East
The History of a Corporate Commission and the History of a Region

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Propriété intellectuelle
In 1993, the Eastern German company Verbundnetz Gas, an importer and distributor of natural gas, financed the launching of an effort to produce a series of photographs documenting the territory of the former German Democratic Republic. In the specific context of the Wende, as the Germans refer to the period that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, its goal was to monitor the radical transformations then taking place in society and the economy. The project lasted eight years, employed a total of seventeen photographers, and took two different names, first VorOrt (1994) and later East (2001).

The mission and scale of the project are reminiscent of other big commissions by which the history of photography has been marked, such as the Heliographic Mission of 1851, the expeditions associated with the New American Frontier at the end of the nineteenth century, and the DATAR Photographic Mission in France in the 1980s. Unlike these earlier projects, however, East was initiated by a private corporation.

The project occupies a very specific place within the larger process of the transformation of Eastern Germany’s identity. Its history is inextricably linked to that of this rapidly changing European region as well as to the history of those who have carried it out – its sponsor and photographers. It served as a vehicle for the combined advancement of the region’s economic and artistic elites at a time when the status of both was rapidly changing. Sponsorship of the arts enabled a newly privatized Eastern German firm to establish itself both economically and politically within a reunified Germany. In addition, the sponsoring firm helped photographers from the former East Germany to gain national and international prominence thanks to its links to the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig (Academy of Visual Arts, Leipzig), famous for its photography program in the German Democratic Republic. Today, in images, East is a mirror of the recent history of a region and the recent history of those among its residents who have carried out the project and brought it to fruition.
A Company in Search of an Image: Verbundnetz Gas

To understand the genesis of the project, it is helpful to know something of the history of the company behind the commission. Verbundnetz Gas was founded in Leipzig in the German Democratic Republic in 1958 under the name Technische Leitung Ferngas. At the time, it was a local branch of Volkseigener Betrieb Verbundnetz, a public company responsible for developing a system for importing natural gas to the western region of the country. On January 1, 1969, it acquired legal autonomy and changed its name to Verbundnetz Gas. Following the collapse of the socialist regime, it was privatized in 1990. It gradually diversified its areas of activity and went on to become competitive at the national and international levels. In twenty years, it has grown to become the third largest importer of natural gas in Germany and one of the ten largest companies in its sector in all of Europe. This economic success has been accompanied by increased political importance. In 2008, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, traveled to Leipzig to take part in the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the company’s founding.

The career path of the company’s managing director at the time the project was launched, Klaus-Ewald Holst, is also exemplary. Originally a native of Mecklenburg in the north of the former East Germany, he began his career in 1968 as an engineer for VEB Verbundnetz Gas in Leipzig. In 1990, he became its managing director, and he is recognized today as one of those rare “Ossies” who have succeeded in rising to the head of one of Germany’s big corporations.

In the early 1990s, Verbundnetz Gas became active in the field of arts sponsorship. Its goal was to promote its corporate image, and an investment in the art world was seen as potentially profitable public relations. The ability to amass an outstanding collection of contemporary art or to provide financial support for a high-profile exhibition would, it was felt, enhance its prestige among its customers. Art sponsorship by big companies had, for several decades, been a strong tradition in Western Germany but this tradition of corporate sponsorship of the arts was virtually nonexistent in the German Democratic Republic. By adopting practices of its Western German counterparts, as in the case of art sponsorship, Verbundnetz Gas was going beyond the privatization of its economic structure and asserting its position in the economic as well as the symbolic arenas.

By sponsoring the arts, the company demonstrated its commitment to culture but also its involvement in the social and artistic concerns of its day. In the early 1990s, society that had been east of the Wall faced the task of completely reinventing itself. Verbundnetz Gas, with the change in its status and activities, was a full participant in the former East’s economic transformation. It seemed a natural fit that Verbundnetz Gas’s corporate sponsorship activities should focus on works that reflected that change. The company chose to support the work of artists in its home state of Saxony, more specifically in Leipzig, where its corporate headquarters were located. The history of the company and its sponsorship activities were now strongly and narrowly connected, a situation that – according to Carolin Förster, an art historian and specialist in photography at Villa Grisebach – was virtually unprecedented.

