In September 1976, the painter and president of the artist union of the GDR, Willi Sitte, received a letter from a West German person whose name he had never heard before. The man introduced himself as Peter Ludwig, “CEO of Leonard Monheim KG, one of the largest chocolate producers in the world.” More than a year ago, he wrote, an instant hot chocolate production plant operated by his company had been set up in Bergwitz (GDR), and he hoped for further cooperation to follow.

“As a sideline, in a way,” he was an art collector and Honorary Professor of Art History at the University of Cologne. Ludwig named a few prestigious honors awarded to him in recognition of his activities, then quickly came to the point: he wanted to visit the painter’s studio to see some recent work. Also, Ludwig was interested in collaborating with a museum of the GDR, possibly the Galerie Neue Meister in Dresden. “It would be an honor and an affair of the heart for me if I could help to close gaps within the overwhelm-

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...ing wealth of the Dresden collections through permanent loans.” Furthermore, he called it a “painful lack” that there was no contemporary art from the GDR on display in Western museums.

Sitte considered the letter. Four years before, the Basic Treaty between the two German states had been signed. It led to the establishment of diplomatic missions in East Berlin and Bonn, acceptance of both Germanies into the UN and a series of cooperation projects and mutual expressions of good will. Still, there was no agreement on cultural exchange and very little was known in West Germany about the art created behind the Iron Curtain. One the one hand, a skeptical attitude was held by most West Germans toward socialist realism and the role of artists in a totalitarian regime. The GDR, on the other hand, was keen to defend its own Nationalkultur against Western influence and “cultural diversion.” Any West German institution wishing to exhibit state-sanctioned art from the GDR could do so only in cooperation with the Communist Party of Germany, DKP. The first attempt at this had been made in 1975 by the (private) Hamburger Kunstverein under its director, Uwe M. Schneede. For a public museum, dealing with the German Communist Party during the Cold War was impossible.

What was Sitte to do with Ludwig’s request? As it happened, the painter received a visit by his friend Horst Sindermann two days later. Sindermann was the president of the Council of Ministers, formally the GDR’s chief executive body. Sindermann was more familiar with the name Peter Ludwig, calling him “a pioneer of the East–Western joint venture,” made possible by the new head of state, Erich Honecker in 1971. It enabled the citizens of the GDR to buy Western goods manufactured by Western companies within the GDR. A large share of the goods, from Blaupunkt stereo systems to Nivea skin cream, was exported back to the FRG where the low wages of the East-
ern Bloc added to the profit of companies like Salamander, Bosch or Nestlé. The GDR was in dire need of foreign currency and consumer goods, and cooperation with Western companies was an indispensable part of the economic strategy of the GDR, and Ludwig was a loyal partner. Within two weeks, Sitte decided to accept Ludwig’s offer. In December, the collector found himself in the studio of Willi Sitte in Halle. Discreetly, Sitte steered him away from the Galerie Neue Meister, whose director, Joachim Uhlitzsch, was an informer for the State Security (Stasi), spying on artists and foreign representatives. Instead, Sitte introduced him to Eberhard Bartke, the director of the National Gallery in East Berlin. Bartke saw Ludwig’s offer as an opportunity to reconnect the National Gallery with Western art, a link brutally severed in 1933 and slightly renewed by Ludwig Justi between 1946 and 1957. Ludwig had become a public figure in 1968 as the only lender to the exhibition Kunst der sechziger Jahre in Cologne, introducing Pop art to a German audience. Holding a PhD in art history, Peter Ludwig steered the family-owned Monheim KG, brought into the marriage by his wife Irene, née Monheim, who is an art historian, too. Peter Ludwig was a connoisseur of many fields, including illuminated manuscripts, classical antiquities and contemporary art, which he had been buying in bulk since the 1960s. Both collectors clung to the human figure and maintained a humanist worldview, with the art of the ancient Greeks as a foundation. Ludwig’s dissertation from 1949 had revolved around Picasso’s idea of man, his Menschenbild, and put it into context with the one presumably held by artists and writers of the same generation. Picasso, who had never abandoned figuration and whose communist, antiwar attitude was warmly welcomed in the GDR, featured prominently in Ludwig’s collection. In 1977, hot chocolate and Picasso paintings were Ludwig’s entrance ticket to the National Gallery of the GDR.

