

INTRODUCTION

Joel Segal and Uta A. Balbier

Having existed for forty years, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) produced a unique socialist material culture. Whether described as modern, socialist modern, or just as kitsch, it defined East German identity, structured everyday life in the GDR, and became a contested feature in the process of unification. West Germans had to come to terms with the fact that East Germans did not just remember the Berlin Wall and the state security apparatus, or Stasi, but also the different streetlights, jars of Spreewald pickles, and yellow plastic egg cups. Studying the material culture of the GDR today makes it possible to highlight a part of the GDR's history that lies behind the history of the state, the party, and the secret police. It enables access to the history of people living, working, consuming, writing, painting, discussing, making love, and dreaming on the east side of the Wall. Their histories unfolded in the midst of things they used and designed. These things, lying at the crossroads of private and public life, communicate traditions of the past and symbolize visions of the future.

Like all states, the GDR used things to stage its own version of modernity and to construct the everyday practices of its subjects and communicate its political power. Likewise, regime opponents used things to convey their political resistance by means of appropriation or subversive reinterpretation. The material world was where political, cultural, sexual, and social identities intertwined, where the identity of the socialist state was shaped and contested. Consequently, the history of material culture and art in the GDR is now fiercely debated, as is its preservation and display. The public disputes about *Ostalgie* only touch the surface of a much deeper controversy over the place of East German heritage in reunified Germany.

The essays collected in this volume explore both the history of things in the GDR and the ways they have been collected, curated, and remembered. They represent a selection of the presentations held during the conference "Germans' Things: Material Culture and Daily Life in East and West, 1949-2009," which the Los Angeles-based Wende Museum hosted and jointly organized with Bob Moeller (University of California, Irvine), UCLA, and the German

Historical Institute, Washington, DC, in October 2009. Bringing together social, cultural, and art historians, as well as musicologists and museum curators, the conference probed the relations between history, collective memory, and material culture in Cold War-era Germany. We focused on the material record with the aim of better understanding the complexities of German postwar life, especially in the GDR. By taking East German material culture—against the backdrop of the extensive GDR collections of the Wende Museum—as a starting point and comparing it to parallel or diverging trends in the West, we hoped to produce relevant insights into aspects of GDR culture and daily life that textual sources alone largely fail to disclose. Moreover, we hoped to critically assess and qualify the rather one-sided and sometimes heavily politicized perspective that has dominated academic and public debate on East German cultural history since the 1990s. The site of the conference near Los Angeles provided the critical distance from the politics that informs historical debate in Germany, which enabled us to address the material record anew.¹

1 For the complete conference program, see http://www.ghi-dc.org/files/pdf/2009/conferences/germanthings/program_germanthings_final.pdf. See also the conference report by Benita Blessing and Leonard Schmieiding, "Germans' Things: Material Culture in Daily Life in East and West, 1949-2009," *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 46 (2010): 150-51, available online at <http://www.ghi-dc.org/files/publications/bulletin/bu046/150.pdf>.

2 See several of Foucault's works, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London, 1973); *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York, 1973); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, 1977). See also David C. Hoy, ed., *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, 1986).

3 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1984); Jeremy Ahearn, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and Its Other* (Cambridge, 1995).

The meaning of material culture

The study of material culture has not always been part of the standard toolbox of cultural historians. During the 1980s, this approach got a strong impetus from fields as diverse as cultural philosophy, economic history, archeology, and anthropology. Most famously, philosopher Michel Foucault analyzed the everyday practices of power and their implications for the material organization of social institutions like prisons, mental asylums, schools, and hospitals.² Partly in his wake, cultural historians started to take a fresh look at museum arrangements and exhibition displays, the organization of public festivals and spectacles, city planning, and interior design as windows to public and private mechanisms of control and power exertion. In Foucault's philosophy, people play a rather passive role, being powerfully determined by the power structures and corresponding "truth regimes" that surround them. In Michel de Certeau's philosophy, by contrast, people in their everyday environment are much more active and creative, giving meaning to their own lives in a variety of ways, in spite of the hegemonic power structures and disciplinary strategies from "above."³ For instance, consumers have the (limited) power to make their own choices but also, more importantly, to invest the products they acquire with new meanings, to appropriate and "re-employ" them. This includes the

power to subvert the “official” meaning of things and to counter power strategies, consciously or unconsciously, with individual tactics from “below.”

