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Vita Bernhard Heisig – english version

1925 Bernhard Heisig is born in Breslau on 31 March. His father, Walter Heisig (1882-1941), is a freelance painter; he dies in an accident in 1941. His mother Hildegard (1895-1978) works in a dry-cleaning shop. Bernhard remains the only child.

1931 attends the König-Friedrich-Gymnasium in Breslau; after graduating from secondary school in October 1941, studies graphic design.

1941 Heisig volunteers for war. One year later he is called up for military service and interrupts his studies. In the summer of 1943, he is assigned to the "12th SS Panzer Division Hitler Youth".

Several times seriously wounded on the Western Front. After the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944, Heisig returns with frostbite to the city of Breslau, which has been declared a fortress city. He is again involved in fighting, is wounded again, falls into Soviet captivity and is released as an invalid in autumn 1945.

1946 Return to his mother in Breslau (Wroclaw), which has now been assigned to Poland. Heisig works as a graphic artist in the "Office for Information and Propaganda", then in the artists' cooperative "Paleta". At the end of 1946 he moves with his mother to the Soviet-occupied area of Germany, where he works in Zeitz, Weißenfels and Gera, again as a graphic artist. In 1948 he becomes a member of the Socialist Party (SED). In October 1948 he resumes his studies at the Leipzig School of Arts and Crafts.

1949 Continuation of studies at the "Academy for Graphic Arts and the Book Trade" (later "Academy for Graphic and Book Design") in Leipzig. In the summer of 1951 discontinuation of studies in protest against the increasing dogmatism in teaching. Heisig now works as a freelance graphic artist and illustrates a number of literary works. In November 1951 he marries Brunhild Eisler (* 1930), a fashion student at the Leipzig School of Applied Arts. Two sons, Johannes and Walter, emerge from the marriage (divorce 1956).

1953 After Stalin's death in March and the protests of 17 June in Berlin and elsewhere, artistic work in the GDR enjoys greater freedom, even though the state continues to control the observance of its political principles. In 1954 Heisig is appointed head of basic studies at the Leipzig Academy; in 1956 he becomes a lecturer for graphic arts there. At the same time, he becomes chairman of the "Verband Bildender Künstler (VBK)" (Association of Visual Artists) in the Leipzig district.

The distancing from Stalin and the crimes of his regime allows for a political thaw in Eastern Europe, including the GDR. After the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and its military suppression by the Soviet Union, however, the cultural climate quickly freezes over again.

Heisig takes historical events as the basis for his paintings, especially in drawing and graphic art, and soon also in painting later he will make it clear: "My paintings are not history paintings, they are paintings that express themselves at the present time with history's help"). He finds themes and motifs primarily in the history of revolutionary struggles on German soil, from 1956 also in the revolutionary events of the Paris Commune in 1871, which are at times focal points of his work. In addition, Ludwig Renn's novel "Krieg" ("War"), published in 1928 and reflecting events of the First World War, opens up for Heisig an access to his own traumatic world of experience during the Second World War. His artistic interests also include portraits and the female nude.

1956 Heisig becomes Chairman of the Leipzig district section of the East German Artists' Association and remains in office until 1959.

1961 With the construction of the wall in August 1961, the GDR tries to prevent dramatic emigration. It does in fact succeed in temporarily consolidating the economy and raising the general standard of living. The enforced stability also seems to give culture new confidence - but political leaders now see their expectations of art called into question. They had articulated these demands at the end of the 1950s as the "Bitterfeld Way": What should be important for the function of socialist art is not the individual and coincidental, but the typical; alienation is only inherent in the world of work in capitalist society - in socialist society, on the other hand, it is essentially overcome.

In the visual arts, it is above all the developments of realism that lead to sharp, ideologically shaped confrontations with those artists who seek to preserve the freedoms they have now won. Bernhard Heisig also feels this again and again. It is true that in 1961 he was appointed professor and even rector of the university. However already two years earlier, in 1959, he had provoked the displeasure of leading cultural politicians when, at the VBK congress, he comes out against "spent aesthetic maxims". At the following congress in March 1964, he bluntly criticizes the paternalism by the cultural bureaucracy towards artists. He is then removed from his post as rector of the academy but remains tutor of a specialist class for painting and graphics. It was only through him that in 1961 "color design" was introduced as a subject in this college, which was largely limited to graphic arts.

