

My Story: *Joint Venture* - and *Re-Statement*

My painting on the East Side Gallery entitled *Joint Venture*

As explained elsewhere on this website, I was invited in 1989 to join a group of international artists to paint on the previously inaccessible East Side of the Wall. Below I describe my work there, *Joint Venture*, together with its development into a gallery painting, *Re-Statement*.

Initially I made many small sketches one of which depicted two stylised heads with lines crisscrossing from one head to the other. This immediately suggested the idea of communication, exchange and partnership and it was the starting point for my concept. I laid the drawing on its side, landscape format, to better fit my space and now the large heads lay side by side like 'strange bedfellows'.



This also seemed to me an appropriate expression for the two parts of Germany suggesting the differences between them in a subtle abstract form. At that time the parameters of a united Germany were still ambiguous.

The central subject was in place but it was not enough conceptually or practically and the length of my five segments stretch of Wall demanded a continuation of my composition.

Ideas formed: I needed a thread of interest to lead from the collective, the universal to the specific and individual. Even thinking these words conjured up images of the position of people of the GDR. Having come to vibrant, brash, bright, West Berlin from a small quiet village on the west coast of Scotland in 1985, alone in the city and not speaking the language, I empathised with their anxieties as every GDR citizen struggled to find their bearings within unaccustomed structures of life.

I made a vertical row of small marks like stitching down the edges of the panels adjacent to either side of the heads. My idea of physically 'adding on', was conceptually to attach a secondary 'story'. Stitches that allude to two parts being brought together, bound together.



My supporting story became a series of small figures, bending, stretching and contorting themselves to fit their new situation. The movement in these individual figures was in contrast to the two large, still heads representing the ideal of the two Germanys with lines of communication flowing between. After

the fall of the Wall, the phrase *joint venture* was frequently heard: buzz words, suggesting that East and West would collaborate as partners and this became the title of my painting. However, not long after I'd finished my painting uncertainties began to surface.

The process of painting on the east part of the Wall

The whole of the Berlin Wall was a grey colour on the east side and preparation, scraping off the loose paint and so on, took time.

Confronting the Wall that was my canvas, now painted white, was a daunting task and scaling up from the preparatory drawing was arduous. To check the progress from a distance required frequently dodging the traffic to cross over to the other side of the dual carriageway at Muehlenstrasse.



Despite the physical challenge of working on a surface 3.5 metres high by 7 metres wide, the painting began to take on a life of its own. As it left the drawing, certain parts were emphasised and strengthened as the slashing lines now red and black between the heads gained drama and energy.

At the beginning of the painting activity, the situation as a whole was still unclear. It was a chaotic time, and GDR guards were still controlling the crossing of the nearby Oberbaum Bridge. In June 1990, a month before I made my mural, industrial equipment began dismantling the Wall dividing Berlin. Segments were bought and donated and ended up all over the world. During the warm summer months, tourists flocked to the city, and came in

droves to the East Side Gallery to see the artists in action. There was a tremendous buzz and atmosphere throughout the city. 'Wall Peckers' as they were called, rented pick axes from enterprising locals and pecked and prised out their little bit of history to take home.



It was exhilarating painting within an international group. The artists worked sporadically here and there along the 1.3 km stretch; often a new face, another language, and brief but exciting conversations with hand signals. Replenishing the painting materials meant a visit to the old circus wagon that was our store. Ladders were few and far between and even with the longest I had difficulty reaching the top of the Wall. As we painted there were often interruptions, interviews, TV cameras, chats with the tourists and a never-ending stream of kerb crawling cars and tourist buses filled with those eager to capture the moment. During that time of mass media attention the atmosphere was euphoric.

Emotions swung between extremes and now and again, while I was painting, I would remember that it was only 10 months since the last person, a young boy, was killed trying to cross to the West. Then I felt very humbled and reminded of the historical weight of the place and the fact that we were working in what was still the GDR, totally inconceivable months before.



Re-Statement: a gallery version of Joint Venture

In 2009, the same year as I renovated my Wall painting at the East Side Gallery, I took part in a group exhibition entitled *Der Geschmack von Wolken* (The Taste of Clouds) in *Der Kunstraum*, Potsdam. The exhibition was on the theme of 20 years after and I decided to make a large-scale gallery restatement of my Berlin Wall painting *Joint Venture* in the quiet confines of my spacious Berlin atelier.

Earlier in that year, there had been plenty of opportunity to reconnect physically with my painting on the Wall and to rethink the significance and relevance of the East Side Gallery. In my atelier I hung five panels of heavy quality carton, in total measuring 3.5 by 7 meters. I began the painting, initially as an exact replica of my Wall mural. There was a sustained period in the quiet of my atelier to reflect on the previous 20 years as I proceeded to rework, over-paint and interpret the piece. The layering of the paint suggested passing time together with different stories and the result expresses a more personal and positive view.



The mainly young students who over the previous twenty years wrote or drew on my Wall painting interestingly showed a kind of respect in avoiding large marks within the two huge heads themselves. It seemed they wanted to participate in the work but not destroy it. One particular drawing that someone added as graffiti was of a leaping man. I liked the idea of appropriating this image for my *Re-Statement* painting. It linked both versions, *Joint Venture* and *Re-Statement*, and underpinned the two-way nature of dialogue.

This step suggested the concept of further interaction involving the public. At the preview of the exhibition held in Potsdam in the previous GDR - East I placed ladders in front of my 3.5 meter high painting and invited the visitors to augment the painting by inscribing their comments about unification directly onto the surface. I asked for political or personal expressions, reflecting their views 20 years after the fall of the Wall.

In the esteemed cultural setting of a public gallery, such behaviour is normally taboo. Particularly for those, it dawned on me later, from East Germany whose whole lives had been restricted and controlled. People were self-conscious and averted their eyes as I tried to entice with my box of charcoal pencils and colourful pastels. However eventually, after the first inscription, others soon became involved and the mood lightened. The changing opinions of locals, visitors and officials are echoed in the fluidity of the painting's changed appearance. Within this event, the work provided yet another platform on which artist and viewer could consider the continually shifting nature of the Wall's status during the previous twenty years. In referring to my Wall mural, the action itself sought to confront, in order to provoke the viewer to consider before marking and it became a kind of visitor's book for the exhibition.

Subsequently my *Re-Statement* painting has been shown in an exhibition in the distinguished halls of the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh. Hung along the full length of one of the walls of a spacious gallery, the painting could be viewed at a distance in its entirety. This was in direct contrast to its hanging in an exhibition of the same name, *reStatement*, in 2011 at the private gallery aquabitArt in Berlin. The five panels were hung around two walls so that standing within the corner the viewer felt that they were *in the picture*. More recently, in 2013, it attracted much public attention when it covered an entire wall in my London exhibition *Stepping Places* in Art First.



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Postscript: In the writing above I have described the process of painting 'Joint Venture' on the Berlin Wall together with its subsequent reprise as 'Re-Statement'. Elsewhere on this website, I write about the origins of the Berlin Wall and the development of the East Side Gallery where 'Joint Venture' is located.