6 Staatsliche Museen zu Berlin–Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Zentralarchiv, VA 975, Correspondence of Director General Eberhard Bartke to Hans Joachim Hoffmann, 9 December 1976, unpaginated.
10 Peter Ludwig, Picassos Menschenbild als Ausdruck eines generationsmäßig bedingten Lebensgefühls, Dissertation, Johannes Gutenberg Universität, Mainz (1950).
The exhibition *Contemporary Art* from the Ludwig Collection, Aachen, opened on 29 September 1977. “It wasn’t treated like a sensation,” recalls Hans Jürgen Papies of the National Gallery, “but it was.” Fourteen artists, including Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, were on display, as well as five works by Pablo Picasso which established a link to the first half of the twentieth century. The selection had been made by Bartke and constituted the only example of international, Western art in the whole country. Although GDR artists were well-informed about contemporary Western art through illegally imported magazines and catalogs, having such works in the National Gallery was a sign of liberalization.

Cooperation between the socialist state and the art-loving capitalist was deepened during the following years. After 1977, Ludwig started buying art in the GDR at an unparalleled rate. At first, he focused on the key figures Willi Sitte, Bernhard Heisig, Wolfgang Mattheuer and Werner Tübke, who were sometimes called the *Viererbande* (Gang of four) due to their success and influence. The focus of Ludwig’s interest later widened, but never touched the margins of underground art. To the patriot Peter Ludwig, the division between East and West German art was artificial, as both were primarily German. While West Germany had oriented itself toward Paris and later toward New York City, the artists of the GDR, appalled by the propaganda art of a Stalinist USSR, had nowhere to turn—and thus looked back. For that reason, “more German art” (Günter Grass) was created in the GDR, where painters like Menzel, Kollwitz, Corinth, and Beckmann were points of reference. An open-minded conservative with a preference for figurative painting, Ludwig was predestined to be susceptible to such art.

But what about the GDR? After successfully gaining international recognition in 1973, the cultural policy of the GDR was undetermined in the 1970s. The officials feared an influx of Western values, yet they were eager to see the GDR represented in the West. More than once, Ludwig complained about the officials’ lack of support. The catalog of his exhibition in

11 Dr. Hans Jürgen Papies in conversation with the author, 11 July 2010.
13 Saehrendt, *Kunst als Botschafter einer künstlichen Nation*.
the National Gallery was delayed for five years—until Ludwig complained to his partner in business affairs, Günter Mittag. The influential Secretary of the Economic Commission within the Politbüro acted quickly. After a confrontational meeting of the Politbüro, the catalog was produced immediately, the preface written overnight by Hans Jürgen Papies instead of Eberhard Bartke. In his foreword, Papies linked Ludwig’s engagement to that of Wilhelm Wagener, whose bequest of 1861 had laid the foundation for the National Gallery.

Although there were critics of his influence, neither the State Security nor ideologues like Kurt Hager had much to say when it came to Peter Ludwig. Erich Honecker’s economic policy relied on welfare and an ever-increasing supply of consumer goods. It worked as a surrogate for a lack of democratic rights and was to prevent social unrest like in June 1953. Therefore, Peter Ludwig was a key figure who could act within the GDR with great freedom. A permanent visa was granted to him allowing uncontrolled and unlimited entry into the GDR at all times; when necessary, Willi Sitte made a call to the border guards to speed things up.

Ludwig first exhibited his eastern acquisitions in Aachen in 1979. Before making contact with the GDR, he had bought works by Gerhard Altenbourg and A. R. Penck, who were not part of the official canon of the GDR. Especially A. R. Penck, closely watched by the Stasi, was considered a constant nuisance and a provocateur by Sitte and the Minister of Culture, Hoffmann. Since the 1960s, Penck’s works were smuggled out of the country by his gallerist Michael Werner, who had made him a prominent figure in the art world of West Germany. When the key representatives of the artists’ union VBK were to be shown in Peter Ludwig’s Neue Galerie in Aachen, Sitte called up Wolfgang Becker, the director of the Neue Galerie, telling him

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15 Dr. Hans Jürgen Papes in conversation with the author, 13 July 2010.
20 Bundesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (BStU), Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (MfS), 62.45/91, vol. 4; Letter by the Minister of Culture, Hans-Joachim Hoffmann to Ursula Ragwitz, Head of the Culture Dept. at the Central Committee of the SED, 14 December 1979, 43–47.
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Penck’s paintings had to be removed. Penck’s paintings had to be removed.21 Today, Willi Sitte denies ever having demanded such a move.22 It was, in fact, Peter Ludwig himself who wrote an apologetic letter to Sitte, referring to Penck as an artist who was “demonstratively not a member of the association.”23 Hence, Ludwig wrote, he had ordered Penck’s work to be taken down while those of the VBK elite were shown. As an early collector of Penck, Ludwig knew very well that this was not true. Penck had been trying to achieve full membership of the VBK for years, since it was a necessary precondition for a legal existence as a visual artist in the GDR. Given the circumstances, distancing himself from A. R. Penck was proof of Ludwig’s goodwill toward the GDR. His priorities were now elsewhere.

