

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ART CRITICS (AICA)

Congress and 30th General Assembly

August 27 - September 5 1978 / Switzerland

Peter H. Feist GDR section

ON THE ROLE AND TYPES OF PUBLIC COMMISSIONS IN THE ARTISTIC
LIFE OF THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC.

For a long time social classes and social groups of a society, and specially the leading classes have availed themselves of art to serve their interests. In order to accomplish this they put into practice a cultural policy, which may assume many different forms: be they public or private, administrative, ideological or economical. This is also true of DDR, a Socialist State, about which I would like to give you some information.

The relation between artistic initiatives, whether public or private, the true object of our discussions, is undoubtedly an essential problem in the relationship between art and society: a relationship which is often in state of crisis nowadays. In the DDR we have undertaken certain experiments to surmount this kind of crisis, and to guarantee and develop the function of art. In the DDR the most frequent form of acquisition of works of art is the purchase of finished products. This is the case for public as well as private purchase. One may buy a work of art directly from the artist; but to facilitate information and distribution, a national network of art galleries has been created during these last years, and it continues to develop itself.

This flourishing art commerce decides its own commissions such as editions of graphic art.

Public commissions are an important means of cultural policy and of promotion of works of art. I would not be able to define accurately its role in the artistic production as a whole. Almost all the artists accept commissions constantly, but nowadays the commerce of art is so active that most part of the artists can refuse commissions which are not to their liking.

To understand the different kinds of public commissions, it is necessary to grasp the role of the Union of the Artists of the DDR. This Union is a professional organisation which presents some of the characteristics of a trade union. Its membership is extended practically to all artists. For the last twelve years or so this social organisation has been entrusted with the total responsibility for the development within the country. Public bodies must of necessity treat the Union as a partner, for instance with regard to public commissions. By the latter we refer to works which societies of socialist States commission directly from artists, and not to the social mission of art in general, nor to the demands which society places upon its artists. We must distinguish different types of such works. The "Maecenas" may take one of many forms: the State and the communes (there being no real difference between them), national enterprises, (that is, the property of the people), national institutions such as National Education, as well as social organisation amongst which the Confederation of trade unions is worthy of note. In general all these bodies act independently from each other, but often joint efforts also take place.

Public commission must encourage the creation of works of art destined to embellish the urban tissue or certain public buildings, factories, museums, etc. When dealing with public buildings or communal housing projects, we must activate certain sums put aside for the integration of the plastic arts and urbanism. In this field, special attention is paid to the artistic treatment of school buildings.

The "promoter" (the body which commissions the work) or the architect may either choose an artist themselves or address themselves to the Art Union. The "promoter" and the artist discuss the commission together with views to the aim of the work. In principle it is implied that the artist is given a wide margin of artistic freedom to experiment his own conceptions. For such an important project on a national scale as the recent decoration of the Palace of the Republic in Berlin, the theme proposed for the sixteen large-sized paintings which now adorn the foyer was "What causes a Communist to dream" - an idea suggested by the artist himself. Sometimes the promoter wishes to incorporate into the process of artistic creation an intervention of one or many of the councillors who discuss with the artist the ways in which the original idea may be interpreted. In the case of the Palace of the Republic, a number of eminent naturalists and sociologists discussed with the artist certain problems of social and scientific import. During the execution of the work proper, the artist is obviously given total liberty. In the case of projects of special importance the different phases of the artistic process are discussed before an advising committee. In each large city and district there is such a committee, which advises the municipal authorities or the competent

bodies on matters of artistic integration in the urban tissue. This committee brings together artists in their capacity of Union members, architects, art critics, politicians and representatives of other professions. In these committees very lively discussions take place between the artists and the public bodies which commission the works of art. The artists' fees are based on rules set down by the Ministry of Culture and by the Art Union. Commissions are often made for the benefit of the workers of a national enterprise or of an institution, for example portraits or other works of art meant to enliven by aesthetical means the social and cultural establishments of a factory, a culture center, a youth club, etc. In this case it is an association of workers which may enter into direct partnership with the artist, so that the latter is often invited to take part in other cultural activities with the workers once the commission is accomplished. These contacts with the workers are useful for the formation of the artist who can thereby accede to a more adequate vision of reality. Today some important industrial plants own vast art collections, to which have contributed financially the enterprise itself, the trade union or the Cultural Funds of the State within the Ministry of Culture. These state funds also encourage the professional evolution of the young artists, by means of contracts which they finance. These young artists are given commissions of quite general themes, according to their interests and aptitudes. Hence the works so created may later be purchased by an enterprise, an institution or a museum.

