistic practice."³⁹ These remarks and the concept of art he outlined together formed an underlying argumentation similar to Cremer's point, but from the perspective of art theory, that advocated for greater liberties in dealing with artistic concepts. Neither Feist's nor Cremer's positions opposed the fundamental notion that art is an active part of socialist society. On the contrary, their criticism aimed to provide art with the freedom to effectively fulfill this task.

Feist's recourse to Lenin's doctrine of two cultures in each nation also proved that it was malleable enough to support various arguments. The doctrine undoubtedly offered itself as an instrument for the ideological classification of individual artworks, "trends," or artists as socialist-progressive or bourgeois-regressive, and it was indeed used to do so, a point to which I will return below. Conversely, it was also used to support arguments in favor of greater liberties, not just for contemporary artistic work, but also for the theoretical understanding and practical treatment of historical artworks and artistic phenomena.

An example of the latter was the discussion about the critical classification of modernism in Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century. In this context, art critics and art historians such as Wolfgang Hütt (1925–2019) and Ulrich Kuhirt (1925–83) also turned to Lenin's teachings to develop new interpretative approaches for the different varieties of modernism. These approaches complicated narrow or even exclusionary evaluations of particular artistic tendencies, allowing for greater argumentative appropriation and artistic appreciation of this art within the GDR than before. Ulrike Goeschen's detailed exploration of the art historiography of modernism in East Germany reveals that this was part of a strategic shift to help free the GDR's artistic discourse from its, at times, narrow focus on Soviet art, thereby reconnecting artists in the GDR with the heritage of their own nation's artistic practices.⁴⁰ Moreover, this line of argumentation could be applied to art history more broadly (i.e., to historical objects from before the age of capitalism). In this way, individual, potentially progressive aspects could be extracted from phenomena initially classified as reactionary, and historical, artistic phenomena that had otherwise been rejected could thus be brought back into the discourse.⁴¹

Aufgaben. Konzeption zur VI. Deutschen Kunstausstellung," *Bildende Kunst* 10 (1966), 548–51, 553–55.

³⁹ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 36.

⁴⁰ Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus: Die Rezeption der Moderne in Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft der DDR* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2001).

⁴¹ A striking example of this strategy is the discussion and evaluation of Caspar David Friedrich in the GDR. While he was initially rejected as a representative of Romanticism, which was perceived as conservative and reactionary in the Marxist-Leninist discourse on art, GDR art historians endeavored to identify elements of Friedrich's oeuvre that could be qualified as progressive in

The fundamental linkage of artistic phenomena and processes to the social conditions under which they emerged was the consequence of strict materialism. In Feist's writing, he also underscored its relevance for the present by providing a theoretical foundation that closely linked the socialist relations of production with culture in general and with art in particular; this connection could, therefore, be controlled by the Party's concept of ideology. By strongly emphasizing the autonomy of artistic creation, Feist gestured to a solution to the theoretical problem of how and in what form art could contribute to social development, one inextricably bound to the contemporary discourse on art in East Germany. In the context of this debate, his solution appears to be an attempt to secure the necessary freedom for artistic practice and the appropriation of historical art in the GDR.

The State of the Discipline

Cremer's criticism at the Fifth Congress of the theoretical derivation of concepts and their dogmatic application to art and the creative process—alluding to, among other things, the Stalinist debate on art and its reverberations in the 1950s—was aimed directly at the field of art history, and it was met with a round of applause.⁴² This reaction had a backstory. Shortly before the congress, artists were invited to share their thoughts in the periodical *Bildende Kunst*—the official organ of the Association of Visual Artists (Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR), which had only recently opened its membership to art historians in 1959. In so doing, they joined a discourse that had been ongoing since the start of the 1960s, which urged the field of *Kunstwissenschaft* to place its expertise in the service of contemporary art. This meant art historians were expected to guide art through, for example, the historical reappraisal of the history of form or the theory of design. In addition, the discipline was heavily criticized for its perceived distance from artists in terms of practice; therefore, art historians were exhorted to familiarize themselves with both the creative process and artistic techniques by visiting artists' workshops much more frequently than before.⁴³