His works are also subject to sustained criticism. The district art exhibitions that take place every four years in Leipzig, as in other districts, as well as the subsequent major exhibitions of contemporary art in the GDR in Dresden, are often visited by top state and cultural officials and judged according to their understanding. At the 6th District Art Exhibition in Leipzig in 1961, for example, Walter Ulbricht, chairman of the State Council, judged in front of two early versions of Bernhard Heisig's painting "Paris Commune" that the event was interpreted too "historically pessimistically" - in contradiction to the assessment by Karl Marx. Heisig, still striving for recognition, is so irritated by the verdict that he destroys one of the versions and paints over the other.

1965 The process is repeated at the 7th District Art Exhibition in the autumn of 1965: Heisig is represented with a new version of the "Paris Commune", created in 1964. It shows above all the individual tragedy of the rebellious Communards in the face of death - and thus meets with harsh criticism in cultural-political circles. Heisig is, as it is called in party jargon, "taught"; criticism accuses him of subjectivism, historical pessimism and the abandonment of realistic positions. Again, he falls into despair and destroys this version as well.

In the meantime, however, the Leipzig art scene has gained more than regional importance. Along with Heisig, painters such as Werner Tübke and Wolfgang Mattheuer have also expressed a new perspective by framing socially relevant pictorial material primarily from the perspective of the individual. Their formulations are artistically elevated above doubt and censorship. When in the early 1970s students also came to prominence with similar works, the term "Leipzig School" arose for this development in art.

In that year 1965 Bernhard Heisig begins a series of lithographs, which finally received the title "The Fascist Nightmare". The 25 sheets of the cycle are reissued in 1974/75, partly revised and published as a portfolio. As early as 1965 Bernhard Heisig is awarded the gold medal at the International Book Art Exhibition for the first print of the series, as well as an award for his illustrations for Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage and Her Children".

His wall paintings for the Interhotel "Deutschland" in Leipzig (1964), his book illustrations for Brecht's "Mother Courage", which came out at the same time, and also paintings such as "Picassoides" I-III clearly show his fascination with French modernism, especially the works of Fernand Léger and Pablo Picasso. Soon, however, he finds stronger inspiration in the work of Oskar Kokoschka and Max Beckmann.

Since 1961, the then 20-year-old Gudrun Brüne has been a student in the book design class at the Leipzig Academy. She becomes Bernhard Heisig's partner and in 1991 his wife.

At the 11th meeting of the Central Committee in December 1965, the SED state party criticizes the "ideologically questionable" developments in the arts. The consequences, both artistically and in terms of personnel, are so far-reaching that many speak of a "clean sweep plenum". Although the visual arts are hardly mentioned at the conference, they are severely affected by the subsequent purge.

In 1966 the Leipzig Museum of Fine Arts holds a first major solo exhibition for Heisig. In this ideologically charged situation, the graphic cycle "The Fascist Nightmare" once again provokes criticism and admiration. Later, the prints are also shown at the Kunstverein Würzburg; in the West German press, the term "Nestbeschmutzer" ("nest fouler") is used. After the suppression of the "Prague Spring" in August 1968, Bernhard Heisig, long weary of constant ideological paternalism, gave up teaching at the academy.

1971 The change of power in the GDR - Erich Honecker succeeds Walter Ulbricht - brings about considerable changes in the cultural-political climate. While Ulbricht makes his personal, conservative taste the generally accepted standard and sees art and culture primarily as a means of ideological education, Honecker is tolerant as long as art and artists do not fundamentally question his politics. "If one starts out from the firm position of socialism," he explains, "in my opinion, there can be no taboos in the field of art and literature. This applies both to questions of content and style."

In the atmosphere of cultural opening of the time, Heisig finds himself ready to take over the chairmanship of the VBK again in 1972, initially in the Leipzig district section. In May 1974 he is elected vice-president of the association at GDR level. Together with the association's president Willi Sitte, he uses the opportunities offered by his office to improve the individual situation of visual artists both socially and in their working conditions.

