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ARTS

'Walking through Walls' exhibition explores divisive borders

The exhibition at the Gropius-Bau museum in Berlin marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It deals with segregation and divisive ideologies — which the world is still filled with.



Border walls divide. Their purpose is to intimidate and repel. President Trump is pushing to set up one such wall along the US border to Mexico. And walls cause deaths. More than 140 people were killed trying to cross the Berlin Wall, most of them shot down by East German border troops.

Artists have repeatedly reflected on the profound inhumanity of border walls. Such works of art make up Berlin's Gropius Bau museum exhibition "Walking Through Walls," which marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The 28 artists on show in the exhibition deal with the physical presence of border walls and how they affect people. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama famously expected that the worldwide spread of liberalism would lead to the "end of history," but divisions continue to affect the world. That pessimistic view is evident in many of the works on show, yet some offer glimpses of hope by reflecting on how division can be overcome.

Read more: [Rediscover East Germany's top fashion magazine, 'Sibylle'](#)

Hope through empathy

"All artists have personally experienced the impact of walls or political divisions in some form," curator Till Fellrath told DW. Even though we might not be able to change the world, added Fellrath, we can nevertheless develop empathy — and art can be part of that.

That idea is demonstrated in the film *Shadow Play* (top picture), featuring



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EXHIBITION 'WALKING THROUGH WALLS' ECHOES BERLIN WALL EXPERIENCE

Mona Hatoum: 'Waiting is Forbidden,' 2006–2008

asylum seekers in Switzerland. New York-based artist Javier Tellez invited them to tell their stories of expulsion and exclusion with their hands. Another artwork suddenly appears in the video: *The Hand*, a 1947 sculpture by Alberto Giacometti, created in memory of his own experience of fleeing to Switzerland during World War II. It becomes clear that uprooting and displacement is a violent experience that transcends any specific era.

Another type of confrontation can be observed in the video loop of Marina Abramovic and Ulay's *Light / Dark* performance from 1977. The couple slaps each other alternately and without interruption. Unable to communicate and compromise, both insist on their point of view, hitting against each other's invisible wall.



© Gropius Bau/Sybille Bergemann

Zeitgeist of a new era: Sibylle Bergemann's portraits from 1990

Beyond many metaphorical explorations of the concept, the exhibition also includes direct references to the Berlin Wall itself, which is not only present in people's minds but still has physical traces: A commemorative section of the wall near the Gropius-Bau museum has been preserved.

A series of six photos by Sibylle Bergemann, one of the most high-profile photographers in East Germany and a co-founder of the photographers' agency Ostkreuz, reflect the post-Cold War atmosphere. They are portraits of a young girl standing by the Berlin Wall shortly after it was opened. It's an area of Berlin that has completely changed since. Her gaze is questioning, expectant and not fearful.

DW RECOMMENDS

Rocker Udo Lindenberg: A nightmare for East German authorities

After being banned for years, the rock star and committed peace activist managed to be invited to perform in East Berlin in 1983 — despite having mocked state leader Erich Honecker in a popular song. (05.09.2019)

Beyond the Wall: East Berlin's many faces explored in exhibition

East Berlin was the center of power in communist East Germany, but it was also a city where subversive currents thrived. The exhibition "East Berlin. Half a Capital" looks at everyday life in the 1970s and 80s. (10.05.2019)

Exhibition 'Point of No Return' shows how art anticipated change in East Germany

"Point of No Return" in Leipzig is the first exhibition to look into the way East German artists expressed their vision of the state and their hopes for change

ahead of the fall of the Berlin Wall. (24.07.2019)

Exhibition 'Utopia and Demise' shows tensions in East German art

Paintings, East German-style: 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Düsseldorf Kunstpalast museum showcases art from Germany's formerly Communist east. It's not all conform with the authorities tastes. (05.09.2019)

How artists depicted the collapse of the GDR

In the show "Point of No Return," the Museum of Fine Arts Leipzig looks into how the years leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall were depicted in the arts. (24.07.2019)

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