This genuine displeasure among artists was integrated with the demands related to arts policy and eventually channeled through official documents. According to the published resolution of the congress in 1964, *Kunstwissenschaft* must investigate the “process for the convergence of art and life through which our socialist-realist art is created.” To accomplish this, “socialist research methods [were] to be introduced into *Kunstwissenschaft* in order to

Marxist terms. In this way, they succeeded in establishing new research on Caspar David Friedrich and Romanticism in the GDR. See Bernhardt, “Kunstwissenschaft.”

⁴² Cremer, “Diskussionsbeitrag,” 169; see also 172.

⁴³ For contributions immediately preceding the congress, see Willi Sitte, “Kunstwissenschaft und Künstler,” *Bildende Kunst* 8 (1963), 435–36; “Wir tragen die Verantwortung für unsere Kunst. Der Vizepräsident des VBKD, Walter Womacka, antwortet auf Fragen der Redaktion,” *Bildende Kunst* 3 (1964), 113–17; “Unserer Kunst den richtigen Weg bahnen. Diskussionsvorschläge zur Vorbereitung des V. Kongresses des VBKD,” *Bildende Kunst* 3 (1964), 118–25; “Stimmen zum Verbandskongreß. Redaktionsgespräch mit Verbandskollegen,” *Bildende Kunst* 3 (1964), 158–60.

identify and influence all factors of visual art.”⁴⁴ Now furnished with concrete objectives, this demand was included two years later in the concept for the Sixth German Art Exhibition (1966), which aimed to strengthen the “close connection of *Kunstwissenschaft* and art criticism with the visual arts of the GDR.”⁴⁵ *Kunstwissenschaft* was thus essentially relegated to the role of art criticism and, as such, was intended to serve as a guiding force in the development of contemporary art.

Against this background, it is striking that Feist, who showed great interest in contemporary art, reacted cautiously to the demands in his publications on the tasks of *Kunstwissenschaft*. In his brief 1964 article “Verpflichtung der Kunstwissenschaft” [The Duty of *Kunstwissenschaft*], he emphasized the “historical nature” of art research at the outset, but only later addressed its role in “sharpening [the] judgment” of artists and art audiences.⁴⁶ Similarly, his *Principles and Methods*—contrary to what its title suggests—was not about the principles and methods of a Marxist *Kunstwissenschaft*. Feist made this point clear from the start: *Kunstwissenschaft* is divided into the fields of art theory, art criticism, and art historiography and also encompasses “what can be called an *operative Kunstwissenschaft*.”⁴⁷ This term—“operative *Kunstwissenschaft*”—corresponded precisely to what was dictated by art policy: namely, a deliberate and carefully controlled reciprocal relationship between scientific inquiry and knowledge and their practical implementation in areas such as monument conservation, museum operations, and, more broadly, in art education, particularly concerning contemporary art. Feist, however, only briefly addressed this “operative” aspect in his introduction and conclusion. Instead, he repeatedly and consistently narrowed the topic around which he aimed to develop and systematize his reflections on the Marxist approach. He was not concerned with a broadly understood *Kunstwissenschaft*, with art criticism and art education, nor with art theory and aesthetics. Rather, he focused specifically on the analysis of *historical* art and thus on a Marxist foundation of art historical analysis, using the visual arts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as examples.⁴⁸ Consequently, Feist detached the field of *art history* (*Kunstgeschichte*) from the more comprehensive discipline of *Kunstwissenschaft*.

As his introductory remarks make clear, Feist did not ignore the requisite framework underlying *Kunstwissenschaft*. But it is also apparent that he felt the subject of art history first needed further clarification. Thus, the primary aim of his essay was to outline the consequences of historical and dialectical materialism for the discipline, establish the essential theoretical basis for the history of art, and delineate the perspectives of a Marxist art history founded on these principles.