Throughout the 1980s, Peter Ludwig bought and exhibited art from the GDR and the USSR in West Germany.24 Although there was a growing interest in these artists among the general public, most German museums remained skeptical about the artistic relevance of artists willingly cooperating with the SED. Even Cologne’s Museum Ludwig, named after the collectors after they donated some 350 works in 1976, excluded art of the GDR. Chiefly for that reason, Peter Ludwig founded the Ludwig Institute for Art of the GDR in 1983, whose goal was to exhibit and research art from East Germany. Ludwig loaned about 500 works to the city of Oberhausen, which provided its municipal gallery as a venue and bore many of the costs.25 In theory, nobody in the GDR could interfere with the institute’s curatorial practice, since all the works belonged to Peter and Irene Ludwig. For that very reason, the GDR regarded the emergence of the Ludwig Institute with a mixture of unease and satisfaction—satisfaction because it actively promoted the country’s art, which was a key aim of the cultural policy of the GDR, and unease because this promotion was not under its strict control. An East German diplomat based in Bonn suggested his government should “try to influence the

21 BStU, MfS, Ast. Dresden, AOP 735/84: 77. See Offner and Schroeder, Eingegrenzt/Ausgegrenzt, 248; conversation between the author and Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Becker, 21 July 2010, Aachen.
22 Schirmer, Willi Sitte, 257.
institution, about whose existence we can’t change anything, to propagate the art of the GDR.”

As it turned out, that was not necessary. While Peter Ludwig could act freely in the GDR, his Ludwig Institute for Art of the GDR was keen to portray the country’s cultural policy in a positive way. Most texts in the exhibition catalogs were compiled from earlier publications in the GDR. Taking into account the small team working in Oberhausen and the few Western scholars familiar with this art at the time, cooperation with the socialist country was unavoidable. But the initial goal of the Ludwig Institute—to present and research art from the GDR from a Western point of view—collided with the collector’s interest to maintain his special relationship with the GDR.

From the first group show “Durchblick” (See through) onward, the role of Peter Ludwig and the selection of artists was greeted by some and criticized by others. “Durchblick” was, in any case, a canonic representation of what was considered good art in the GDR. When the exhibition traveled to West Berlin, German conceptual artist Hans Haacke commented on Peter Ludwig’s eastern endeavors with an installation in the Neue Berliner Kunstverein. Broadness and Diversity of the Ludwig Brigade (Plate 6.1) was a site-specific work. Haacke divided a room with a replica of the Berlin Wall and put an advertisement of the Monheim chocolate brand Trumpf on the western side. On the eastern side, the viewer encountered an oil painting mocking the agitational style of socialist realism. It shows Peter Ludwig in an apron, stirring chocolate with a beater. His pose is taken from August Sander’s famous portrait of a Confectioner (1928), eluding the self-confidence of a master craftsman. In the painting, Ludwig is flanked by two women, one holding a banner calling for “solidarity with our colleagues in capitalist Berlin,” the other demanding a pay rise. The woman to Ludwig’s right is his wife Irene, the second, on the left, is Erika Steinführer, a labor heroine decorated for exceeding her

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16 BStU, MsS, AP 645/92, Permanent Representation of the GDR, Bonn to Ministry of Culture, Report about the Foundation of the Ludwig Institute for Art of the GDR, 12 July 1981.
17 See Bernhard Mensch, ed., Durchblick (Oberhausen: Ludwig-Institut für Kunst der DDR, 1984) and Bernhard Mensch, ed., Durchblick II (Oberhausen: Ludwig-Institut für Kunst der DDR, 1986).
19 Hans Haacke, Weite und Vielfalt der Brigade Ludwig, 1984, multipart installation (oil on canvas and billboard), Falkenberg Collection, Hamburg; the title is an allusion to Erich Honecker’s promise for “broadness and diversity” in the arts made in 1971.
output target in a light bulb factory. Through a publication, the public was in-
formed about the Monheim chocolate factory in West Berlin, where low wag-
es were being paid while the company profited from tax breaks afforded to the
walled West Berlin.