The principle of public commissions must be examined in its social context, and not in an isolated way. In fact

it is only one aspect of the concerted efforts used by socialist societies to relate the artists to the people, specially with regard to the working class - to open the whole population to art, particularly the workers - so that art might become a vital need of all individuals. Public commission was and still is an important means against bourgeois artistic habits and against the formerly strong interests of the bourgeoisie - it should bring into being a new form of art, a socialist art, while offering new positions and new conceptions to the artists. Society thus offers new directions to encourage artistic production.

At times artistic production disposes of more important financial means; the public authorities and the organisations prepare in conjunction with the Union of Artists contests obeying very precise themes which usually culminate in an exhibition. The commissions received on such occasions are tied to measures meant to enrich the social and artistic experience of the artists: study travels are financed in the Soviet Union or in others socialist countries for example - or an internship in a modern center of production can be organized, permitting the artists to deepen their contacts with the workers of a factory or of an agricultural production cooperative.

The artistic promotion in the DDR, a Socialist State, is based on the assumption according to which every man has a right to the values and to the pleasure of art; and that the right to work concerns both the artists as well as the other productive workers. This idea cannot be dissociated from the interests of the working class - the leading class, as I have already mentioned at the beginning of my paper -

when it plays an active part in these same interests.

Promotion of art for the public developed according to the economical possibilities of our country has given the artists a feeling of social security, mainly during these last ten or fifteen years. This feeling is well founded. The artists can generally live from their artistic work. They have the certainty that their art and their profession are regarded by society as useful and necessary - a stimulus then as now - perhaps more important than the development of artistic life. The growing interest of the public regarding art is the best proof of this. Every five years a large exhibition of national art is organized in Dresden to assess, in a certain way, the nation's artistic production. The last demonstration of this kind took place in autumn and winter 77 / 78 - and counted more than a million visitors. The exhibition consisted, to a high degree, of public commissions. A great number of other works was also purchased, particularly with the help of public funds. The artists respond to this social interest in art by taking part in society's responsibility towards the development of artistic life. There are more than these seven hundred artists who are elected in national and regional associations of the Union of the Artists and who must work very hard in order to organize the artistic life. I would like to mention particularly these hundreds of other artists who work as volunteers in different councils, where their competent advice contributes to a climate of fruitful discussion and where they encourage the artistic creation of their colleagues thus offering to the public appreciation works of quality.

Let me still mention two other points: we have

learned that the subjective role of the "promoter" is very relevant, be it an association of workers or a social organism. Whatever problems may appear, the solution depends essentially on the competent personalities within the municipalities: they decide what should be commissioned, when an urban complex or an important building should be redecorated. They can thus influence a fruitful and creative cooperation between the "promoter", the architect and the artists. We have also known conflicts and defeats as well as encouraging successes. Society as a whole must be called upon to go a step further in its experiments concerning public commissions, in the orientation of artistic development, and in the awakening of its citizens to art as well as its own contacts with the artists. For this reason, the State and the social forces such as trade unions also exert a certain influence on the art education of their leaders, on the development of their talents put to the service of a cultural policy, which is both intelligible and perceptive. To this end numerous internships and conferences are organized and no leader is free from his cultural responsibilities.

The second point concerns the artists once again. An artist who carries out a commission undoubtedly proceeds differently from an artist who only follows his individual intentions and his intuition. The painter or the sculptor - as the architect, the designer or the graphic artist who also belong to the Union of the Artists - who wishes to create a work of art related to architecture must take into consideration the intentions and points of view of his partners (the "promoters"). He must seek a common road, respect the delays, etc. This is not always easy but it must be learned. This is

in open opposition to the traditional subjectivity to the anarchic laws of production dictated by the capitalist market. But the development of our society during these last thirty years has progressively given birth, on one hand to socialist conditions within artistic life and, on the other hand, to the lessening of differences. One can no longer speak of contrasts between individual art and art created by public commission. The different means by which society responds to artistic needs - the ways by which it commissions artists directly or indirectly - has all in all proved. The artists consider public commissions not as a limitation of their artistic freedom but as a creative challenge from their partners to whom they are bound by common aims. The encouraging artistic climate in the DDR and the international interest in its art - by virtue of its high quality and imaginative wealth - are equally the result of the manner in which public commissions are handled.

The second point concerns the artists once again. An artist who carries out a commission undoubtedly proceeds differently from an artist who only follows his individual intentions and his intuition. The painter or the sculptor - as the architect, the designer or the graphic artist who also belong to the Union of the Artists - who wishes to create a work of art related to architecture must take into consideration the intentions and points of view of his partners (the "promoters"). He must seek a common road, respect the delays, etc. This is not always easy but it must be learned. This is