⁴⁴ “Die bildende Kunst beim umfassenden Aufbau des Sozialismus in der DDR und die Aufgaben des Verbandes. Beschluss des Kongresses des Verbandes bildender Künstler Deutschlands,” *Bildende Kunst* 6 (1964), 283–86 and 322–28, here 326.

⁴⁵ “Ziele und Aufgaben,” 554.

⁴⁶ Peter H. Feist, “Verpflichtung der Kunstwissenschaft,” *Bildende Kunst* 3 (1964), 160.

⁴⁷ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 28. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29, 34–35.

Feist's concept of art also underscored the inadequacy of any art historical analysis that focused exclusively on elucidating the historical conditions of artistic phenomena or artworks. In his view, no matter how complex such an explanation may be, it could not comprehensively describe either the essence of art or the individual work of art. Such an approach could only ever grasp their creative potential and, thus, their potential to affect social change in a very limited way. To bolster this argument, he relied on earlier Marxist theorists, noting "that [they] accounted for the 'inner movement in the material,' that is, the relative autonomy of artistic development and the specificity of art as a particular human mode of behavior and expression."⁴⁹

In addition to this clarification of a materialistic framework of art history, Feist's text also aimed to acknowledge the inherent dynamics of art and set them in relation to the laws of society or, at the very least, to devise the theoretical and methodological framework for doing so. Given the nature of these objectives, particularly those related to his concept of art, the need for theoretical clarity was closely aligned with what the contemporary situation required. Simply put, if art was to be accorded its own quality and relative autonomy in the sense outlined above, then specific methods for its analysis were needed. However, because the previous approaches for this purpose had originated under capitalism, they were now inevitably subject to scrutiny in a socialist society. By reflecting on whether and how these theoretical approaches could be integrated into a Marxist history of art under socialism, Feist's text played into university politics, both internally, as a strategy to mediate Marxist principles within the professional art history community, and externally, in its concern for the political and institutional repercussions that this strategy's success or failure might have for the discipline in the GDR.

At the precise moment that the criticism of the discipline was gathering steam, Eberhard Bartke published an article in the October 1963 issue of *Bildende Kunst*, which offers crucial insights into the stakes of this discussion. As the head of the Department of Fine Arts and Museums in the GDR's Ministry of Culture, Bartke explicitly outlined in his article the expectations that art policy held for art historical research and, more specifically, in art historiography. His unusually long article was prompted by plans to turn the National Gallery in Berlin into a "representative museum of German art."⁵⁰ For Bartke, this initiative necessitated a critical reevaluation of the historiography of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art in order to demonstrate that "socialist realism had become the rightful heir and successor of the best, the most progressive, and most humanistic German art, especially that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." To this end, he argued that Marxist-Leninist art scholarship must confront "late bourgeois" art historiography and reveal its distortions of the history of art, which he claimed acted "in service and as a manifestation of monopoly capitalist and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁰ Eberhard Bartke, "Die Aufgaben der marxistischen Kunstwissenschaftler an unseren Museen," *Bildende Kunst* 10 (1963), 507–12, and no. 11 (1963), 601–4, here 508. On Bartke, see Beatrice Vierneisel, "Bartke, Eberhard," in Stiftung Aufarbeitung/Biografische Datenbanken, <https://www.bundesstiftung-aufarbeitung.de/de/recherche/kataloge-datenbanken/biografische-datenbanken/eberhard-bartke> (accessed 10/18/2021).

anti-national class interests.”⁵¹ Additionally, this research task was to be given “top priority in the coming years.”⁵² Bartke’s contribution also made it abundantly clear that this was a critical and politically relevant debate, as both the GDR and the FRG asserted their historical authority over the interpretation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century German art.⁵³