The most important improvement is the - albeit strictly regulated - freedom for visual artists to travel to "capitalist foreign countries" including the Federal Republic of Germany. The reform of the art trade is also one of the association's successes in these years. Until then, there were only the sales cooperatives acting on a local level and the party galleries (such as CDU, NDPD and LDPD) affiliated with the publishing houses, as well as a few private art dealers. In 1974 the "Staatlicher Kunsthandel der DDR" (State Art Enterprise of the GDR) is founded, which operates sales galleries, publishes editions, organizes competitions and exhibitions outside the country.

Bernhard Heisig now also enjoys official recognition. In 1970 he receives the art prize of the city of Leipzig. In 1972 he is awarded the National Prize of the GDR, 2nd Class, and the Art Prize of the German Gymnastics and Sports Federation. In the same year, he is also elected a full member of the GDR Academy of Arts. In 1973 he is awarded the Art Prize of the Federation of German Trade Unions FDGB, and in 1974 he is awarded the Patriotic Order of Merit in Gold as well as the Theodor-Körner-Prize of the People's Army. In 1975, the year of his 50th birthday, he is honored with the Johannes R. Becher Medal. In 1976 he is awarded the decoration "Banner of Labor".

1973 the Gemäldegalerie Neue Meister in Dresden and the Museum der bildenden Künste in Leipzig put on the first major retrospective of the artist's work. Afterwards the exhibition is also shown in the Neue Berliner Galerie im Alten Museum. Abroad, exhibitions of his works are held in 1974 in Moscow, in the State Gallery at the Kusnezki Bridge, in the "Galleria Alzaia" in Rome, and in 1976 in the Palac Kultury in Poznań.

For the new building of the SED district administration in Leipzig, he finishes the painting "Yesterday and in our time" in 1974 on five assembled picture panels, altogether 2.40 meters high and 9.50 meters wide. In 1975/76 he creates for the Foyer Gallery in Berlin's Palace of the Republic the painting "Icarus", 2.80 by 4.50 meters. By now, the compositions of such works, which transcend the boundaries both of time and space, are considered typical of Heisig's painting.

Heisig does also create numerous self-portraits and portraits of personalities from politics, society and culture. An example is the portrait of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, with whom a close and multi-layered relationship develops - Heisig interprets the portrait in several versions in 1985/86. In addition, six portraits attest to the painter's intimate connection with his mother. The last of these was painted in 1978, the year she died.

1976 Heisig returns to Leipzig Academy and is elected rector. During his eleven-year tenure, Heisig carries out the complete repair and renovation of the building, which was partly destroyed during the war. He creates the conditions for the special exhibition's gallery on the ground floor, which opens in 1979, and uses his international connections to realize an attractive exhibition program. Among others, the college presents graphic art by Pablo Picasso, American Pop Art as well as works by El Lissitzky, Alfred Hrdlicka, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Joseph Beuys.

1978 Heisig is honored with the National Prize of the GDR, 1st class. In the same year he is elected First Vice President at the Congress of the VBK of the GDR. In 1983 he is reconfirmed in this post, but in 1988 he does not run for re-election.

The art of the GDR also gains increasing recognition outside the country. Bernhard Heisig is regarded as one of its most important protagonists. In 1977 he was invited to participate in Documenta 6 in Kassel alongside Willi Sitte, Werner Tübke and Wolfgang Mattheuer. In 1980 the Frankfurter Kunstverein showed several his paintings and the graphic cycle "The Fascist Nightmare". In the same year, the Bremen art dealer Michael Hertz presents "Pictures from the Seventies" by Bernhard Heisig in his gallery.

