



Margaret Hunter

Margaret Hunter, born 1948, Scottish artist, since 1985 also resident in West Berlin.

1990 artist of the East Side Gallery.

‘Who hears butterflies breathing’

The English translation of the interview featured in the book ‘Mauerfall’ published on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall 2019.

I came to West Berlin after my studies at the Glasgow School of Art for post graduate study at the Academy of Arts under Prof. Georg Baselitz. West Berlin had a very special situation, different from anywhere else. Life was ‘artificial’, with tax concessions for businesses, subsidies, no army conscription for young men, cheap apartments and people seemed to study forever, jobbing on the side. The main thing in West Berlin was this feeling of absolute freedom. I could live as an artist in a way that wouldn’t have been possible at the time in Scotland. That was fantastic. But the freedom was physically limited; no matter where you went in the city, you always came up against the Wall, so it was an artificial kind of life. After the fall of communism, that changed radically. The artificial life, the ‘freedom’ was gone.

In 1988 I was invited by Solidarność to a large group exhibition in the Franciscan Church in Pryemysl, Poland. Art in Poland was especially a means of bringing people together. A politically significant time, an amazingly interesting experience for me; the artists I met wanted to show me everything, tell me everything, how they lived what their hopes were. That gave me a different perspective for my art work, and the feeling that as an ‘outsider’ I was neutral, impartial. During that

visit one of the invited group, a professor from Warsaw University, was picked up by the police simply for being out on the streets around 9:00 in the evening. He was allowed to leave a day or so later but very shaken. This also made me frighteningly aware of how precarious freedom in these East Bloc countries could be.

After the fall of communism, I was curious and soon visited East Germany with exhibitions in Potsdam, Halberstadt, Görlitz, Dresden. Again, I was welcomed, particularly as a Scot and people wanted to talk to me. I was not a West German artist at a time when they might have been found arrogant.

I felt an affinity with the East Germans because I was reminded of how I felt, after living in a small village on the west coast of Scotland, suddenly confronted with this glittering, bright, buzzing West Berlin, this 'everything is possible' place. It was very difficult for most East Germans. Chancellor Helmut Kohl had promised the people of the GDR 'a flowering landscape'. But what came for many? Unemployment. Having to rethink all their previous structures but unprepared. The whole process took time.

For the ten-year anniversary of the Fall of the Wall there was hardly anything going on, no major celebration, very little. I had been invited for a solo exhibition to commemorate the event in Glasgow by the Hon. German Consul. But I noticed in Berlin it was all still too close. Many people were still in conflict about it.

The actual night the Wall fell I was in Scotland because my daughter had got married. The news, the TV pictures were incredible and the euphoria, it was contagious. Amazing how it happened. Nobody believed that the division of Germany could suddenly change in a moment, a moment full of energy, almost like an eruption, an outburst. That evening I immediately changed a painting I'd started in my studio; now it depicted a head with both arms and hands stretching upwards, with more outstretched hands scratched into the thick oil paint. I used very dramatic colours, turquoise, lots of vibrant reds and orange. I called it "Berlin, 9.11.89".

Many visitors flew to Berlin, to join in and be part of this great reunion. Not so long before that, perhaps ten months, a young man had been shot dead trying to escape to the West. For me there was this dichotomy between euphoria and seriousness. I also remember the wooden crosses near the Wall opposite the Reichstag, some marked 'Unknown'. People later came and wrote names on them. That was very poignant.

After the Fall of the Wall I often commuted to Scotland. Every time I came back to Berlin there were dramatic changes. The Treuhänder (Government Trustees) came, sometimes folding up and selling businesses for one German mark. Many East people became unemployed. The Stasi headquarters were stormed as they sought to destroy documents, information. Later everyone could read their Stasi files; for many of the people it was a trauma, terrible to know who had been spying on them, even sometimes within families.

