

WE LIKE AMERICA AND AMERICA LIKES US ME LIKE AMERICA AND AMERICA LIKES US

In 1949 Perry T. Rathbone, the director of the Saint Louis Art Museum,¹ received the most unusual delivery of an artwork.² Inside a hearse lying on a cot was a 15th-century gilded and painted wooden sculpture of the Virgin and Child. The owner of this German Gothic Madonna, Dr. F. C. Katzenstein, had hired the hearse to transport the delicate object from his home in Salem, Illinois. Although it was a short trip to St. Louis, the conscientious doctor, who had served as a U.S. Army medical officer in his native Germany during World War II, did not want to risk any potential damage. The Madonna had already traveled a great distance.

Originally belonging to his German Jewish parents who were killed in Nazi concentration camps in 1942, the Madonna had been seized by the Nazis. A former classmate of Katzenstein helped locate the sculpture, which in July, 1949 was shipped to Salem from Wiesbaden, Germany, from one of the collection centers for art confiscated by the Third Reich. Soon after, Katzenstein coordinated its travels to the Museum where it remained on long-term loan until the Museum purchased it in 1961.

Such a rich story about a single artwork, its particular journeys through space, time, and history, is one of three compelling narratives unique to St. Louis that Berlin-based conceptual artists Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock have uncovered for their *Currents 107* exhibition, subtitled “The German Connection—Raft with Stranded Objects.”

Artworks speak of the past and history. They are tangible evidence of what has come before. Combined with facts found in newspapers and archives, such objects can tell their own stories. But what about memories—the intangible traces of the past, some more distinct and others more hazy when the past recedes? It is this very intersection of memory and history that Stih and Schnock investigate in their work. As with many of their

contemporaries—German artists born in the aftermath of World War II—Stih and Schnock have been deeply informed by the complex issues of Germany’s role in the Holocaust and the war.

In past projects for memorials and museums, Stih and Schnock have pushed, prodded, and pulled memory apart in attempts to shed new light on the past, perhaps to retrieve new kernels of truth. Yet memory is not truth. Instead, to steal a line from French author Marcel Proust, it is the *remembrance* of things past. What Stih and Schnock do is activate memory, questioning how memory is shaped and how it functions in public spaces. Their art is open-ended; they do not shut doors, answering a question with finality. Instead, they leave doors open, giving space to past stories discovered through dogged, extensive research.

The Museum’s exceptional holdings of postwar German art resonated with Stih and Schnock, allowing them to reflect upon their own positions as artists informed by German artist Joseph Beuys’s influential teachings from the 1960s and ’70s. Beuys theorized a new art form, “social sculpture,” and he believed that this participatory artwork, which merged artistic thought with human activity and performance, would bring about revolutionary change in society.

Not surprisingly, Stih and Schnock have drawn parallels between the travels of the 15th-century Madonna and those of Beuys himself for his legendary 1974 performance, *I Like America and America Likes Me*. A documentary video of this performance is now on view in the exhibition, *Postwar German Art in the Collection*, in the Museum’s new East Building. For his first performance in the United States, Beuys had himself transported via ambulance from the airport, lying on a stretcher, to the New York gallery where he would share a space with a wild coyote over the course of three days.

Stih and Schnock have installed their work *The Voyage of the Katzenstein Madonna* (illus.) next to the 15th-century Virgin and Child previously owned by Katzenstein, currently on display in Gallery 237. In their two-paneled work, the artists have depicted an X-ray image of the Madonna resting on a hearse cot, thus comparing and linking its journey with that of Beuys’s 1974 trip. The artists have made a more overt and emphatic connection to Beuys’s New York performance with a large banner installed in the north balcony overlooking Sculpture Hall. Colored red, white, and blue, it reads in capital letters, “We Like America and America Likes Us.” Such a statement, repeated twice, speaks to their own position in the United States as a pair of German artists who enjoy working regularly in America.

For Stih and Schnock, who value not only intersections of memory and history, but also concepts of cultural exchange and mobility, public spaces such as the museum are fitting sites for investigation. Indeed, they interpret the museum as both a container and carrier of memory and knowledge, as a raft taking visitors down a river of history. Their selected interventions, including the banner in Sculpture Hall and the installation of their artwork near the Madonna, highlight such a passage.

