

SUPPLEMENTI

# Immagini controverse

Casi studio e prospettive di ricerca  
su un patrimonio culturale  
potenzialmente conflittuale



IL CAPITALE CULTURALE

*Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*

**eum**

*Rivista fondata da Massimo Montella*

## Il capitale culturale

*Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*

Supplementi n. 19, 2025

ISSN 2039-2362 (online)

ISBN cartaceo 979-12-5704-038-3

ISBN PDF 979-12-5704-039-0

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Registrazione al Roc n. 735551 del 14/12/2010

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# Art of the East Side Gallery in Berlin. A monument of joy with potential for conflict

Axel Klausmeier\*

## *Abstract*

More than four million people visit the East Side Gallery every year to see what is still considered to be the longest gallery in the world. Even almost 35 years after its creation, the fascination of this piece of the Berlin Wall, transformed in 1990 into a work of art with colour and creativity by 118 artists in 1990, remains unbroken. The East Side Gallery was created at the same time as other artistic appropriations of the former barrier at a time when, for a short while, anything seemed possible along the former border strip. As the East Side Gallery is in its entirety a listed monument, so are each of its individual paintings – even after significant changes during the major renovation in 2008/2009 were carried out. The significance of the memorial lies on the one hand, in the historical layer of the Berlin Wall and, on the other, in the unique artistic appropriation for the period 1989/1990. The artworks all reflect the spirit of the time in which they were created. However, perceptions change. How should we deal with paintings that are, in our eyes today, politically provocative? The article discusses different approaches of conservation as well as aspects and approaches of the interpretation and mediation of contested public spaces and historic monuments. In the case of the East Side Gallery, there is also a debate about

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what is really authentic about this still young monument, as authenticity is always considered a key prerequisite for the credibility of monuments.

Ogni anno più di quattro milioni di persone visitano la East Side Gallery, considerata ancora oggi la galleria più lunga del mondo. Anche a quasi 35 anni dalla sua creazione, la fascinazione esercitata da questo tratto del Muro di Berlino, trasformato nel 1990 in un'opera d'arte di colore e creatività da 118 artisti, rimane intatta. La East Side Gallery nacque nello stesso periodo di altre forme di appropriazione artistica dell'ex barriera, in un momento in cui, per breve tempo, tutto sembrava possibile lungo l'ex fascia di confine. Poiché la East Side Gallery è nel suo insieme un monumento tutelato, lo sono anche ciascuna delle sue singole pitture, anche dopo le significative modifiche avvenute durante il grande intervento di restauro del 2008/2009. Il valore del memoriale risiede, da un lato, nello strato storico rappresentato dal Muro di Berlino e, dall'altro, nell'unica e irripetibile appropriazione artistica legata al periodo 1989/1990. Le opere riflettono tutto lo spirito del tempo in cui furono realizzate. Tuttavia, le percezioni cambiano. Come dobbiamo rapportarci a dipinti che, ai nostri occhi odierni, possono apparire politicamente provocatori? L'articolo discute diversi approcci alla conservazione, nonché aspetti e modalità di interpretazione e mediazione degli spazi pubblici controversi e dei monumenti storici. Nel caso della East Side Gallery, si pone anche il dibattito su cosa sia veramente autentico in questo monumento ancora giovane, poiché l'autenticità è sempre considerata una condizione fondamentale per la credibilità dei monumenti.

### 1. *Art of the East Side Gallery in Berlin*

I would like to begin with an admittedly very abbreviated reflection on the cultural history of memory. You may be wondering what Joachim Winckelmann's dictum of "noble simplicity and quiet greatness", which refers to antiquity, and Goethe's understanding of culture as the "true, beautiful and good" have to do with the Berlin Wall. Without doubt, there is no direct line and I am sure that the Berlin Wall would have been built even without Winckelmann and Goethe. More interesting, however, is the question of the origin of the handling of so-called inconvenient architectural monuments and historically burdened heritage, and here a certain connection or a line of categorisation can be established from Winckelmann to the Berlin Wall. Both Winckelmann and Goethe had a lasting influence on the bourgeois understanding of education, and this also applies in particular to the study of and preoccupation with history. With the work of Gustav Droysen, Heinrich von Treitschke and Theodor Mommsen, national interests also came into play in Germany, as elsewhere in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. From then on, history served as an instrument for communicating the glorious national past. Such a reading and interpretation was completely destroyed by the German crimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially those committed by the Nazis. There could be no "business as usual", because suddenly there were inescapable places of suf-

fering and crime almost everywhere and in many small regional communities, not only in Germany, but throughout Europe and beyond. A confrontation with this shameful history had become unavoidable, even if this did not begin immediately after the war, neither in West Germany and the young Federal Republic, nor in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which was posturing as anti-fascist.