Whereas economic historians traditionally study material culture in terms of production, distribution, and consumption figures, as well as markets and the relation between supply and demand, cultural historians are typically more concerned with the symbolic meaning of “things.” Inspired by archeologists and their ways of extracting all kinds of information from material sources, and by cultural anthropologists and their interpretation of “things” in the context of social networks and ritual meanings,⁴ cultural historians analyze material culture to find how it is used to represent values, beliefs, attitudes, and lifestyles and to form individual and collective identities. In the 1980s, for instance, the field of cultural history witnessed the rise of the British “History Workshop Movement” (Raphael Samuel) and the West German “Geschichtswerkstätten,” which were characterized by a bottom-up (instead of top-down) perspective and a great interest in oral history and material culture.⁵ In Germany, Alf Lüdtkte and others popularized “Alltagsgeschichte,” the history of everyday life. His concept of “Eigen-Sinn,” the ways in which people assert their subjectivity and create meaning in their own social environment, corresponds closely to the philosophical ideas of de Certeau.⁶ These trends inspired a new approach to GDR history, which helped to counterbalance the strongly politicized approaches of the 1990s.

During the 1990s, a great deal of historical research on the GDR focused intently on the structures of power and the mechanisms of suppression and dissent in the totalitarian SED regime. The Bundestag established two commissions of historical inquiry to study these, as well as human rights violations, with the explicit aim of identifying and eliminating the anti-liberal heritage of the SED state. Between 1992 and 1998, the commissions published two multi-volume reports highlighting the various means of suppression and ideological indoctrination the regime employed to achieve absolute control over all facets of public and individual life.⁷ Especially during the early 1990s, there was remarkable agreement among historians and the parliamentary commissions concerning this interpretation of the East German past.

Useful and revealing as this approach proved to be for understanding state power mechanisms, it was less suitable for gaining insight

4 See, for instance, Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973).

5 Examples include Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981); Gerhard Paul and Bernhard Schossig, eds., *Die andere Geschichte. Geschichte von unten, Spurensicherung, ökologische Geschichte, Geschichtswerkstätten* (Cologne, 1986).

6 Alf Lüdtkte, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, 1995).

7 Deutscher Bundestag, ed. *Materialien der Enquete Kommission "Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland"* (Study Commission for Working through the History and the Consequences of the SED Dictatorship in Germany), 18 vols. (Baden-Baden, 1995); *ibid.*, *Materialien der Enquete Kommission "Überwindung der Folgen der SED-Diktatur im Prozess der deutschen Einheit"* (Study Commission for the Overcoming of the Consequences of the SED Dictatorship in the Process of German Unity), 13 vols. (Baden-Baden, 1999).

into the various productive and creative ways people dealt with the realities of life. Over the course of the 1990s, a counter-narrative stressing the more positive qualities of East German culture and society—which came to be associated with the term *Ostalgie* (a nostalgia for the East)—did develop: it compared the GDR’s real or alleged idealism, solidarity, social welfare, women’s emancipation, and children’s daycare favorably to the merciless individualist and materialist society of the Federal Republic. However, this approach did little to produce a more balanced understanding of GDR history. On the other hand, some social and cultural historians in the 1990s—among them Jürgen Kocka, Martin Sabrow, Konrad Jarausch, and Thomas Lindenberger—started to combine political, social, economic, and cultural perspectives in their studies, incorporating analyses of the everyday experiences of East German citizens.⁸ More recently, scholars have begun to research the material record of the GDR in myriad ways, including its ambivalent modernity.⁹