Furthermore, while Bartke also relied on Lenin’s doctrine of two cultures in each nation, he took the argument one step further, suggesting that erroneous art-historical writings had fundamentally distorted the interpretation of German art over the last two centuries. He thus pushed the conversation about modernism and whether its works were progressive or reactionary towards a critical evaluation of the interpretive authorities. With this move, he revitalized the harsh attack leveled against the established art historiography in the mid-1950s with the publication *Against Bourgeois Art and Art History* (1954).⁵⁴ Yet the conflict that this argument laid bare was that the scientific foundations of art history, the formulation of its theories and methods, as well as its institutionalization—especially at the former University of Berlin (now the Humboldt University)—could not be separated from the historiographic tradition that was the target of its criticism. This, of course, was Feist’s central concern.⁵⁵ Moreover, if Feist wanted to do justice to the complexity of his concept of art, he had to integrate the analytical methods produced by this art history with the Marxist-Leninist approach to history, despite the vehement political demands for a fundamental critique and rejection of “late bourgeois” art history.

Accordingly, Feist stated right at the beginning of his text that Marxist art historiography combines constantly developing dialectical materialism, which Marx and Engels had

⁵¹ Bartke, “Aufgaben,” 602.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 509.

⁵³ The research group “History of German Art Education with Special Reference to the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries” was established at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig, and a research area on “Proletarian Art” was established at the Humboldt University in Berlin. On Leipzig, see: Ernst Ullmann, “Aus der Kunstwissenschaft der DDR. Institut für Kunstgeschichte und Kunsterziehung der Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig,” *Bildende Kunst* 15 (1967), 53. On Berlin, see: Brandt, “Auftrag,” 368. See the thematic issues in the scientific journal of Humboldt University in Berlin: “Einfluß der revolutionären Arbeiterbewegung auf die deutsche Kunst in der Zeit von 1917 bis 1933,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Gesellschafts- und sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1962), and “Entwicklungsprobleme der sozialistischen bildenden Kunst,” thematic section in *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Gesellschafts- und sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, vol. 17, no. 5 (1968).

⁵⁴ *Gegen die bürgerliche Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft. Ein Sammelband mit Aufsätzen von W. S. Kemenow, B. R. Wipper, I. A. Kusnezowa, N. M. Tschegodajewa, W. N. Lasare, M. W. Alpatow* (Berlin: Dietz, 1954). On this volume, see: Uwe Hartmann, “Die ‘Verteidigung’ der Renaissance. Zur Auseinandersetzung sowjetischer Kunsthistoriker mit der ‘bürgerlichen’ Kunstwissenschaft zu Beginn des Kalten Krieges,” in Tatjana Bartsch and Jörg Meiner, eds., *Kunst – Kontext – Geschichte. Festgabe für Hubert Faensen zum 75. Geburtstag* (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2003), 294–309; Krista Kodres, “Stil und Bedeutung: Über konkurrierende Renaissancemodelle in der polarisierten Welt des Kalten Krieges,” *ARS*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2015), 118–34, esp. 119–22.

⁵⁵ Bredekamp and Labuda, eds., *In der Mitte Berlins*.

argued was the basis for all knowledge in nature and society, “with new practical experiences under new, thus different, conditions *and* with the critically evaluated facts and methodologies [that constitute] the rational core of all art historical research to date.”⁵⁶ The two mainstays of research highlighted in this prefatory statement (i.e., a constantly developing dialectical materialism and specialized technical and methodological expertise) are vividly expressed in Feist’s striking division of the text between a theoretical discussion of Marxist art history and an overview with commentary on established and current art historical methods.

