

# Producing the Film



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## By executive producer Frank Löprich, 2011

The GDR is a vanished country. The Berlin Wall has disappeared. But in today's Berlin, at the historic spot between the *Rotes Rathaus* (Red City Hall) and Cathedral, the largest and most ambitious East German monument project still stands like a fossil: the Marx-Engels Forum. An East German site of remembrance, on one of the best pieces of property in the new German capital—an ideology-laden relict of the past. A true sign of political sovereignty: it was not torn down.

We had a similarly strange feeling in 1982, when they hauled the equestrian statue of Old Fritz, the representative of militaristic Prussia, out of Babelsberg Park and back to its original site on Unter den Linden, in the center of socialist East Germany's capital. History repeats itself.

Now they are building a subway line between Alexanderplatz and the Brandenburg Gate. There will be an entrance where the Marx-Engels Monument stood. For this reason, it has been temporarily relocated.

In 1974—but certainly they thought about a monument like this earlier—the GDR government and party leadership commissioned a collective of artists, under the leadership of sculptor Ludwig Engelhardt, to design a prestigious monument site commemorating Marx and Engels in Berlin, capital of the GDR. In East Germany, these two philosophers were considered the ideological forefathers of the revolutionary workers' movement. Their doctrine was the "religion of the state."

Ludwig Engelhardt was to create the four-meter-high bronze figures of Marx and Engels, Werner Stötzer a marble relief on the theme of the "Old World," Margret Middell two bronze reliefs about "The Dignity and Beauty of Free People," and on eight (four double) steel stelae the photographer Arno Fischer, in collaboration with the documentary filmmaker Peter Voigt, was to present "The World Revolutionary Process, from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to the Present."

In 1981, the Ministry for Culture and the Central Film Administration commissioned the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films to document, two or three times a year, the creation of each artwork and their integration into an ensemble. A representative full-length documentary was to be the result. As the director they selected Jürgen Böttcher, the most important documentary filmmaker at DEFA, because—in contrast to other documentary filmmakers—he appeared to those in charge to be an artist (as he is also a painter known as Strawalde) on a par with those working on the monument. For him, at first it was purely an exercise in duty, which he only agreed to after giving it considerable thought—because a documentary about a state-commissioned artwork was itself a state-commissioned artwork, with which he wanted to have nothing to do.

I was the production manager for this documentation project. From 1981 to 1986, we shot with the sculptors several times a year, depending on the state of their projects, and exposed approximately 16,000 meters of 35mm material for a film that was then never made.

The best working conditions and best materials were made available for everyone involved. The marble came from Carrara, Italy. (Other sources say it was Bulgarian marble—that the Italian marble was used for another sculpture Stötzer was working on; a mistake is conceivable; but for us, it was always Carrara marble; back then it was basically proof that we only got the best and that even foreign currency was no object for this state project.)

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The photos used on the stelae were collected from around the world, though such travel was normally off-limits for GDR citizens. Arno Fischer and Peter Voigt searched for the most touching and human photos made since the invention of photography in all the important photo archives and museums in the world—an assignment which many people envied them.<sup>1</sup>

The artists had their studios in the most beautiful landscapes in the GDR. So we worked at Ludwig Engelhardt's atelier on the Island of Usedom, at Werner Stötzer's place on the Island of Rügen and at Margret Middell's studio at the Barther Bodden (Baltic Sea). We filmed the photographic stelae in little studios in Berlin, where the new technology of etching photos into steel was used for the first time. The Marx and Engels figures were cast in bronze at the art foundry of the VEB Schermmaschinenbau (Heavy Machinery Works) in Lauchhammer. These were days of shooting in private environments, filled with interesting political discussions without problems or surprises. Nobody interfered or "accompanied" us. We witnessed how the sculptor Ludwig Engelhardt, in particular, often desperately struggled with how to link this "state commission" to the country's increasingly critical political situation. It was work situated between scruples and privilege.

Marx and Engels were realistically depicted; but, at the same time, at various stages the sight of them was a satirical provocation. After all, it was the largest commissioned artwork in the history of the GDR! The plaster models were exposed to wind and weather, were wrapped in plastic and tied up, sawn apart, beheaded, gagged, admired by cows and dragged by tractors over the meadow. Meanwhile, the artists contemplated the development of *Solidarność* in Poland, Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and this supreme commissioned work. Already then, these were absurd and surreal images, and the artists knew it. When we saw the footage, we wondered how this unusual material would ever end up in what was basically a "protocol" film, a film commissioned by the highest political leadership. Based on his experience, it seemed impossible to Jürgen Böttcher that we'd show this film in the "Great House," the seat of the Central Committee of the SED Party, next door.

Between the original idea and the unveiling of the monument in 1986, the political situation in the socialist bloc had changed. Glasnost and perestroika affected the GDR too. At the first public presentation of the model of the monument at the *Marshall* building on April 8, 1983 at the latest, objections arose in the population about both the realist figuration and the location of the monuments behind the *Palast der Republik* (today demolished). The plan was to pave the existing lawn for the huge monument ensemble (four hectares size). It was at this point that the commissioners lost their interest in making this representative film; their insecurity had grown and they feared that the intention to honor the famous philosophers and their doctrine could flip in the other direction. We were not unhappy about this, but nevertheless kept shooting until the installation was complete. The people of Berlin apathetically acknowledged the ceremonial inauguration of the Forum by Erich Honecker on April 4, 1986, the night before the eleventh—and last—SED Party Congress.