Simultaneous to these theoretical developments, material culture from East Germany was finding its way into a number of museums and other public institutions, albeit with clear conceptual differences in the manners in which it was displayed and contextualized. For example, the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn presents German history from 1945 to the present through the lens of political history, and the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig focuses on resistance and dictatorship in the Soviet Occupation Zone (1945–1949) as well as the later GDR (1949–1990). The DDR Museum in Berlin, the Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR in Eisenhüttenstadt, and the Wende Museum, by contrast, concentrate on the material record of the GDR to access everyday life and culture. Interestingly, these three museums see it as part of their mission to reconsider existing clichés about East German history or to encourage diverse interpretations from a variety of perspectives.¹⁰

Dealing with material culture

In tune with recent developments in the historiography of the GDR, the seven conference papers selected for this supplement to the *GHI Bulletin* investigate different fields of East German material culture and their relevance for a deeper understanding of the lifestyles, aspirations, and dreams that were marked by *and* helped define the realities of life behind the Berlin Wall. The first two papers by John

8 Jürgen Kocka, ed., *Sozialgeschichte der DDR* (Göttingen, 1992); Jürgen Kocka and Martin Sabrow, eds., *Die DDR als Geschichte. Fragen, Hypothesen, Perspektiven* (Berlin, 1994); Konrad Hugo Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York, 1999); Thomas Lindenberger, ed., *Herrschaft und Eigensinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR* (Cologne, 1999).

9 Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, eds., *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor, 2008); David Crowley and Jane Pavitt, eds., *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970* (London, 2008).

10 For the various mission statements, see the respective museum web sites: Haus der Geschichte Bonn: www.hdg.de/bonn, Zeitgeschichtliches Forum Leipzig: www.hdg.de/leipzig; DDR Museum Berlin: www.ddr-museum.de/en; Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR Eisenhüttenstadt: www.alltagskultur-ddr.de/pages/home.html; Wende Museum Los Angeles: www.wendemuseum.org. See also Justinian Jampol’s essay on the Wende Museum in this volume.

Maciuika and Eli Rubin deal with the built environment during the GDR and after reunification, the contributions by Josie McLellan, Leo Schmieding, and Jana Scholze discuss objects of everyday life, whereas the last two papers by Joes Segal and Justinian Jampol focus on political and philosophical issues related to the role of material culture in historiography and museum practices after reunification.

John Maciuika discusses the prolonged fight over the seat of the East German parliament, the “Palast der Republik” (palace of the republic, PdR), an architectural symbol that carried a number of social and cultural functions in GDR times. He explores the political considerations and discussions that led the Bundestag, in the end, to decide to tear down the building and replace it with a copy of the Hohenzollern “Stadtschloss” (city palace), which had been damaged during the war and completely demolished in 1950 as a symbol of Prussian imperialism. Maciuika shows that the “politics of memory” that inform part of the academic discourse on East German history have direct repercussions on the way urban realities are dealt with, as well. He demonstrates that, in spite of seeming only locally relevant, the debate on the “PdR” quickly assumed international significance.

Turning from symbolic architecture to a typical living quarter in the city of East Berlin, Eli Rubin analyzes the history of Marzahn, the capital’s biggest *Plattenbau* district, which the state conceived as a total environment reflecting and expressing the blessings of modern socialism. Here the built environment was designed to sever all ties and associations with the past, not unlike many housing projects from the 1960s and 1970s in West Berlin and other cities of the Federal Republic. Rubin discusses the plans for Marzahn and their realization not only from the point of view of the politicians, urban planners, and architects involved but also from the perspective of its residents, who reflect in post-unification interviews on the ways moving to Marzahn changed their lives.

While architecture sets the larger frame for everyday objects, the next section offers close readings of smaller objects and cultural trends that could more easily permeate the East/West border. These essays reveal unexpected intra-German connections and cross-fertilizations. First, in her highly original research, Josie McLellan focuses on the hitherto much neglected topic of nude photography and soft-porn in East German publications. Although the GDR was famous for its nude beaches, which purported to celebrate a very

natural sexuality, some of the published photos nonetheless exhibit a more pornographic character that suggests socialist sexuality was not always so “innocent.” Instead of suppressing these Western-type images as deviations from the socialist norm, the state unofficially permitted and even supported their reproduction as they yielded welcome revenue and distracted citizens from politically more dangerous anti-socialist behaviors—even if this implied tolerating a capitalist “aberration” among the East German populace.