The text subsequently reveals strategies to bring together these two aspects. In Feist’s overview of the “Marxist Conception of Art and History,” he delivered a categorical critique of “late bourgeois” art historiography, as exemplified, for instance, by Hans Sedlmayr (1896–1984), which he believed was incapable of comprehending the essence of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art to the same extent as a materialist analysis.⁵⁷ Even if it yielded several noteworthy insights, their interpretations relied on faulty assumptions. It was in this sense that Feist appreciated, for example, Pinder’s model of historical generations. Although he noted that it was based on accurate observations, he nevertheless stressed that the “heterogeneity of the simultaneous” was not a “biological phenomenon,” as Pinder proposed, but rather the outcome of various yet concurrent social processes, particularly “the struggle of different, usually class-related trends in an era.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, Feist acknowledged that non-Marxist art historians have also posed questions aimed at analyzing the material and social conditions of art. He speculated that the materialist approaches of bourgeois art historians should be considered a sign and consequence of the “most recent objective social development,” which had “stimulated certain scholarly tendencies in non- or anti-socialist contexts that somewhat parallel our own [Marxist] endeavors.”⁵⁹

In this manner, Feist subjected—albeit selectively—the professional approaches and interpretive models of “late bourgeois” art history to the necessary Marxist critique and offered, where possible, positive interpretations of them. In so doing, he made them available for discussion in the GDR regardless of the political criticism they faced. Together with the endnotes, the idiosyncratic last chapter of the text on the “Methodology of a Marxist *Kunstwissenschaft*” thus should be understood as an annotated reading list—vetted by the framing Feist provided in his discussion of the Marxist conception of the history of art. It notably listed the “late bourgeois” authors alongside the foundational works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin and also included contemporary art theory and current contributions to art history and its methodology. Feist later called the Marxist-orientated integration of these authors “an exhaustion [*Ausschöpfen*] of the ‘inner reserves’”—an exhaustion, one might add, in the

⁵⁶ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 31. Emphasis my own.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 44. Here, Feist is referring to Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte* (Salzburg: O. Müller, 1948).

⁵⁸ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 33.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

service of a *history* of art which would, in turn, contribute to a more robust understanding of a Marxist *Kunstwissenschaft*.⁶⁰

Tellingly, the publication of Feist's text coincided with a veritable wave of scholarly treatises in the GDR that focused on nineteenth- and twentieth-century art historiography. This surge in output was likely intentional and strategic: satisfying the Party's demands for a critical revision of bourgeois art historiography offered an opportunity to enrich the discipline by intensively examining its history and methods. As a result, the field underwent a thorough revision at a comparatively early stage in the GDR.⁶¹ The focus of Feist's text on art *history* (rather than the wider field of *Kunstwissenschaft*) was thus driven by the need to incorporate the methods refined over decades of disciplinary debate into a Marxist history of art and to preserve these methods for scholars as the scientific foundations of the subject. Both objectives were crucial in catering to the aspirations of GDR art historians to participate in current professional conversations at the international level.

By skillfully emphasizing the specificity of art history's methodological foundations, Feist made an implicit claim for its autonomy. Furthermore, he also stipulated that art historians must be able to not only classify and evaluate the results of historical research, but also to conduct the historical investigations necessary for their research whenever such knowledge is lacking. This work, described as the "preliminary stage" (*Vorfeld*) of art historical analysis, naturally arises from a materialistic conception of art.⁶² Feist effectively showcased the necessity of linking the work of art back to its historical context in his critique of André Malraux's "imaginary museum," that is, of decontextualized museum objects.⁶³ But he was

⁶⁰ Peter H. Feist, "Hundert Jahre nach Herman Grimm, dreißig Jahre seit der Befreiung vom Faschismus. Die Entwicklung der Kunstwissenschaft an der Berliner Universität 1875–1975 (1975)," in Betthausen and M. Feist, eds., *Nachlese*, 11–30, here 11.