Haacke’s work is full of allusions. The devoted party member Walter
Womacka had painted the portrait of Erika Steinführer in a Rauschenberg-
inspired fashion, using screenprints for the first time in his career.30 The lend-
er of the only Rauschenbergs in the GDR was Peter Ludwig—and he was
the one to buy Womacka’s two-piece work, which had pleased even Erich
Honecker.31 While Haacke showed Broadness and Diversity of the Ludwig
Brigade, the original Erika Steinführer by Womacka was on display in the
Berliner Kunsthalle on Kurfürstendamm.

Hans Haacke pointed to the interrelation of the business and art activi-
ties of Peter Ludwig—and to an agreement among some West Germans that
the official art of the GDR deserved a place in the museums of the West. It
was, however, only the art approved by the SED, not the one created in the
social margins and within the underground scene of the country. Still today,
an easy definition of what a Staatskünstler is and who could claim to be a dis-
sident is hard to make—sometimes established artists acted in favor of the
artistic freedom of their young colleagues, sometimes they hampered it. Even
critics of the regime were usually members of the VBK, and in general there
were “enough public funds to be distributed to everyone,” as Christoph Tan-
nert put it in 1990.32

Still, Peter Ludwig supported artists who were having a difficult time in
the GDR, such as Hartwig Ebersbach. The recognition gained in Oberhausen
strengthened their position in the GDR. Besides the attention, Ludwig made
sure the artists received a share of 15% of the price paid for their work, to be used
for trips and shopping.33 But they had to be loyal: when the painter Volker Stelz-
mann used his retrospective in West Berlin (organized by the Ludwig Insti-
tute) to leave the GDR, Ludwig stopped buying works from him.34 Altogether,

32 Christoph Tannert, “DDR-Kunst”—letztes Kapitel,” in Bilder aus Deutschland, Kunst der DDR aus der
33 Schirmer, Willi Sitte, 257.
34 Bernhard Mensch, ed., Volker Stelzmann, 1967–1983. Werkverzeichnis der Gemälde und Grafik (Oberhau-
the exhibitions of the Ludwig institute became more varied in the second half of the 1980s, focusing less on the generation of Sitte, Heisig and Tübeck. Young artists were allowed to travel to Oberhausen for a symposium in 1988.\footnote{For a protocol, see, Bernhard Mensch, ed., “Probleme des Realismus heute,” Ludwig Institut für Kunst der DDR. Informationen und Neuerwerbungen, Vol. 4 (July 1989).} It was, in fact, the West German government that refused to fund the institution on a permanent basis, arguing that its focus could endanger the idea of national unity, which was a key demand within the constitution of the FRG.\footnote{The Federal Minister of Intra-German Relations, Rainer Barzel, in a letter to Peter Ludwig quoting: Bernhard Mensch and Peter Pachnicke, ed., Deutsche Bilder aus der Sammlung Ludwig (Oberhausen: Ludwig Galerie, 2006), 204.}

As the Berlin Wall fell and the disintegration of the GDR began, Peter Ludwig tried to install his collections permanently in the National Gallery in East Berlin. In the autumn of 1989, he offered to donate about forty works of art plus sixty on permanent loan.\footnote{Draft contract for the Ludwig donation offer, SMB-PK, Zentralarchiv, VA 5528, unpaginated.} In addition, he promised to pay 100,000 DM a year to support the institution. In exchange, the entire contemporary branch of the museum had to be named after him.

While the director general was inclined to accept, a full meeting of the academic staff voted against the offer, fearing a loss of identity of the National Gallery—whose collection of art of the GDR would have become part of the Ludwig Galerie as well. As the offer was rejected, all loans were withdrawn from Berlin in 1991. Many of them found a new home even further east. Peter Ludwig was not interested only in East German art—from 1981, loans and donations had been made to museums in Vienna, Budapest (1988), St. Petersburg (1995) and, finally, Beijing in 1996.\footnote{For information on the respective cooperation projects, see Marc Scheps, ed., Unser Jahrhundert. Menschenbilder, Bildwerwelten (Munich: Prestel, 1995), 253–60, and Bernhard Mensch, ed., Sammlung Ludwig in Museen der Welt (Oberhausen: Ludwig Institut, 1996).}

While his attempt to become an all-German patron had failed, Peter Ludwig continued to broaden horizons about Eastern art in the West and vice versa. While the Ludwig Institute for Art of the GDR in Oberhausen lost its purpose after 1990, East and West German artists were on display in Ludwig museums around the world, along with art from the respective countries. Paradoxically, Peter Ludwig’s intention to unite German art before the reunification was not achieved in Cologne or Berlin, but in Budapest, St. Petersburg and Beijing.