

# **IMPRINTING IDEOLOGY, MEMORY, AND EDUCATION IN ART OF THE EARLY GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines three artists and their politicized engagement with cultural memory and ideological formation in East Germany's educational structures during the immediate postwar period and early years of the Cold War. I argue that artistic identity in eastern Germany was deeply dependent on remembering, positioning, and re-narrating the past. After 1945, several artists whom the Nazis had repressed or banned from making work during National Socialism became professors and public leaders in Germany's reconstruction. My project looks at three professors and their pedagogical circles in Berlin and Dresden: Oskar Nerlinger (1893-1969), Lea Grundig (1906-1977), and Edmund Kesting (1892-1970). Each artist was involved in the nation's collective struggle to reconstruct the visual arts and cultural activity after World War II. During an era of debate and contradiction about form, function, and style, these artists looked for ways to educate the younger generation about the position of art and expression within a nation that officially divided in 1949. Contrary to scholarship that maintains a rigid division between East German Socialist Realism and West German abstraction, my dissertation reveals multiple competing ideas and practices. It locates the tension that

existed between artists' individual approaches, dominant political beliefs, and public institutional models.

Nerlinger, Grundig, and Kesting each served as a visual artist, a public figure, and a writer. Chapter One examines Oskar Nerlinger's traversal of geopolitical and ideological boundaries as an academy professor in West and East Berlin, and as a co-editor of the art magazine *bildende kunst*. Chapter Two illustrates how graphic artist and Dresden professor Lea Grundig deployed antifascist messages and traumatic memories, real and imagined, in her work and teaching. Chapter Three discusses Edmund Kesting's insistence on modernist experimentation in academies in Dresden, Berlin, and Potsdam. Underscored in the introduction and conclusion as key contributions to cultural life, these case studies reveal the broad range of pedagogical and artistic practices within the foundational years of the GDR. Together they show the relevance of history in East Germany in spite of political and social efforts to erase, revise, or ignore the past.