The film material then sat in the hall by the editing rooms on the fifth floor of the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films at 32 Otto Nuschke Street until the building was vacated; the negative was at the duplication facility and later brought to the Federal Film Archive.

Eleven years after the *Wende*, in spring 2000, we were encouraged to make our film *A Place in Berlin* (*Konzert im Freien*; working title, *Der Platz*) by the DEFA Foundation, which also supported the review of the old film material. The Federal Film Archive was looking for insiders who could review the 1981-86 film material and negatives. They contacted us, Ö-Filmproduktion, which had been founded in 1990. In my notes, I read: 2/18/2000 – delivery of



16,000 meters of positive material and c. 10,000 meters of negative material from the Federal Archive to our editing room; after viewing, evaluating + reviewing the negative, 5,000 meters returned and 11,000 meters destroyed.

At first, we only had to summarize the content of the material for the Archive. To this end, we hired the editor Gudrun Plenert-Steinbrück. The viewing and processing took two weeks. At the end, it was clear that 5,000 meters were available for archival purposes, as well as for our film. We invited Jürgen Böttcher to the editing room; for four weeks, he delved into the material and developed a concept for a new film from a present-day perspective—to interpret the existing material anew. From *Der Platz (The Square)* there evolved *A Place in Berlin*.

Jürgen Böttcher: Besides lots of boring stuff—small wonder, with this kind of compulsory labor—there were still enough quirky sequences worth watching; so, rather surreal. We would never have gotten this approved back then. Feelings at seeing it again after so long? All the old stuff came up again! That strange, contradictory time of life. What we all did because you clearly couldn't do anything else."<sup>2</sup> So, still ambivalent feelings. About political conditions, one's own life, commissioned art...

Böttcher had just filmed the two musicians Günter "Baby" Sommer and Dietmar Diesner at a session in Dresden and was taken with them: "This extremely ambivalent, at first glance dubious material could only be captured in a collage-like filmic form. All of my films were, of course more or less, also influenced by the experience of a painter... Without the jazz of "Baby" Sommer and Dietmar Diesner, this film wouldn't exist. It's that simple. A documentary, linear report about the old stories, with few contemporary observations at the strange square, would have been pointless and unacceptable. The two musicians knead and structure this obscure object, virtually make it dance with their free and powerful music. Like Beckett's balladeers, street singers without words, they break and counter this old, anachronistic monument stuff with their jazz. They sensuously, disrespectfully and contemporaneously saturate everything—lively, free. There's no need to go on and on—they deliver a multilayered musical narrative level."<sup>3</sup>

Ö-Filmproduktion started funding the film, with help from the BKM<sup>4</sup> and MDM<sup>5</sup>, and found in WDR<sup>6</sup> a co-producer. It was clear that we were producing the film to be screened in theaters, but the new scenes (music performance, observations) could not be filmed with several 35mm cameras. The negative for the "old" material was partly missing, or had not been stored properly. The technical transfer to a new negative would have been prohibitively expensive. So we decided to film with several digital cameras, to digitally scan and edit the archival material and, at the end, to produce a 35mm negative from digital material all of a piece. We only filmed a few tests and observations (panoramic panning shots) during the so-called leafless period, in March 2000, and filmed the music shots for three days with three camera teams around Whitsuntide 2000.<sup>7</sup>

"Jürgen Böttcher compiled an experimental documentary film, a collage about history and art, by using newly shot material and his own, previously unknown 35mm archival footage of the evolution of the Forum from 1981-86. 'The musicians Günter "Baby" Sommer (perc) and Dietmar Diesner (sax) lead us through the film with percussion and saxophone, structure it and virtually make the brittle, alienating and grotesque materials dance.'<sup>8</sup> The music comments on the contemporary use of the monument ensemble."<sup>9</sup>



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- <sup>1</sup> Arno Fischer said, "We went to West Berlin, to *Stern* in Hamburg, to Leningrad, Moscow, Prague, Paris, Amsterdam, to Magnum in New York, to Washington und London. The work was supported by the Ministry for Culture." ([www.seen.by.spiegel.de/interview/arno-fischer](http://www.seen.by.spiegel.de/interview/arno-fischer))
  - <sup>2,3</sup> Schenk Ralf, "Interview with Jürgen Böttcher," German Press Kit for the film *Konzert im Freien*, Basis-Film Verleih Berlin, 2001.
  - <sup>4</sup> BKM=Beauftragter der Bundesregierung für Angelegenheiten der Kultur und Medien (Representative of the Federal Government for Affairs in Culture and Media)
  - <sup>5</sup> MDM=Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung (Central German Media Foundation)
  - <sup>6</sup> WDR=Westdeutscher Rundfunk (West German Broadcasting Corporation)
  - <sup>7</sup> The documentary includes exactly 37 minutes and 37 seconds of footage shot in 1981-1986. The DEFA-Stiftung ([www.defa-stiftung.de](http://www.defa-stiftung.de)) owns the copyright for the material shot in the 1980s; PROGRESS Film-Verleih GmbH ([www.progress-fim.de](http://www.progress-fim.de)) owns the rights to distribute the material.
  - <sup>8</sup> From Jürgen Böttcher's *Handwritten Script*, 2000.
  - <sup>9</sup> German Press Kit for the film *Konzert im Freien*, Basis-Film Verleih Berlin, 2001.