As a symbol of its ambitions, the company’s sponsorship activities were linked to the identity it wished to project. Despite having been in existence for approximately thirty years, Verbundnetz Gas was a newcomer to the competitive marketplace. It decided to associate its image with risk-taking and innovation by focusing on photography – a
medium that was itself still a relative newcomer to the art market – and by directly financing the production of new works. In 1993, it invested the sum – quite sizeable at the time – of 334,000 DM in the launching of a documentary project to be carried out by four young photographers, all of them graduates of the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig (Academy of Visual Arts, Leipzig). The photographers were given complete freedom in the production of their images, to the point that the commission almost resembled an artist’s grant. Since the market for fine art photography in this part of Germany was still in its infancy, for these photographers the Verbundnetz Gas commission was an unexpected and welcome opportunity.

The project was inspired by the work Das Bitterfeld, Fotografie, also commissioned by Verbundnetz Gas, a photo-essay produced in 1992 by three of the four photographers, on the Bitterfeld area, roughly thirty kilometers north of Leipzig. This area was emblematic of the lost illusions of the former socialist state. In the early 1960s, it had begun to become a center for the chemical industry, raising hopes of prosperity and abundance. Thirty years later, it was a symbol of the ‘Schandpfuhl sozialistischer Misswirtschaft,’ the disgraceful effects of socialist mismanagement. After the fall of the regime, this former economic hub of the German Democratic Republic was virtually deserted and experiencing a precipitous decline. Frank-Heinrich Müller, Matthias Hoch, and Thomas Wolf, all of whom were students at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig, photographed the area in an effort to capture the rapid changes since the fall of the Wall in November 1989. In the larger context of the Wende, their images were informed by the political, social, and economic challenges that were changing the face of this area on a daily basis. The photographs caught the attention of Verbundnetz Gas, the sponsoring firm, and in 1993 it commissioned the three photographers – along with Max Baumann, also a graduate of the Leipzig academy – to produce a similar work on the Leipzig area.

From VorOrt to East

The 1993 commission was the first milestone of a project that continued for more than ten years. The German title VorOrt, adopted in 1994 when the works were publicly exhibited for the first time, was abandoned in 2001 and replaced by the English title East. This change in terminology reveals much about how the project was evolving and about the aspirations behind it. ‘VorOrt,’ also used as the title of the 1994 catalogue for this first exhibition of the photographs, means ‘sur place’ or ‘sur le terrain’ (on site). All of the photographers were originally from East Germany and this title stresses their personal involvement.

Nevertheless, the artists chose to bear witness from a detached perspective, excluding altogether human beings from their photographs in favor of landscapes, buildings, and infrastructure. In the space of just a few short years, this entire setting had changed: the public amenities, the appearance of the houses, the stores. Industry had disappeared and been replaced by service sector establishments. Glass office buildings had materialized together with highways and parking lots. Facades had been renovated, satellite antennas had sprung up, and cars had invaded the streets. Stone and wood had been replaced by steel and glass. Confronted with these transformations, the photographers decided not to dwell on the ‘symbols’ of the former socialist state but instead chose to foreground everyday scenes. The way of life of the former German Democratic Republic was abruptly disappearing with a profound and powerful impact on its former citizens; the tiniest
house or alleyway became a monument in the depiction of what was already a bygone age. This was the reality, the ordinariness, of the transformation of society that was taking place.

12 This approach represented a risk for the project’s sponsor, Verbundnetz Gas, and in particular, for Klaus-Ewald Holst, who had made the sponsorship decision. His colleagues had their doubts – How could these photographs, which showed a territory in crisis, enhance the company’s image? In 1994, their fears were quickly laid to rest by the positive response to the collection’s first exhibition at the World Gas Conference in Milan, Italy. The success of this exhibition, in a professional context, encouraged them to continue the project.