1980 As part of the preparations for the exhibition "Artists of the GDR" Dieter Brusberg visits Bernhard Heisig in Leipzig for the first time. He is accompanied by the gallery owner Herbert Meyer-Ellinger and Georg Schäfer, the head of culture of the Jahrhunderthalle Hoechst in Frankfurt, where the exhibition is to take place in 1981. When official organs of the GDR try to influence the curators in their choice of artists, they categorically refuse - and experience an undreamt solidarity from artists like Heisig, Willi Sitte, and Werner Tübke, along with their compatriot Gerhard Altenbourg, who was frowned upon as a critic of the regime in the GDR, and who finally (like Carlfriedrich Claus or Heisig's student Hartwig Ebersbach) is also supportive. Also, in 1981 Brusberg shows a large exhibition of Bernhard Heisig in his gallery in Hanover and takes over his representation in the Federal Republic. In addition to private collectors such as Peter Ludwig in Aachen, West German museums also acquire important paintings by the artist. The Hanover collector Bernhard Sprengel buys the painting "Seeräuberjenny" (1979/80) as, he insists, "an important and necessary gift for the Sprengel Museum".

1981 The Akademie der Künste publishes a monograph on Bernhard Heisig, authored by the

Leipzig art historian Karl Max Kober. In 1982 Heisig is awarded the title "Merited University Teacher of the GDR" and one year later receives the Hans Grundig Medal of the Association of Visual Artists of the GDR.

1982 Bernhard Heisig is one of 13 artists from the GDR whose works are shown in the exhibition "Zeitvergleich" (Comparison of Time) until 1983 in Hamburg, Stuttgart, Düsseldorf, Munich, Nuremberg and Hanover. The impulse for this is given by the Hamburg journalist Henri Nannen, editor of the magazine "STERN" (STAR), who was excited by the exhibition in Höchst the year before. Dieter Brusberg, editor-in-chief of the art magazine "art", founded in 1979, and Uwe M. Schneede, then director of the Hamburger Kunstverein, act as curators. Günter Grass writes the preface to the catalogue and his quote "All artists are wall jumpers" almost causes a sensation.

1985 On the occasion of his 60th birthday, Heisig is honored with the ribbon of honor of the Order of Merit of the GDR. On the same occasion, the Museum of Fine Arts in Leipzig organizes a retrospective including recent works, which is subsequently shown in Moscow and in the Berlin Exhibition Center at the Television Tower.

1987 Bernhard Heisig resigns from the post of rector but remains head of a class and mentor of master students until 1990. The Faculty of Philosophy of the Karl Marx University in Leipzig awards him the academic degree of PhD. honoris causa. An exhibition in Moscow shows works by Heisig, after which it can be seen in the Neue Berliner Galerie im Alten Museum.

1989 During the second half of the eighties the crisis in the GDR became increasingly obvious. Heisig registered the social reality of the country very well and also recognized the necessity of reforms but withdrew more and more into artistic work. He leaves the SED only in autumn 1989. In December he returns not just the two national prizes, but also the associated endowments of 70,000 marks. From that a fund is set up at the Leipzig Academy from which graduates and master students can receive scholarships. In 1991 Heisig resigns from the Academy of Arts of the GDR.

The German-German cultural exchange experiences two final highlights: A retrospective of Max Ernst, compiled by the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, is shown at the Moritzburg in Halle in early September. A few weeks later, a large travelling show with works by Bernhard Heisig opens in Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau. The initiative for both projects comes primarily from the founding director of the Berlinische Galerie Eberhard Roters and Dieter Brusberg.

Incidentally, the Heisig Show in the Gropius-Bau is opened by the Mayor of Berlin, Walter Momper, at the beginning of October 1989, six weeks before the fall of the Wall. Subsequently it is shown at the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn and the Haus der Kunst in Munich. The catalogue book "Bernhard Heisig, Retrospective", edited by Jörn Merkert and Peter Pachnicke, is published to accompany it. At the same time, a part of the graphics and illustrations are exhibited at the Sprengel Museum Hannover and afterwards at the Ludwig Galerie Schloss Oberhausen. Following the major tour, in July/August 1990, the National Gallery Berlin exhibits a larger selection of the paintings in the Old Museum under the title "Bernhard Heisig, the Painter", again supplemented by new works.

1992 After reunification, Bernhard Heisig is repeatedly accused of having supported the GDR regime through his work. He remains true to his artistic attitude even under the new social conditions. Finally, he and his wife Gudrun Brüne move from Leipzig to the Brandenburg village of Strodehne. The couple have been familiar with the Havelland region since the 1970s, when they regularly withdrew to work in their house in neighboring Warnau during the summer months.