This metaphorical raft-like journey continues in Gallery 338 with their installation of objects, collages, and other works. Here Stih and Schnock mine two more intriguing stories about St. Louis and German history, one of which begins in the late 19th century. Through discussions with leading Reichstag historian Michael Cullen, Stih and Schnock learned of an architectural model of the Reichstag that eventually made its way to St. Louis at the turn of the 20th century. For the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, German emperor Wilhelm II sent a large plaster model of the Reichstag, then under construction in Berlin, to represent the German Empire.

At the fair’s end, decisions were made to send the model to St. Louis, a nearby city where many German immigrants lived. It was shipped to the Saint Louis Art Museum in 1897, then the St. Louis School and Museum of Fine Arts, its own entity within Washington University. After the Museum separated from the University in 1909, the Reichstag model became the property of the school, and at some point after 1917, the model was lost.

Considered the most important political building in Germany, the Reichstag is highly emblematic of 20th-century German history, from its use during the Weimar Republic and the fire in 1933 that helped the Nazis seize power, to its later reconstruction after the 1990 reunification of Germany. In *The Reichstag?* (cover) Stih and Schnock feature a hazy black and white image of the Reichstag, which the artists produced by repeatedly manipulating an archival image of the model from the 1893 Chicago fair. Using photography, drawing, and tracing, Stih and Schnock knowingly move further away from the authenticity, or, in the words of German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, the “aura” of the model. Each further manipulation continues to distance their own Reichstag depiction from its original, with the original—the lost model—already itself a reproduction of the building. In *Raft with Reichstag on the Mississippi*, Stih and Schnock have reimaged the Reichstag model on a raft drifting down the Mississippi River in 1917, perhaps to its eventual disappearance. In doing so, they allude to the parallel between the importance of the Mississippi to American culture and that of the Rhine River to Germany. The artists further examine this concept in their video *Liquid Traces* featured in Gallery 301.

Indeed, the legendary Mississippi played a germinal role in the third and last story the artists have brought to light in their *Currents* exhibition, another example of cultural exchange from Germany—this time not about an inanimate object like the 15th-century Madonna or the 1893 Reichstag model, but a real-life double agent of the Cold War era. The spy is Werner Stiller, an East German Stasi officer, who became a counterspy for West German intelligence.

In 1979 Stiller escaped from East Germany and identified almost 100 agents, including the chief of the Stasi. West Germany enlisted the CIA to provide safe haven for Stiller. As Stiller explained, “[They] put a pile of color brochures in front of me and told me to choose a city. I’d always wanted to see the Mississippi so I chose St. Louis.”³ With a new identity as Peter Fischer, he moved to St. Louis where he enrolled in the MBA program at Washington University and later became a banker on Wall Street.⁴

Stih and Schnock explore other fluctuating transformations of personal identity, memory and history in the series *I Am Not Stiller* (illus.). Through the ghostly portrait repeated in this series, Stih and Schnock refer to the changing personae of Stiller, while merging these with the different identities of another famous Stiller, the fictional character of Swiss author Max Frisch’s 1954 novel, *Stiller*, a masterpiece of postwar German-language literature. This novel investigates the theme of shifting identities and the question of whether or not we can ever know what is true, what is real about a person.

Through three real stories (that seem too extraordinary to be true) Stih and Schnock have produced an absorbing and provocative exhibition on German history, identity, cultural mobility, and transnational exchange, weaving St. Louis into the broader and complex connections between Germany and the U.S. during the 20th century. Their engagement with museums as sites of storytelling and flux, and their fascination with the life and memory of art objects bring to mind what Beuys once said in 1975, “Because different people are always coming in, museums will continue to treat their objects in different ways. The museum ultimately exists in a state of transformation.”

Tricia Y. Paik
Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

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1. From 1909 to 1971, the Saint Louis Art Museum was called the City Art Museum of St. Louis and was renamed the Saint Louis Art Museum in 1972.
2. A. G. Benesch, ed., “By the Mississippi,” *St. Louis Star-Times*, 1949.
3. Ian Johnson, “East German Double Agent Trades His Spy Gear for a Broker’s Briefcase,” *The Baltimore Sun*, July 12, 1992.
4. In 1986 Werner Stiller published a bestselling memoir in Germany, *Beyond the Wall: Memoirs of an East and West German Spy*, in which he did not disclose his new identity or his life in St. Louis.



We Like America and America Likes Us, 2013
cotton on canvas, 5 x 30 feet

From the series *Ich Bin Nicht Stiller—I Am Not Stiller*, 2013
photograph, 28 x 20 inches