

WIELAND SPECK/SHELLEY SILVER

EXILE- BERLIN



Above: WIELAND SPECK, *Berlin Off/On Wall*, 1978. Installation view at Exile, 2009. Photo: Christian Siekmeier. Right: SHELLY SILVER, *Former East/Former West*, 1994. German with English subtitles, 16mm transfer to video, 62 mins. All courtesy the artist and Exile, Berlin.

While the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall was celebrated at the Brandenburg Gate with the usual trappings of state holidays, political speeches on huge flat screens, fireworks and a Bon Jovi concert, the question remains why hardly a single major contemporary art institution in the city wagered an exhibition dealing with German reunification. The task was left to smaller galleries and ini-

tiatives, like Exile, which showed two films that presented documentary material problematizing the existence of two Germanies. *Berlin On/Off Wall* by Wieland Speck is a documentation of a performance from 1978, in which painter Per Lüke climbs a western portion of the Berlin Wall and sits playing a harp until the arrival of the West German police. Roughly documented and observed by only a handful of on-lookers (Western tourists and Eastern border guards,) the action itself conveys fragility and naiveté. A radical contrast to the innocuous performance is the response of the East German Stasi, which photographed the action and subsequently researched “the perpetrator’s” personal information with a horrifying minutiae reflected in files that Speck was able to obtain from former state police archives and which accompany the film.

Dealing with the early years of reunification, Shelly Silver’s hour-long film *Former East/Former West* (1994) presents a compelling portrait of the mental landscape that prevails in a persistently divided Germany. In interviews with a fascinating range of individuals on the street, Silver probes attitudes towards notions of de-

mocracy, socialism, history, foreigners and nationality. Gradually outlining a substantial disparity in the experience of the “Wessies,” for whom little had changed, and the “Ossies,” whose daily lives were often transformed, the film’s value as a historical document is based on its ability to deconstruct stereotypes of East and West. However, it leaves the unsettling question of whether today’s responses might be at all different — a valuable starting point for a discussion worth pursuing.

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