This new approach meant a broadening of the view of history and the confrontation with historical responsibility in particular. As far as historical sites of state-ordered political crimes were concerned, the grassroots movement with its motto “Dig where you stand” developed as a result of the 1968 movement in the West, and with it the awareness of dealing with difficult history on-site. In the GDR, state-ordered national memorials dedicated to anti-fascism were established on the sites of former concentration camps, such as Ravensbrück, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, as early as the 1950s. Numerous memorials were also soon created in the Federal Republic of Germany, mostly as a result of civic engagement, often initiated by former prisoners. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the unification of the two German states in October 1990, the crimes of the first German dictatorship were joined by the crimes of the socialist SED regime. However, it took several more years for the realisation to occur that the memory of the dual dictatorship history was now part of the state’s responsibility, as did the institutionalisation of institutions and their financial support. This brings me to the centre of the topic and the period of upheaval in which my main topic, the East Side Gallery, was created.

The Berlin Wall was not built as a monument, but as a military instrument to prevent people from escaping. Officially, the state leadership of the GDR called it an ‘anti-fascist protection rampart.’ On the night of 9 November 1989, however, it lost its brutal character, and monument preservationists soon recognised it as a globally recognised symbol of the peaceful overthrow of the communist dictatorship in East Germany. In terms of monument theory, it thus became part of the so-called «uncomfortable monuments» a term introduced by Norbert Huse in his 1997 book of the same name<sup>1</sup>.

A debate about this relatively new type of monument quickly developed. Monument theory discussions about “difficult heritage” followed, particularly in the English-speaking world, and numerous individual studies were conducted<sup>2</sup>. What is particularly interesting about the East Side Gallery is that it is a positive interpretation, as the joy of the peaceful fall of the Wall is clearly in the foreground here.

<sup>1</sup> Huse 1997.

<sup>2</sup> To name but a few: Cocroft, Schofield 2007; Binnewerg 2012; Greßhake 2010; Klausmeier, Purbrick, Schofield 2006; Deutsches Nationalkomitee für Denkmalschutz 2009; MacDonald 2009; Wohlleben 2009.

## 2. *Street Art under monument protection*

The immediate period after the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 opened up free spaces and opportunities for co-creation (Fig. 1). Artists from East and West Berlin both utilised and created these open spaces. While the accessible West Berlin side of the Wall had already become the subject of street art by artists from West Germany and all over the world before 1989, the art scene now found favour with the military-strategic whitewashed areas on the East side of the Wall after its fall. The former barriers, stripped of their horror and function, were used as canvases for the *zeitgeist* of a city on the move. Artists experimented and worked in various locations in the conquered no-man's land. On Mühlenstraße, a main road in the East Berlin district of Friedrichshain, a 1.3-kilometre-long gallery was created in the summer of 1990 as part of an art project on the former barrier wall, as approved by the GDR Council of Ministers. Some artworks were created overnight, others over several days, and the quality of the paint used also differed, as most of the artists assumed that their artworks would be painted over by other artists at some point (as is usual with street art), and that the wall would eventually be torn down. But things turned out differently.