⁶¹ See here the following works from the 1960s: Helga Möbius, "Methodische Bemerkungen zur Geschichte der Kunstwissenschaft," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität. Gesellschafts- und sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe Jena*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1962), 107–13; Harald Olbrich, "Einige Seiten im Verhältnis von Kunstwissenschaft und Philosophie in der deutschen bürgerlichen Kunstwissenschaft des 20. Jahrhunderts," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig. Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1963), 293–99; Gerhard Strauss, "Adolph Goldschmidt – zur 100. Wiederkehr seines Geburtstages," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Gesellschafts- und sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, vol. 12, no. 6 (1963), 737–41; Hubert Faensen, *Die bildnerische Form. Die Kunstauffassung Konrad Fiedlers, Adolf von Hildebrands und Hans von Marées* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1965); Hubert Faensen, "Quellen und Tendenzen der kunstgeschichtlichen Konzeption Wölfflins," *Bildende Kunst* 11 (1966), 602–4; Hermann Weidhaas, "Zum Anteil der Kunstgeschichte an der Begegnung deutscher und sowjetischer Wissenschaft," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Hochschule für Architektur und Bauwesen Weimar* 14 (1967), 465–71; Ingrid Schulze, "Wilhelm Worringer und die bürgerliche Opposition gegen den großdeutschen Nationalismus auf dem Gebiet der Kunstgeschichtsschreibung," *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg. Gesellschafts- und sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1969), 65–85.

⁶² Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 42.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

equally keen to emphasize that while the Marxist analysis of art contributed to a deeper understanding of artistic phenomena, it also facilitated the development of “insights into the *modus operandi* of social-cultural relations and processes,” which, in turn, were capable of generating insights into the “laws” of historical processes.⁶⁴ Both perspectives underscored that the art historian’s historical expertise was both a prerequisite for rigorous analysis and a byproduct of their scholarly endeavors that enabled the discipline’s contributions to historical insights. Feist thus empowered the *history* within art history.

Indeed, there were compelling reasons to do so. In two articles from 1960 and 1962, Friedrich Möbius—a doctoral student at the University of Jena at the time, who, like Feist, would go on to become a prominent intellectual in art history—had drawn far-reaching conclusions from the criticism levied against the discipline. He not only called on art historians to fundamentally reorient their work to the practical aspects of artistic creation, suggesting that scientific teaching and research should consistently strive towards this goal, but he also went one step further to propose that “the study of art history... should be combined with that of art education.”⁶⁵ In these two contributions, Möbius brought forward ideas that had already been discussed internally for some time. The closure of three art history institutes at universities in the GDR was first considered in 1955.⁶⁶ While they would remain open for the time being, student enrollment in art history programs was severely restricted across the country.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, efforts to merge art history and art education continued unabated. By the time Feist’s text appeared, such mergers had already taken place at the Karl Marx University in Leipzig and the Ernst Moritz Arndt University in Greifswald.⁶⁸ And even though the discipline still existed as such, its established institutional form remained subject to debate.

Following the two argumentative strands outlined in this section, it is evident that Feist’s focus on art *history* aimed, on several levels, to support and validate the specificity of the discipline, as well as its relevance and independence as a *scientific* field. The objective was to decisively strengthen the historical dimension of the discipline’s questions while recognizing the autonomous nature of art history as a subject. Together, these two aspects helped justify the requirement of art historians to possess specialized qualifications and fulfill

⁶⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁵ Friedrich Möbius, “Sozialistische Brigaden und Kunstwissenschaft,” *Bildende Kunst* 8 (1960), 547–48; Friedrich Möbius, “Kunstgeschichte und Kunstkritik,” *Bildende Kunst* 10 (1962), 545–8. The three quotes are from the 1960 article, 548.

⁶⁶ Peter H. Feist, “Die Kunstwissenschaft in der DDR,” *Kunst und Politik. Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft* 8 (2006), 13–49.

⁶⁷ Brandt, “Auftrag,” 369.

⁶⁸ On the plans for the merger of the two disciplines at Humboldt University Berlin, see: Feist, *Hauptstraßen*, 89. At Karl Marx University in Leipzig, art history and art education were merged into one department in 1964. See: Thomas Topfstedt and Frank Zöllner, “Kunstgeschichte,” in Ulrich von Hehl, Uwe John, and Manfred Rudersdorf, eds., *Geschichte der Universität Leipzig 1409–2009*, vol. 4/1, (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitäts-Verlag, 2009), 218–34, here 229. For the process at the Ernst-Moritz-Arndt University Greifswald, see Bernhardt, “Kunstwissenschaft,” 4.

the corresponding institutional prerequisites. Considering that the radical curtailment of university education directly challenged this autonomy, Feist's text thus also conveyed a political stance on higher education policy.

