GERMANS’ THINGS: MATERIAL CULTURE AND DAILY LIFE IN EAST AND WEST, 1949–2009

Conference at the Wende Museum and the University of California at Los Angeles, October 1-3, 2009. Co-sponsored by the GHI, UCLA, and the Wende Museum. Conveners: Uta Balbier (GHI), Philipp Gassert (University of Augsburg), Justinian Jampol (Wende Museum), Robert G. Moeller (University of California, Irvine). Participants: John Ahouse (Wende Museum), Paul Betts (University of Sussex), Paul Freedman (Yale University), Lindsay Hansen (California State University, Northridge), Karen Lang (University of Southern California), Alf Lüdtke (University of Erfurt), John Maciuika (Baruch College, CUNY), Josie McLellan (Bristol University), Jane Pavitt (Victoria & Albert Museum), Kathy Pence (Baruch College, CUNY), Uta Poiger (University of Washington, Seattle), Martin Roth (Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden), Eli Rubin (Western Michigan University), Lutz Sauerteig (Durham University), Leonard Schmieding (University of Leipzig), Jana Scholze (Victoria & Albert Museum), Jeff Schutts (Douglas College), Joes Segal (Utrecht University), Edith Sheffer (Stanford University), Detlef Siegfried (University of Copenhagen).

From October 1-3, 2009, an international group of historians and museum specialists convened in the UCLA Library and Villa Aurora under the auspices of the Wende Museum and Archive of the Cold War and the German Historical Institute. In six panels and a plenary discussion, they scrutinized the role of “things”—that is, objects of material culture—and their importance for the writing of German history. Some of the presenters focused on tangible objects, such as photographs or menus; others looked at the practices associated with objects, from teaching sex education to collecting designer pieces of furniture. Exploring the political, social, and cultural history of the two postwar German states in the Cold War era from the perspective of material culture, conference participants emphasized three areas of research: first, the function of things in the everyday life of East and West Germans; second, the history of cultural transfers of material culture, including different, often contesting, interpretations and appropriations of objects and their associated uses; and third, present-day museum practices as indicators of the politics of “doing history.”

Throughout the conference, a number of themes informed the presentations and subsequent discussions. Speaking about Germans’ things in Los Angeles triggered many responses about proximity,
distance, and perspective. Los Angeles was particularly attractive as the conference location because it gave participants the opportunity to go on a guided tour of the remarkable collection of the Wende Museum, which includes many objects de-accessioned by other museums and thus lends itself to exploring alternative ways of writing histories of the Cold War. While at first glance, Los Angeles seems very far away from Germany—or at least East Germany—in fact, the city has strong ties to German culture, as demonstrated by the exile of intellectuals such as Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, and Lion Feuchtwanger to L.A. Talking about “things” German on the Pacific coast, then, seemed not only appropriate, but it allowed us to probe into their “German-ness” from a safe and liberating distance, free from the German political discourse of “doing history,” and inviting new perspectives on historiographical approaches. This setting sparked discussions about the agency of things, as well as their opacity and their respective aura. By suggesting a need to unsettle things, to shake loose their layers of meaning, and to attend to signifying practices, the conference group opened up new arenas for further research agendas. Closely connected with scrutinizing this “thingness” of things were concerns about their relation to texts, the written and spoken word, and images, and correspondingly, the discourse and practice of using and staging “things” in museum contexts. In the space of three days, about 25 scholars of German history came together, but not to further their own agendas; rather, to discuss their projects within the framework of a truly collaborative investigation. There were disagreements, but no arguments; new ideas, but no grand-standing; answers, but none of them wrong. As this conference demonstrated, more of these opportunities for cooperative work are needed. The subject matter is not important. True, we came to this conference to talk about things. But we left with new questions about the practice of history—a step towards (inter-)disciplinary growth that is perhaps the harbinger of a new era of doing history.

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