Today, the world's longest open-air gallery is a place that appears in every travel guide, where buses full of tourists are poured out and partygoers watch the sunrise (Fig. 2). In the midst of the few remaining remnants of the Berlin Wall, the ESG is a place where the «euphoric opening of the Berlin Wall and the aesthetic appropriation of the concrete wall», how it is described in the Berlin Senate's 'Master Plan for Remembering the Berlin Wall'<sup>3</sup>, take centre stage. Other places along the Wall, such as the Berlin Wall Memorial, are about remembering the division of Germany and its effects as well as commemorating the 140 victims of the border regime in Berlin. The East Side Gallery, even though at least thirteen people lost their lives here, is not only perceived by the public as a historical Wall site and memorial, but also as Berlin's tourist hotspot for street art and a 'living' symbol of freedom that is perpetuated by international sprayers, artists and tourists. The aura of the place has an effect on millions of people every year.

In November 1991, the Berlin Heritage Authority placed the 1.3-kilometre-long section of the former Hinterland wall, as well as each of its artworks, under monument protection. However, over the years the colours faded, and vandalism, car exhaust fumes, and the effects of the weather caused the Wall's paintings to deteriorate. The artists repeatedly restored their paintings themselves. In 2008, the gallery had deteriorated to such an extent that the Federal state of Berlin and the federal government organised an extensive restoration. The preservation authorities broke new ground by turning back the clock to

<sup>3</sup> Berlin Senate 2006.

1990: the Wall paintings and their ‘cultural significance’ as symbols of freedom were to be preserved in their original form, and the protection of the original, as is customary in the preservation of historical monuments, was no longer the main focus. With this in mind, the artworks were completely or partially removed, the masonry was repaired, and the pictures were repainted by the artists; some were also provided with anti-graffiti protection. In 2016, a further partial repair and renewal of the protective coating was necessary.

Since 2018, the state and federal funded Berlin Wall Foundation has been responsible for the long-term preservation of the East Side Gallery. Its task is to preserve the artworks in accordance with the monument preservation plan and to further develop educational formats. In the long term, the institution must address the question of how to deal with the remaining original substance of the longest preserved section of the Berlin Wall knowing that some of the paintings underwent significant alterations during the major refurbishment in 2008/2009 at the latest<sup>4</sup>.

### 3. *Art as a starting point for debate and conflict*

Today, the East Side Gallery is home to 107 works of art by 118 artists. They all reflect the spirit of the “wind of change” of 1990, as the former mayor of Berlin said «they immortalised the moments of happiness» and they created «a total work of art that repeatedly pauses for thought and reflection and encourages its many visitors to stand up for peace, freedom and democracy»<sup>5</sup>. But if we take a closer look at the individual artworks and their genesis the question arises, what do those works and their meanings tell us today? Is there more than the *zeitgeist* that makes the murals special? What about works of art and representations that no longer go hand in hand with our current values and are aggravating in public urban spaces? What about political messages that are reinterpreted and misused for current conflicts? The potential for conflict and debate will be illustrated in the following section with reference to four selected works.

### 4. *Can art be apolitical?*

Lutz Pottien, an artist from the DDR, painted the picture *Pottiens persönliches Eigentum* (*Pottien’s personal property*, fig. 3) spontaneously and without

<sup>4</sup> von Arnim-Rosenthal, Hauboldt-Stolle 2022, pp. 140-144.

<sup>5</sup> Giffey 2022, p. 6.

official permission on a prominent section of the East Side Gallery wall. His intention was to protest against any “paternalistic” selection process for artists. So, he bought a few buckets of paint and started painting. He expressly wanted to paint an apolitical picture because the call to “paint art with attitude” reminded him of SED-propaganda. «Especially on the east side at the beginning of the 90s, the Wall would have benefited from depoliticisation»<sup>6</sup>, he says 20 years later. This is why he chose motifs that he liked and painted stereotypical orientalisising motifs from the cigarette advertisements of the 1920s.

The picture shows the heads of three men and a dog, all of whom are smoking a cigarette and emitting clouds of smoke. The two men on the left are shown in profile, wearing suits and a red fez, a headdress for men originating from East Asia. The bulldog in the centre wears a red scarf and looks at the viewer while smoking. The man on the right-hand side of the picture is also wearing a fez and is looking upwards, or at the dog. The three independent motifs on a white background might evoke the impression that the picture is unfinished.