A Critical Appraisal

This last perspective inevitably brings us to the primary concern of the present essay: To what extent did Feist, from his Marxist standpoint, arrive at a new understanding of art history, one that differed from the traditional conceptions of the discipline and its object of study? Or, to put it another way, what role did Marxism play in Feist's conceptualization of the discipline?

In 1960, Günter Feist (1929–2014), then a senior assistant at the Institute of Art History at the Humboldt University, published an article in *Bildende Kunst* in which he emphatically claimed that every scientific work had a bearing on the present and, therefore, was intrinsically bound to its interests; there was “no science for its own sake.” In this sense, he observed the regression of the art historical discipline in the GDR toward a more conventional self-conception that was “something highly political,” especially in view of art history in the “West.” Referring to the “world-historical upheaval of our days,” that is, the theoretically determined and historically inevitable rise of socialism and communism, he insisted that the field should mobilize its “strength in the service of the cultural revolution,” specifically by making contemporary art “its most important object of study.” Accordingly, he argued that *Kunstwissenschaft* must also “reconceive the entire art-historical process to date” and determine the tasks it must accomplish.⁶⁹ Günter Feist's proposition went beyond a mere utilitarian understanding of an “operative *Kunstwissenschaft*.” Regardless of whether he was working on behalf of the Party or following his own convictions, he championed a Marxist *Kunstwissenschaft* dedicated to the practical implementation of its socialist commitments, calling for a fundamental revision of the discipline's objects of study and findings. In the same spirit, Harald Olbrich later stated in his review of Feist's text: “Direct participation in the progression of socialist realism also has consequences for historical methodology.”⁷⁰

It would be reductive to view these positions purely as concessions to the Party's demands. Instead, one can see how Günter Feist revealed a fundamental issue at the epistemological level: the fact that all scientific questioning and knowledge are conditioned by the specific historical and social contexts from which they emerge. Consequently, Marxist art history, especially from a socialist perspective, had to start from a Marxist understanding of social contexts and historical dynamics. Therefore, a critical reevaluation of the traditional conceptions of art history and art historiography was essential. This revision had to include

⁶⁹ Günter Feist, “Kunstwissenschaft und Gegenwartskunst,” *Bildende Kunst* 3 (1960), 187–90, here 188.

⁷⁰ Harald Olbrich, review of *Prinzipien und Methoden marxistischer Kunstwissenschaft*, by Peter H. Feist, *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1968), 263–67, here 264. A second review of Feist's text was published by Horst Zimmermann, review of *Prinzipien und Methoden marxistischer Kunstwissenschaft*, by Peter H. Feist, *Neue Museumskunde*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1968), 100–101.

not only the findings of previous research, but also their objects of study, conceptual underpinnings, and methods in general.

In this regard, Peter H. Feist's text appears much less radical than the positions of Günter Feist or Friedrich Möbius; it may even have been designed to strategically offset their extremity to a certain extent. By limiting the scope of his analysis over the course of his essay, shifting from *Kunstwissenschaft* to art history and then to the fine arts, he gradually returned to the conventional knowledge system of art history. Feist refrained from questioning this system outright. On the contrary, his effort to integrate "bourgeois" methodology with Marxist art history, along with his indirect yet insistent endeavor to emphasize the discipline's specificity and thus its autonomy, effectively perpetuated a conception of art history closely linked to its established tradition since the end of the nineteenth century. The same could be said for Feist's conception of the artist. By asserting that the artist possessed a unique perception of the world and engaged with this perception in a distinctly artistic way, he positioned the artist in a role that was inextricably rooted in a conventional understanding of the artist.