From Max Beckmann's heirs, Heisig receives eight still unpainted panels from the New York estate

of the revered painter, from which he composes an eleven-part polyptych. The "Galerie Berlin" exhibits it in the same year. In the following year, it is extensively revised and in 1994 forms the core of the travelling exhibition "Zeiten zu leben" (Times to live), which begins at the Herforder Kunstverein and continues to the Städtische Galerie Siegen, the Landesmuseum Oldenburg and the Kunstverein und Städtische Museum Reutlingen. By the time, the "Galerie Berlin" presents the panels of the polyptych in 1995, it has since been broken up into a series of individual pictures.

Galerie Brusberg has already moved from Hanover to Berlin in 1982, where it is responsible for the work of Bernhard Heisig, compiles publications and has since presented five exhibitions of his works in its rooms on Kurfürstendamm (another exhibition will follow in 2011 in the rooms of the Hofgalerie). In 1995, the "Worthington Gallery" in Chicago will also offer the American public an insight into Heisig's art. 1995/96 the "Galerie Berlin" shows an exhibition of mainly recent works under the title "Geisterbahn" ("Ghost train"), which is subsequently taken over by the Mönchehaus-Museum für moderne Kunst in Goslar. And in the exhibition "Herbstspaziergang" (Autumn Walk) put together by the University of Leipzig at the turn of the year 1996/97, 20 of the 50 paintings alone were only created in the year just ended.

1998 A show with a more retrospective character, including Heisig's competition designs from 1978 for the ceiling painting in the foyer of the newly built Leipzig Gewandhaus, is shown in 1998/99, first in the Sinclair House in Bad Homburg and the Von-der-Heydt-Museum in Wuppertal, then, supplemented by the latest works, in the rooms of the "Galerie Berlin".

From September 1998 to March 1999 Heisig works on his painting "Time and Life" for the German Bundestag in the building of the Reichstag in Berlin. The unusual format - 1.25 meters high, 5.92 meters wide - was given to him by the British architect Sir Norman Foster, who had completely redesigned the historic building. In response to the recent accusation of "loyalty to the state" during GDR times, the painter Hartwig Ebersbach, a former master student of Heisig, wrote an open letter in which a large number of personalities from East and West - including Günter Grass and Lothar de Maizière - expressed their solidarity with the artist. The Art Advisory Council of the German Bundestag also does not waver in its decision.

2004 Although several serious accidents severely affect him, Heisig continues to work. He writes obituaries for the painters Wolfgang Mattheuer and Werner Tübke, companions and colleagues at the Leipzig Academy, who died in 2004 shortly after each other. In the same year, the Lord Mayor of Leipzig, Wolfgang Tiefensee, awards him the "Medal of Honor of the City of Leipzig" in Strodehne.

2005 In the year of his 80th birthday, the Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig shows a retrospective initiated by Armin Zweite in Düsseldorf and conceived by the art historian Eckhart Gillen under the title "Die Wut der Bilder" ("The fury of images"). In his speech at the opening, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder lifts the artist above all criticism: "For some he was and remains the most important representative of GDR art, for others he is one of the most significant German artists of the 20th century. I profess to the latter." On the occasion of the exhibition Gillen publishes a catalogue; Heiner and Marianne Köster present the commemorative publication "Gestern und in dieser Zeit" (Yesterday and at this time) with contributions from more than 70 authors. The exhibition is subsequently shown by the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf and in the Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin. In addition, the Berlin art dealers Rüdiger Küttner and Dieter Brusberg publish Heisig's scattered essays and speeches on the occasion of this anniversary under the book title "Ruhig mal die Zähne zeigen" (roughly: "It's o.k. to show your teeth from time to time").

2010 On the occasion of his 85th birthday on March 31, Bernhard Heisig is awarded the "Honorary

Prize of the Prime Minister of Brandenburg for a lifetime achievement". The artist continues to impress friends, admirers and critics with the energy of his artistic exploration of present and past.

2011 After two strokes Bernhard Heisig dies on 10 June in his house in Strodehne.