Can art be apolitical at all? Are the three motifs unfinished paintings without meaning or a meaningful testimony to the times? When the paintings were renewed in 2009, the artist himself explained that he would prefer to paint a different motif. However, this was not possible. Due to monument protection laws, corrections or major changes must be permitted prior to realisation. Over time the painting itself has become a political issue due to its seemingly apolitical message. Only recently, ultra-conservative Erdogan supporters of Turkish origin in Berlin used the empty spaces in the picture as a canvas for their political slogans.

#### 4. *How's God? She's Black*

The painting *How's God? She's black* by the West German artist C. F. is the only decidedly feminist picture in the East Side Gallery (Fig. 4). The work was inspired by a racist incident the artist witnessed. A black and lesbian woman was verbally attacked and insulted by a right-wing extremist on the Berlin underground in April 1990. The woman then explained that she has had to deal with racist hostility every day since the Wall came down<sup>7</sup>. Thus the artist «embeds the Black lesbian's experience of discrimination in the climate of fear in which migrants, homosexuals and other marginalised groups lived

<sup>6</sup> Stricker 2025, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

<sup>7</sup> Schwarzenberger 1997, pp. 68-70.

in the 1990s»<sup>8</sup>. The mural can be understood as a call to show civil courage to the racist attacks in the immediate period of upheaval in Germany. With the title's statement that God is a black woman, the artist challenges the common view that God is a white man. In doing so, she positions herself against both patriarchy and racism.

The picture itself consists of three elements. On the left-hand side there is the large-format English title of the picture *How's God? She's black*. In the centre, against a large rectangular background in yellow, appears a black silhouette of a standing woman, her arms outstretched. On the right-hand side you will find a smaller section of text in German: «For a BLACK GERMAN LESBIAN that a so-called 'Republican' wanted to gas in the underground on 21 April 1990. After the Wall came down, attacks on people of colour<sup>9</sup>, homosexuals and marginalised groups increased. The dedication is to civil courage» [translated by the author]. An anthracite-coloured stripe runs across the entire width of the picture section at the upper edge; the rest is whitewashed.

With the description of the racist incident, the artist provides the viewer with the interpretation on a silver platter and leaves no doubt about the political signal against any form of marginalisation of people who are not read as German or heterosexual. The mural took on particular political relevance in the context of the #metoo debate and the Black Lives Matter protests following the killing of George Floyd in 2020.

### 5. *Confronting the Past*

The vast painting *Vaterland (Fatherland)* by West German photographer Günther Schaefer was one of the first paintings at the ESG (Fig. 5). It shows the fusion of the German and Israeli flags and makes a cautionary reference to the German Nazi past and the memory of the Holocaust<sup>10</sup>. The artist was in Berlin a few days after the fall of the Wall and captured the atmosphere in expressive black and white photographs. He then stayed in Berlin and is known, among other things, for a long-term photographic study of the city. The motif itself was originally designed by him for the 50th anniversary of the *Reichsgromnacht* on 9 November 1938, but of course it also refers to 9 November 1989, the day of the fall of the Berlin Wall. He wanted to draw attention to the multiple and many-layered significances of that date, but also to the fact that the GDR never politically recognised the state of Israel.

<sup>8</sup> Fuchs 1997, pp. 68-71.

<sup>9</sup> The artist used the German term *Farbige*, which is today an outdated word, formerly used to refer to people of colour.

<sup>10</sup> Schaefer 2022, *Berlin Wall Foundation*.

The picture depicts the merging of the German and Israeli flags. The two horizontal blue stripes and the central Star of David lie on the black, red and gold vertical stripes of the German flag. The motif is framed by lettering. The headline “MÄRZ ‘90 VATERLAND” is emblazoned at the top of the tube. On the left-hand side is a poem in English by the Israeli artist Varda Carmeli, which takes up the idea of dreaming together across nations. However, the current composition of the painting differs from the original: on the left and right outer sides, Günther Schaefer describes his thoughts on the flag in 1990, which represents a symbol of coming together, a «memorial against any fascist tendency in the GDR and FRG» and a «confrontation with the legacy of all German generations after the Second World War»<sup>11</sup>. To this end, he juxtaposes the historical dates of the *Reichspogromnacht* (9 November 1938) and the opening of the Wall (9 November 1989). In an artistic action with Varda Carmeli in 2004, the text on the left-hand side was replaced by the above-mentioned poem and the left-hand side of the flag was supplemented with Palestinian flag elements. Both artists thus created a symbol of peace in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The motif of the German-Israeli flag was restored during the renovation in 2009. The current text on the outside right of the picture is a mixture of the original text. In the course of the redesign in 2004, the English lettering “TIME BOMB” was graffitied on the bottom right-hand corner, which Günther incorporated into the artwork, adding to it the locations of racist and fascist attacks in Germany in the 1990s and 2000s.