In 1990 I was invited to make a painting on the Berlin Wall on the previously forbidden East part of the city. It's said 10 people had died in the area trying to flee to the West. It was called the East Side Gallery, with over 100 artists involved from East and West worldwide. When I was painting, a young woman parked her Trabi car on the pavement beside me and said, "I want to paint a picture here, too." It was too late; all had been allocated. But I replied: "You can have a segment from me." She copied her Trabi from the car manual and wrote above: 'Test the Best!' The car came from west to east bursting through the wall. I thought it was a very clever idea. Also 'Test the Best' was apt. Because the Trabi was decried in West, and at that time the cigarette brand 'West' was everywhere with its advertising 'Test the West'.

The artists worked together, beside us Romanians, Italians, Spaniards, Americans, from France, artists and others who had something to say. We couldn't really understand each other, but the atmosphere was full of verve and we were all happy. Buses were continually rolling past, a lot of Japanese and also the constant media. We discussed the reunification. Those were such exciting times. After one year the East Side Gallery was placed under monument protection.

But ten years later the East Side Gallery was in a miserable condition. Some artists came together and we renovated our own paintings and removed the graffiti. Over the years there was a kind of 'dialogue' with the graffiti people. They wrote something, I wiped it away. New messages came again. I didn't find the small 'I was here' inscriptions so disturbing. One time I was trying to photograph my painting. Then three Italian girls asked me if I had anything to write with. I retorted: "You're not going to write on this painting!" Si, nodding their heads. No, no I said: "that's my painting." We took photos together and discussed the meaning of the picture. I enjoyed this kind of rapport.

The title of the painting is *Joint Venture*. Those were keywords at the time, with the thought of East and West companies coming together. I interpreted the idea with two large mask-like heads placed on top of each other on their side. The English term 'strange bedfellows' came to mind. For me these two masks were like the two Germanys because neither side really knew what lay behind the other. The black lines between them were supposed to symbolise communication and exchange;

that was the ideal. But I added the figures on both sides of the heads signifying individuals who had to bend and stretch to come to terms with their new situation. Especially in the East their lives were radically changed and they were unprepared. That I felt was the reality.

The East Side Gallery was a patchwork of paintings some with more or less graffiti. It was excellent news when it was taken over, now under the auspices of the Berlin Wall Foundation, a great relief. There were huge protests and demonstrations when a piece of the East Side Gallery was removed in 2016 to make an entrance way for a tower block built on the 'death strip' behind the Wall. I was very worried: I thought it was the beginning of the end for the East Side Gallery.

The Wall is a synonym for the Iron Curtain for people worldwide. If you walk along the Gallery you can imagine what it was like. It's real, concrete, without attempting to cause guilty memories. It was a positive act of freedom, there are the stories, it's colourful and you can read into the pictures. That's why I rejoiced when in 2009 we were asked to restore our paintings on the East Side Gallery. The majority of the artists came together again, brought back from all over the world. It was a reunion for the artists and very different from the first time we worked in 1990, with better quality of paint, scaffolding and assistants to support us in the work. The complete restoration was a highlight of the 20th anniversary of the Fall of the Wall and the interest of the population and the media was tremendous, jubilant. Perhaps the fresh, colourful pictures acted like a plaster on a wound that covered up old or bad memories.

In 2009 for an exhibition in Potsdam formerly in the East, I made a 1:1 copy of my large East Side Gallery Wall painting. At the opening I invited people to inscribe comments on the painting, their feelings about the reunification. It was a kind of reiteration linking it to the graffiti on the original mural. Someone wrote the remark: "Who hears butterflies breathing".

In 2017 I had an important exhibition in Scotland and again showed the copy of my huge Wall picture. There were school groups who'd never heard of the Berlin Wall. I conducted guided tours and explained some of the history. The picture filled a large wall which first shocked people as they entered and then interested them. The gallery supervisors also listened attentively to me and later made small 'guided tours' of their own, which really pleased me.

For a long time the wall was very difficult to overcome in people's minds. That's what makes the 30th anniversary so interesting. I think it will be a great celebration. Because now we also have an audience that was not yet born in 1989 and that never experienced the Berlin Wall.