13 Beginning in 1995, in addition to using commissions to finance the production of new artworks, the firm embarked on a policy of acquisition in the form of purchases, which allowed it to expand the temporal compass of the collection and go further back into the history of the former German Democratic Republic. The documentary photography project was gradually evolving into a collection. Between 1994 and 1997, the project was joined by four new photographers. In 1997, at the World Gas Conference in Copenhagen, Denmark, Verbundnetz Gas again presented the works in a professional context, and a second catalogue was published. That same year, the photographs were placed on permanent display in the new building housing the company’s corporate headquarters and nine additional photographers joined the project.

14 In 2000, the collection was exhibited at Kulturhaus Leuna in Germany. It was the first time it had ever been presented at a venue devoted specifically to culture and thus the first time it had ever been divorced from the exclusive function of promoting the company. The real turning point in its status came in 2001, when it was exhibited at Stiftung Bauhaus (the Bauhaus Foundation) in Dessau. For this event, the collection changed its name to East. A catalogue was published, and, to replace the former title, a new jacket was printed for the earlier 1997 catalogue.

15 It was a radical change: from VorOrt, a German idiomatic expression that highlights an organic connection to the region, to East, an English expression and the simplest possible geographic designation. In his speech at the exhibition’s opening, Rolf Sachsse, who had been involved in the project since its inception, suggested a parallel between the new title and its geographic opposite, the West. In the nineteenth century, ‘Go west’ was the battle cry associated with the campaign to settle the American West, which, for the settlers, represented an opportunity for a new life, the chance to reinvent themselves and go forward into the future. At the end of the Second World War, when the Cold War divided the world into East and West, there were many residents of the former GDR – citizens of the East – who dreamed of moving to the West to enjoy the freedom they expected to find there. The fall of the Wall and the Soviet regime at the beginning of the 1990s was also the end of the East as a symbol, a reference point around which to build an identity. The former GDR now became the East of a reunified Germany. It was a territory that had lost its cultural bearings, and its identity was difficult to define, for foreigners as well as for its residents. The decision, ten years later, to reaffirm this geographic designation was connected with the desire to forge a new identity for the region. If the former German Democratic Republic had been a closed state, both literally and figuratively, the choice of English – the international lingua franca – for the exhibition’s new title signaled a desire to embrace an attitude of openness to the world.
From a collection, East gradually evolved into a genuine artistic project, whose specificity was particularly emphasized at the exhibitions of 2002 and 2003. In 2002, at the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst (Museum of Contemporary Art) in Leipzig, the works were hung in a manner that recalled the academic salons of the nineteenth century; they covered the walls from floor to ceiling. Numbers alone were used to designate the photographs, and some of the images were missing. Visitors needed a brochure to navigate the exhibition. In its first section, it contained the captions of the photographs exhibited, and in a second, small black-and-white reproductions of those that were missing. Both those that were exhibited and those that were reproduced were numbered according to the order in which they had entered the collection, producing a chronology specific to the project. In Frankfurt am Main in 2003, the exhibition at the Deutsches Architekturmuseum (German Architecture Museum) was organized around the collection’s topographical dimension. Graphic representations of the collection’s characteristics were juxtaposed with a selection of prints presented in the manner of items from an archive. The interest was no longer purely in the contents of the collection – the images themselves – but also in the manner in which the collection itself had been assembled. The visitor was first presented with a diagram of various aspects of the collection and then moved on to view the photographs themselves. In both cases, the focus was on the collection as a whole, its significance, and its relationship to the time and the territory depicted. The status of the collection had evolved in the course of the project. Independent of the historical or artistic value of the individual photographs, it now had an identity of its own.

That identity is linked to the region depicted and the sponsoring firm, but it is also linked to an East German art institution, the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig. The central role of this art school in the development of the project may be explained by its geographic proximity to Verbundnetz Gas but also by its importance in the history of East German photography after 1945.