As the wall element is one of the first elements of the East Side Gallery from the direction of Oberbaumbrücke Brücke/Warschauer Straße, it is noticed by many people. It always leads to provocation and reflection. Günther Schaefer cleaned, repaired and partially restored the picture himself at least 65 times after it had previously been attacked or smeared with anti-Semitic or fascist graffiti. Especially after the Hamas-led attack on Israel on 7th of October 2023, it was repeatedly subjected to graffiti. The front, as well as the back, was used as a venue for graffiti comments of solidarity on both sides of the conflict.

## 6. *How (not) to dismantle privilege*

And yet another example. The two East Germans, Ines Bayer and Raik Hönemann, painted their picture on the East Side Gallery without prior arrangement, subsequently titling it *Es gilt viele Mauern abzubauen* (*There are many walls to break down*, Fig. 6). The work of the then extremely young artists – both were around 19 years of age – thematises prejudices and the

<sup>11</sup> Translated quotation of the text written on the right side of the artwork itself.

overcoming of these by breaking down the symbolic wall between people and races. The choice of motif was influenced by personal experiences of animosity towards East Germans in 1990<sup>12</sup>. Despite the artist's intention to utilise this image to advocate for the elimination of prejudice against all individuals, it can be argued that the work exemplifies an insidious form of racism that is imperceptible and deeply entrenched in the subconscious of many. In light of this background, the painting serves as a poignant reminder that introspection and critical examination of one's own prejudices must constantly be scrutinised.

The painting portrays seven individuals positioned on either side of a brick wall, meticulously extracting individual bricks with their hands and subsequently discarding them. The subjects depicted are characterised by their exaggerated and stereotypical representation as four Caucasian individuals with blonde hair (two males, one female, one child) on one side of the wall, and on the other side, two black individuals (one male, one female) and one individual of apparent Asian descent. The viewer is positioned on the side of the light-skinned caricatures, thus serving to create a clear contrast with the "Other". The depiction of individuals on the opposite side of the barrier aligns with a historical precedent of exoticising and racist portrayals.

The painting has been the subject of allegations of racism; if these allegations are found to be substantiated, the pertinent question to be addressed is how such a state of affairs should be handled. Should it be permitted to remain in place, or should it be removed? Shouldn't it simply be painted over in times of "political correctness"? Instead, in recent years, several workshops have been held with people affected by racism and ultimately the image is aggravating and unsettling but also encourages intensive debate. The sometimes-heated discussions and debates about the painting also fulfil the purpose of making people even more aware than before of their prejudices and experiences of exclusion, which is great, because one could state: Could one ask for more?

## 7. Conclusion

The East Side Gallery, in its entirety and as a collection of individual artworks, is a protected monument. The significance of the memorial is on the one hand due to the historic layer of the Berlin Wall, and on the other in the artistic appropriation which is unique for the time of 1989/1990. Taken into account that some of the paintings underwent significant alterations during the major refurbishment in 2008/2009 at the latest, how can we deal with these artefacts today?

<sup>12</sup> Bayer, Hönemann 2022, *Berlin Wall Foundation*.

The art at the East Side Gallery offers a multifaceted opportunity to engage with the *zeitgeist* of the time when the pictures were created. Although many of the paintings have been altered over the last 35 years, as the East Side Gallery has been renovated and renewed in several stages due to major damage or complete loss of substance<sup>13</sup>, the basic message of the time of upheaval is still clearly recognisable as a monument to the joy of the peaceful fall of the Wall.

The East Side Gallery still bears witness to the feelings of this unique moment: of the individual appropriation of the hated building, where at least 140 people died, and the overwhelming joy at the opening of the Wall - but also of the hopes and fears that accompanied it.

