

SHIFTING NARRATIVES OF THINGS: THE EAST/WEST GERMAN GARDEN EGG CHAIR

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Today, more than twenty years since German reunification—and even longer since the fall of the Berlin Wall—Germans in both the eastern and western parts of Germany still struggle to come to terms with the history of the Cold War and the country's former, divided state. As people who spent the greater part of their lives in either East or West Germany rapidly pass away, age, or displace memories of this era with events of the intervening period, historians have the urgent task of supporting this endeavor: they must collect eyewitness testimony and preserve the material culture of these former nations and times—and especially of the former GDR—along with written documentation and other types of historical evidence, before it slips away.

In this project of capturing the past, museums and their curators play an important part. They not only work to preserve historical evidence, but they also convey specific interpretations of certain aspects of history, usually to a broader public, thus forming a central component in public debates about that history. To be sure, museums deal with a wide range of types of historical evidence, but they are perhaps the most significant sites for the preservation of material culture. Whereas eyewitness testimony is subject to the changing condition of personal memory, material objects appear to be rather solid and immutable windows onto the past. Yet, in order to view that past through them, curators must follow the trails that objects leave behind—in the case of furniture, for example, via documentation of the design process, production specifications, and contexts of use and display; but also via personal memories, such as reports by or interviews with designers, production managers, and owners of the piece. Interviews, in particular, are naturally as subject to problems of memory as eyewitness testimony. Nonetheless, the objects as such remain unchanged, presenting a cultural palimpsest of the attitudes toward and uses of the objects. The rather complex trails objects leave can not only uncover detailed accounts of the history of the object but can help us to better understand the social, cultural, economic, and political context of their time.

This historical tracing is precisely what I did with one particular object—the East/West German Garden Egg Chair—which I helped to accession in my curatorial work at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for the exhibition *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970*. Touted by the lead curators, Jane Pavitt and David Crowley, as “the first exhibition to explore international developments in modern art, design, architecture and film in the context of the Cold War,”¹ the project brought together over three hundred items presenting art and design from the immediate postwar period through the space race and the youthful rebellions in Paris and Prague in 1968. One significant theme—and the one that the Garden Egg Chair was a part of—was the application of Cold War technologies in architecture and design to create visions of the future, inspired by the space race, that captured the sense of ideological rivalry between East and West.

I was born in the German Democratic Republic, studied in Leipzig and Berlin, and also worked for various German collections before taking up my current position at the Victoria and Albert Museum, working specifically on German design history. This background, combined with the experience of working on this groundbreaking exhibition—and the task of accessioning the Garden Egg Chair, in particular—gave me insight into the unique problems that curators “collecting the GDR” face, and how these problems differ inside and outside of Germany. Moreover, the exhibition highlighted how important material objects are in piecing together history. As the specific story of the Garden Egg Chair will show, objects help us to uncover new, quality information that provides for more nuanced and integrated historical narratives and helps people—and in this case, especially Germans—understand the past.

Shifting narratives of history

One reason Germans in particular find it so difficult to come to terms with the Cold War past is that, for a long time, only conflicting and fairly simplistic master narratives of the period existed. Citizens raised in the GDR were presented with a historical master narrative authorized by the ruling Socialist Unity Party, or SED. Embodied by the Old Communists who had led an antifascist struggle under Hitler, the “official memory” of the GDR, which the SED encouraged Old Communists to write in their memoirs, was intended to legitimize the regime.² At the same time, critical alternative and unofficial voices—primarily oral rather than written—contested this master

1 See the exhibition description on the Victoria and Albert Museum web site: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/microsites/cold-war-modern/>.

2 See Catherine Epstein, “The Production of ‘Official Memory’ in East Germany: Old Communists and the Dilemmas of Memoir-Writing,” *Central European History* 32, no. 2 (1999): 181-201, 181.

narrative in the East. After reunification, a crucial question that both Germans and international historians have had to address, then, is which versions of history to accept and convey. Is there any truth to the master narrative, and what details of the “official memory” should not be dismissed? Are the unofficial voices trustworthy? To what extent? Of course, the answers to these questions are rather complex and can often only be found for particular cases.