**The Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst Leipzig: The Center of East German Photography**

While there is no structural connection between these two Leipzig institutions – the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst and Verbundnetz Gas – many of those involved in the project had links to the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst. Of the seventeen photographers who worked on the project between 1993 and 2001, eleven were graduates of the school. Similarly, in the early 1990s, Rolf Sachsse, the author of all texts introducing the project, regularly worked in Leipzig. After defending a thesis on photography as a vehicle for the interpretation of architecture in Bonn in 1983, he gave courses on the theory and history of photography at the school in 1990 and 1992. In 1993, he was involved in the conception of the exhibition *Leipziger Schule, Fotografie, Hochschule für Graphik und Buchkunst Leipzig*, which presented the work of nine photographers who were later involved in the project. Finally, it is worth noting that Christine Rink, the curator of the art academy’s gallery, is also in charge of contemporary art collections for Verbundnetz Gas.

The involvement of so many Leipzig photographers reflects the sponsor’s desire to forge a close link between the project and the territory of Eastern Germany. It also points to the
firm's desire to associate itself with a celebrated art school of the former German Democratic Republic. The Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst is the descendant of the Academy of the Visual Arts of Saxony, which was founded in Leipzig in the seventeenth century. The first photography department was created there at the end of the nineteenth century, in 1893, under the name Fachschule für photomechanische Vervielfältigungsverfahren (Professional School for Photomechanical Reproduction Techniques). In 1945, even after a large proportion of the school’s buildings had been destroyed by bombs, August Walter Tiemann took over the academy’s leadership and attempted to inject new life into it. In 1947, it became the State Academy of the Arts, and in 1950 the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst. Under the socialist regime, it was the only institution to offer a specialized program in photography, and it became the center of fine art photography in East Germany. It is impossible to understand the history of photography in Leipzig without taking into account the fact that beginning in the late 1950s, photographic production was controlled by the socialist state. The government of the German Democratic Republic very early on assigned a central role to photography as an instrument of propaganda.27 Aware of the power of images, particularly photographs, the regime sought to control their production and distribution. It became the duty of photography to serve the aims of socialist propaganda by depicting proud and happy workers living in a vibrant and powerful state.

Early on, the Leipzig photographers registered their opposition to the dictates of government propaganda and the tyranny of ‘pretty pictures.’28 In the 1960s, under the chairmanship of Heinz Föppel,29 the photography department of the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst became a laboratory for the development of a photographic aesthetic that sought to incorporate the tensions and ambivalences of the regime into its images. This brand of photography, which defined itself as ‘social documentary,’ was committed to the search for new representations of daily life. Because they bore witness to the weaknesses and failings of the socialist state, the photographs were censored, and for many years they could only be seen by an audience of initiates.30

In the 1970s and above all the 1980s, the works of these photographers became increasingly widely known. From 1976 to 1987, under the leadership of Bernhard Heisig, the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst gradually developed an international reputation. In the 1980s, under the chairmanship of Peter Pachnicke,31 the photography department took advantage of the openness of the regime to emphasize the specificity of its curriculum and to highlight the existence of a Leipzig School of photography. These photographers flouted the aesthetic dogmas of the German Democratic Republic and developed an aesthetic of their own. In 1987, Arno Rink was placed in charge of the school, a position he would retain until 1994, after the fall of the Wall. That event sparked a radical transformation of the school’s curriculum, undertaken to better compete with the art schools of the Federal Republic.

Beginning in 1990, the theoretical portion of the school’s curriculum, which since 1945 had contained a strong political component, changed to incorporate subjects like art history, philosophy, media theory, and the history of photography. In 1993, the photography department began to add Western German artists to its faculty. The hiring of Timm Rautert and Joachim Brohm as professors in the department – both of whom were graduates of the Folkwangschule für Gestaltung (Folkwang School of Design) in Essen – marked a turning point in the institution’s history. The work of the new generation of photographers showed the impact of these changes; it was largely devoid of...
any immediate political relevance. Bernd Lindner, Leipzig research director for the Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Foundation of the Museum of Contemporary History of the Federal Republic of Germany), observed that they seemed to be distancing themselves from ‘social documentary’ practice. They emphasized composition and abstraction and sought to explore new photographic forms. Thilo Kühne and Anett Stuth are the only members of this new generation of photographers to have worked on the project.