In his essay on the East German hip-hop scene, Leo Schmieding presents an excellent example of what can be called the re-employment model of material culture. Schmieding raises issues of transnational influence and local appropriation of musical forms, dance, fashion, hairdos, and spraypaint in his discussion of the youth who carved out a social and cultural niche for themselves in the GDR of the 1980s. Hip-hop was not just about dancing and making music, nor was it all about political resistance against a communist dictatorship. The hip-hop scene created a parallel universe with its own social conventions and cultural practices. Paradoxically, the East German state had made this scene possible in the first place by allowing the distribution of the American hip-hop film *Beat Street*, with the aim of advertising the downsides of capitalist society. Thus, the youth endowed this film with a meaning that was by no means intended by the state and imitated its culture in their own “eigen-sinnige,” or willful, way.

A further instance of cultural border crossings between East and West can be found in Jana Scholze’s case study of the “Garden Egg Chair.” Scholze tells the story of this West German designer chair that was mass-produced in the GDR following a secret cross-bloc business agreement. Having been assistant curator of the exhibition *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970* in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (2008), Scholze tells the improbable story of the chair’s production and reception in East and West largely with information gathered from eyewitnesses, whose perceptions do not all line up together. She uses this example not only to consider the role and value of material culture in history-telling and memory, but also to reflect more broadly on the politicized discussions that arise when museums and other institutions deal with East German material culture, suggesting that we still have a long way to go before we can approach this history free of ideological biases.

Scholze’s paper builds the bridge from the everyday life of objects to the contested field of their collection, memory, and display. The last

two papers of this volume address the role of East German material culture in German historiography and museum displays and exhibitions after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The potentially unsettling role of “things” in relation to preconceived views of East German history is the topic of Joes Segal’s text. He discusses the clash of East and West German historical and art historical narratives during the 1990s and argues that a “truthful” interpretation of material objects cannot be arrived at through the lens of ideologically biased convictions. Many art historians, art critics, and politicians simply rejected forty years of East German art as state propaganda. Yet this broadly accepted perspective grossly underestimates the power of creativity and “Eigen-Sinn,” even in a dictatorial state like the GDR. Artworks and other material objects relating to collective memory, such as monuments and street signs, can force us to reconsider our prejudices about the world we claim to know.

In the final contribution to this volume, Justinian Jampol ponders the unique position of the Los Angeles Wende Museum of which he is the founder and executive director. Jampol argues that, strange though it may seem to have a Cold War museum focusing on the GDR on the Pacific coast, the geopolitical aspect actually benefits the museum. On the one hand, the Wende Museum continues a tradition of keen interest in German history and culture in the city of Los Angeles, which accommodated a number of famous German artists, writers, and intellectuals who had fled Nazi Germany during the 1930s. On the other hand, and even more importantly, Los Angeles proved to be a safe haven for objects, artworks and documents in the 1990s, when they were being deaccessioned, discarded, or actively destroyed in Germany and other Eastern European countries following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Soviet communism. Whereas these material sources, especially at that time, excited uncomfortable or disturbing associations with the recent past, or were suppressed as symbols of a hateful regime, the Wende Museum was and remains able to display them in a depoliticized context, where they can be perceived as historical sources contributing to a deeper understanding of the past.

Like the Wende Museum itself that hosted this conference, the seven essays of this book, spanning from John Maciuika’s description of the political debates behind the decision to destroy the Palast der Republik to Justinian Jampol’s insights into the political role of space when it comes to shaping historical memory, certainly attest to the highly politicized nature of GDR historiography and memory.

Yet they also evince the analytical gain of rewriting history from below through the lens of material culture and the use and memory of everyday objects. By discussing various aspects of everyday culture in the GDR on the basis of “things,” this volume aims to contribute to a more differentiated view of the East German past that challenges political narratives and gives rise to a more nuanced conception of the complex and multiform crossroads between political reality and everyday experience.