Although many of the pictures reflect the spirit of the times, they are provocative. And that is surely a good thing, because many of the themes depicted are still relevant today in a completely different world. The rapidly changing society poses new questions and throws new perspectives into the world. The historical image motifs provide the opportunity to take up and thematise current debates against the backdrop of their historicity; for this reason alone, the Berlin Wall Foundation, as trustee of the site, has a duty to preserve the site in its multi-layered tradition, despite the thematic trigger potential of individual images<sup>14</sup>. Controversy is a fruitful starting point for entering into dialogue with one another in order to constantly question the self-image of democracy and freedom anew.

Anyone who has studied the history of heritage conservation will be familiar with one of its fundamental dogmas: "What is lost, is lost". And it is precisely this succinct wisdom that harbours the dangers and opportunities of an iconoclasm arising from actionism. Once the images have disappeared, no productive process of debate can develop around them. Discussions that are not conducted are almost always worse than controversial ones.

Protected monuments are often inconvenient and literally stand in the way. They are aggravating and therefore, like the objects presented here, have a «contentious value» in the sense of Gabi Dolff-Bonekämper<sup>15</sup>. This contentious value as a present value in the attribution of monument value consists of the fact that the objects are the subject of intense discussion and sometimes even controversy. This is a very special and valuable quality, because value attributions are man-made and must be constantly scrutinised. The UK Gov-

<sup>13</sup> von Arnim-Rosenthal, Hauboldt-Stolle 2022, pp. 140-144.

<sup>14</sup> Section 2, paragraph 1 of the Berlin Wall Foundation Act of 17 September 2008 states: «The purpose of the foundation is to document and communicate the history of the Berlin Wall and the flight movements from the German Democratic Republic as part and consequence of the division of Germany and the East-West conflict in the 20th century, to preserve its historical sites and authentic traces and to enable a dignified commemoration of the victims of communist tyranny».

<sup>15</sup> Dolff-Bonekämper 2021, pp. 4-27.

ernment has found a short and catchy formula for dealing with monuments with disputed value: Retain and explain!<sup>16</sup> The “Retain and explain” policy will see assets kept in place, accompanied by an explanation of their historical context. This toolkit is intended to ensure that heritage decision-makers can access expert advice and good practice to support them to make better and more considered decisions with confidence when deciding how to deal with a heritage asset which may have become the focus of debate.

History is nuanced and complex. It is full of grey areas, which is what makes it so interesting and, in many ways, inspiring. However, of course, there are times when paintings, statues and monuments depict people or events that we very much disapprove of today.

Our examples discussed show that they have the potential to provide food for thought in often simplistic debates that negate or try to minimise the complexity of historical contexts. We live in times of discourse bottlenecks, in times of crises in the culture of debate and in times in which open-ended discussions are sometimes made very difficult or completely called into question by undemocratic “cancel culture”. This is why the mission of the Berlin Wall Foundation must be taken very seriously; it is both about preserving the heritage entrusted to it and about communicating the complex history and historicity of the site and its sculptures in all their complexity. The fact that this is both not always easy, and not always possible without controversy, is an extremely positive side effect of the knowledge gained.

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<sup>16</sup> UK Government, Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2023.

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*Appendix*

Fig. 1. The opening of the East Side Gallery on 28 September 1990, Berlin Wall Foundation (Photo: Günther Schaefer)



Fig. 2. Tourists at the East Side Gallery in Berlin, Berlin Wall Foundation (Photo: Jascha Fiebig, 2018)



Fig. 3. Lutz Pottien, *Pottiens persönliches Eigentum*, Berlin Wall Foundation (Photo: Günther Schaefer)



Fig. 4. C.F., *How's God? She's Black*, Berlin Wall Foundation (Photo: Günther Schaefer)



Fig. 5. Günther Schaefer, *Vaterland*, Berlin Wall Foundation (Photo: Günther Schaefer)



Fig. 6. Ines Bayer and Raik Hönemann, *Es gilt viele Mauern abzubauen*, Berlin Wall Foundation (Photo: Günther Schaefer)

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ISSN 2039-2362