Most of the photographers who worked on East belong to the generation of students who received their training in Leipzig before this change in the academy’s orientation. Evelyn Richter studied there in the 1950s; Peter Oehlmann, Erasmus Schröter, Marion Wenzel, and Rudolf Schäfer were her students there in the late 1970s. The four pioneers of 1993 as well as Hans-Christian Schink took Peter Pachnicke’s classes in the late 1980s. Sigrid Schütze-Rodermann, Michael Schroedter, and Ulrich Wüst are not graduates of the academy, but they nonetheless developed their personal works under the German Democratic Republic, when the world of photography was dominated by the work coming out of Leipzig. However, given the growing influence of Western German artists and theorists on the Leipzig photography scene beginning in the early 1990s, one is justified in wondering whether the documentary photography project financed by Verbundnetz Gas truly presents a vision that is peculiar to the Eastern photographers. Do the works that make up the collection East truly reflect the existence of a ‘Leipzig School’?

A Vision of the East

The reunification of Germany was also the reunification of the German photography world, and it placed the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst of Leipzig in competition with its Western German counterpart, the Kunstakademie (Academy of the Arts) of Düsseldorf, which enjoyed international recognition. The Leipzig photographers were quick to feel the influence of the Western German artworks and aesthetic. As early as 1992, the creators of Das Bitterfeld, Fotografie invoked leading Western German photographers when discussing their work. Frank-Heinrich Müller recalled that they had used a view camera ‘like the Bechers.’ In that same year, Max Baumann went to Düsseldorf to take classes with the Bechers at the Kunstakademie. On a more general level, the formal choices of the project’s photographers – the use of a large-format camera, for example, or the fact that their images are completely devoid of any human presence – recall those of the Düsseldorf photographers. In 1997, the collection even acquired works by two of the academy’s students, Johannes Bruns and Thomas Struth.

Nevertheless, just as political reunification was experienced as annexation by the Germans of the East, the Leipzig photographers have refused to be considered disciples of the Bechers. The two photographic movements have different sets of concerns. Far from Bernd and Hilla Becher’s typologies of industrial buildings, the approach behind the Verbundnetz Gas collection refuses to establish a hierarchy among its subjects or to adopt a predefined method. The authors of these images document not only the traces of socialist architecture but also the new infrastructure, not only small towns with their little streets of private houses but also the construction of highways. The appearance of ads on the city’s walls, the coldness of the big glass buildings, and the anonymity of the parking lots in commercial areas have their counterpart in the dilapidated state of a half-timbered house and in the ruins of a factory.
It is a collection – to borrow a phrase used by those involved in the project – that seeks to assemble 'archives of reality.' Rolf Sachsse has discussed the meaning of this formulation. In his view, the reference to 'reality' does not reflect a desire for comprehensiveness. It is thanks to the subjective choices made by the photographers in the production of their images that the latter reflect the ‘reality’ of the far-reaching transformation of this territory. While they seem to be products of chance and the photographers’ wanderings, they construct a panorama of the territories of the East. The freedom from any fixed methodology allows a more faithful transcription of reality, a kind of 'documentary anarchy' that seems to be the hallmark of the Leipzig photographers. Their work appears to foreground the sensory dimension of the perception of these territories. In these images, empty of any human presence, the human nonetheless remains the photographers’ main concern.

Their images elaborate the portrait of a society, a representation of the people through the environment. The photographers explore "the historical context of a landscape." For Barbara Steiner, curator of the exhibition at the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Leipzig in 2002, the Leipzig photographers’ images are imbued with a form of narrativity. More than mere visual records, these images tell a story – the history of a society, of a region. They do not seek to abstract from time or place. On the contrary, they are deeply imbued with the passage of time; they are the traces of that passage; they tell the story of the places they depict.

Without propaganda or bias, by asserting a specific viewpoint, the photographers present themselves as subtle observers of the region’s evolution. The collection is no more a hymn to the past than it is an ode to the glory of the new. It does not attempt to convey a single message or a distinctive style. It is this unity of approach and the diversity of the statements to which it gives rise that today seem to constitute the specificity of contemporary Eastern German photography.