Here, Feist was both reacting to and actively shaping a complex array of conflicting interests. These latent tensions are discernible from the very start of his essay. Strikingly, Feist introduced his remarks with a series of rhetorical qualifications, emphasizing their provisional nature while delicately navigating a contentious area of discussion. Moreover, as my analysis has shown, the text was intertwined with a number of thorny issues, the clarity of which would have varied among the text's intended audience, depending on their perspective.

Feist's assertion that there was no comparable outline in German of a Marxist history of art was addressed to a broad circle of readers, which included the West German scholarly community—especially since he referred at the start to the 1964 LMU conference that had served as inspiration for his book. His preoccupation with systematizing a Marxist foundation of art history that could be seamlessly integrated into the discipline's methodological approaches was brought to the fore for this audience. The integration of "bourgeois" art history and its established methods helped create a resonance chamber for the text's reception by an international professional community that he was well acquainted with—a resonance chamber in which Marxist art history could be perceived as a natural progression of the discipline's internal development and which, thanks to the skillful strategies employed by Feist, had the potential to be acknowledged as such.

This function of *Principles and Methods* was equally relevant to the context of art and disciplinary politics in the GDR, which Feist also hinted at early on as framing his reflections. However, as my examination of the text has made clear, the essay itself addressed this context in a more nuanced way. Feist's development of a theoretical framework for art historical analysis to be used by his colleagues in the GDR helped facilitate the necessary integration of Marxist methodology into the practice of *Kunstwissenschaft*. At the same time, this integration also comes across as an attempt to reconcile these conceptual demands with the discipline's self-perception or, indeed, with any resistance to the discipline's Marxist foundations and associated ideological orientation. Viewed in this light, the text can be seen as contributing to the ongoing internal discussions concerning the methodological reorientation of the discipline.

Furthermore, Feist's aspiration to stimulate "utterly necessary and thoroughly theoretical, methodological, and historical research" and contribute "to the dissemination of a Marxist-Leninist, dialectical-materialist *Kunstwissenschaft*" was also intended as a direct message to the Party.⁷¹ It signaled the discipline's readiness to reflect on the Party's criticism of art history for its methodological "backwardness." By developing a Marxist art historical analysis based on social conditionality and the social determination of art, he critically reflected on the programmatic utility of art for implementing developed socialism. After all, as the 1963 party program proclaimed, art, in its capacity to influence people's consciousness in favor of socialism, was a means of increasing production. Feist did not adopt this statement unreservedly. Through his sophisticated exploration of the interrelationship between art, relations of production, and productive forces, he exposed the complexity of these relations and questioned the Party's utilitarian notion of art. Yet, this should not be construed as an overt objection to the Party's demands. Rather, Feist very likely sought to criticize the system from within, leveraging his disciplinary expertise to ensure the quality of the discipline's work and research and, thus, the fulfillment of its required tasks. At the same time, however, this approach stressed the importance of the discipline's continued existence to the Party. In this regard, Feist's booklet was primarily a document of *higher education policy*, one that cautiously articulated this concern through theoretical reflections.

By accounting for the complex relations between art and society, Feist also contemplated the nature of art. This exploration was relevant to art's present and future—namely, the ongoing debate over its relative freedom and contributions to the socialist project—as well as its past, that is, the concern for the objects of art history and their evaluation. Although mediated through the lens of art history, Feist's text thus served as a commentary on the contemporary stakes of *art policy*.

Against this backdrop, Feist's *Principles and Methods* comes across as a remarkably diplomatic work. Beyond this, its appeal lies in the very effort to rise above the ideological and political demands of the day and to address fundamental problems. Feist thus presented a systematic exploration of various issues and problems that is still worth reading today. His discussion of society's determination of art, in particular, was highly innovative, illustrating the untapped potential of a materialist analysis of art. Nevertheless, a broader contextualization is needed to ascertain whether and to what extent these impulses spoke to broader trends in the Marxist history of art, at least within the context of the two Germanys.

⁷¹ Feist, *Principles and Methods*, 27.