Verbundnetz Gas began as the sponsor of a detailed documentary photography project. Today, with more than six hundred works, it is the owner of one of the most extensive contemporary collections of East and Eastern German photography. As the company consolidates its economic influence, the collection is increasing in value on the art market thanks to the growing renown of the photographers involved. The combined success of sponsor and photographers may be seen as a symbol of the affirmation and rapid reinvention of Eastern Germany and its territory.

As Rolf Sachsse observed in 2001, the project has managed the amazing feat of documenting the transformation of a region while also creating a work of genuine artistic value. Simply and straightforwardly, the photographers set about visually exploring a region, including all of its rough edges. 'East. Germany. Look. Nothing more, nothing less,' declared a reporter for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in 2003. In 2006, a selection of the works was exhibited in Brussels to mark the opening of the offices of the states of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Sachsen-Anhalt at the House of Nations. It was no longer a matter of promoting the company’s image, nor even that of Leipzig and its environs, but the broader image of these two eastern states. This private project has now become the instrument of an eminently public task: reshaping the identity of this region in transition.
NOTES

1. The company’s name may be translated into English as ‘United Gas Networks.’
5. Nadja Daniela KLAG, Die Liberalisierung des Gasmarktes in Deutschland (Marburg: Tectum, 2003), 169.
6. This is a nickname that has been popularly used to refer to the former East Germans since reunification.
10. Interview with Frank-Heinrich MÜLLER in Leipzig on April 1, 2008.
15. Presentation of the project East at the workshop Formen Fotografischer Dokumentation (Forms of Photographic Documentation) on December 3, 2005; this event was organized to accompany the exhibition Bernd und Hilla Becher, Typologien industrieller Bauten (Bernd and Hilla Becher, Typologies of Industrial Buildings) at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. See http://www.vng.de/vng_art/fotografie.
17. The new photographers were Hans-Christian SCHINCK, Peter OEHLMANN, Michael SCHROEDTER, and Ulrich WÖST.
19. The new photographers were Evelyn RICHTER, Sigrid SCHÖTZE-RODEMANN, Erasmus SCHRÖTER, Marion WENZEL, Rudolf SCHÄFER, Thilo KÜHNE, Anett STUTH, Thomas STRUTH, and Johannes BRUNS.
22. Rolf Sachsse is a professor at the Hochschule der Bildenden Künste in Saarbrücken, Germany (Saar University of Art and Design). He is the author of many books and articles on the history of photography and design.
29. Heinz Föppel was chairman of the photography department at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst from 1962 to 1980.
31. Peter Pachnikce chaired the photography department from 1980 to 1990.
33. Ulrich Domröse, Positionen künstlerischer Photographie in Deutschland seit 1945 (Cologne: Dumont, 1997), 36.
34. Interview with Franck-Heinrich Müller (note 10).
35. Barbara Steiner, EASTINGFZK (Leipzig: VNG ART, 2002).
36. Presentation of the project East at the workshop Formen Fotografischer Dokumentation on December 3, 2005 (see note 15).
39. Barbara Steiner, EASTINGFZK (note 35).

ABSTRACTS

In 1993, the Eastern German company Verbundnetz Gas, an importer and distributor of natural gas, financed the launching of an effort to produce a series of photographs documenting the territory of the former German Democratic Republic with special emphasis on the Leipzig area.
Its goal was to monitor the radical transformations then taking place in society and the economy. The project lasted eight years, employed a total of seventeen photographers, and took two different names, first VorOrt (1994) and later East (2001). It served as a vehicle for the combined advancement of economic and artistic elites at a time when the status of both was rapidly changing. Sponsorship of the arts enabled a newly privatized Eastern German firm to establish itself both economically and politically within a reunified Germany. In addition, the sponsoring firm helped photographers from the former East Germany to gain national prominence thanks to its links to the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig (Academy of Visual Arts, Leipzig).

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