In the West, on the other hand, the master narrative revolved—and to a great extent still does—around the superiority of the Western way of doing things and the corruption and bankruptcy of the communist system. In the long process of reunification, East Germans, especially, often assumed that Western historians would be more trustworthy and impartial in their judgments of East German history because of their “proper” education. Others, however, doubted whether Western scholars would be able to interpret the East German past precisely because they lacked direct experience of it.

These conflicting narratives and the mutual distrust of East and West have made telling the history of the GDR within Germany, as well as the collection and integration of East German material culture, a particularly daunting task. Not surprisingly, a great many historians and curators within Germany shied away from dealing with the GDR. A lot of East German curators, in particular, feared the necessity of changing the interpretations of their collections as it required them to be actively engaged in the writing of history, with all the uncertainties that entails. Their anxiety also pertained to collecting material from their immediate surroundings; many of them preferred to concentrate on objects that had not been available to them before the opening of the Iron Curtain. West German curators, on the other hand, held off from collecting Eastern material for lack of knowledge. In retrospect, it seems that a period of slow rapprochement was necessary for Germans in the eastern and western parts of the reunified country to develop insight, trust, and respect for one another so that an exchange of knowledge and an honest accounting of the history of both sides could be presented among historians, in history books, and in museum collections. Indeed, it seems that this situation is, at last, beginning to change, as both museums and academic organizations begin to address issues of East and West Germany from a more comprehensive, inclusive perspective. One example of such a perspective with regard to design history is the new annual conference of the Gesellschaft



Figure 1. Garden Egg Chair, designed by Peter Ghyzcy, 1968, manufactured by VEB Synthesewerk-Schwarzheide, East Germany, 1971. In the collection of the Wende Museum, 2011. The chair is white with a bright blue cushion.

für deutsche Designgeschichte. The first annual conference (after the inaugural one the year before) held in the spring of 2009 in Hanover under the heading “Deutsche Dinge. Design im doppelten Deutschland von 1949 bis 1989”³ did not focus on the place of design within each political system but rather introduced the design history of the two countries in parallel. With East/West comparison of approaches, designs, and products central to all discussions, participants came to see that, at least concerning design, the two Germanys had more commonalities than differences, which emanated from shared traditions and cross-border connections between designers. To be sure, there were politically driven attempts to foster opposite approaches to design that manifested themselves in differing iconographies with certain stylistic indicators. Yet these seemed to peter out early on, and primarily impacted design in the foundation years of both German

countries, after which the two design histories followed largely parallel courses.

Such a shift in perspective has been a long time in coming, however, and in the twenty years prior to this development, the “mental blocks” to dealing with and collecting GDR material culture in Germany left their mark. One consequence of the practical and ideological hurdles to “collecting the GDR” in Germany was that it has made the subject more attractive for non-German collectors. A small number of museums outside the country took up the task, integrating East German and East European material into their collections. The Wende Museum in Los Angeles is one of these.⁴ However *The Cold War Modern* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, though not specifically dedicated to the history of the GDR, represents another such international effort, as it looked at Eastern European design, including that of East Germany, alongside Western design history.

What Justinian Jampol, the founder of the Wende Museum, as well as the curators of the Victoria and Albert exhibition and numerous German museum curators who have collected GDR material culture, despite their initial hesitation, understand is the urgency of the

3 For a conference report, see <http://www.gfdg.org/archiv/tagungen/tagung2009/bericht>.

4 See Justinian Jampol's contribution in this same volume on the advantages that this museum's site in Los Angeles brings to the issue of interpreting GDR history, 123.

situation. The end of the GDR and the Eastern Bloc, as such, presents a unique and special circumstance with the concomitant duty to collect as much of this disappearing material culture as possible before it is gone. By the mid-1990s, people were renovating their homes and offices in the former East at an unprecedented pace, with massive amounts of GDR material culture winding up in the trash heap. But these international and daring German curators have followed the advice that Günter Höhne, the last editor of the East German design magazine *form und zweck* and the self-proclaimed “ehrenamtlicher Erbpfleger” (honorary keeper of the heritage) of East German design, gave me in an interview: “solange weggeschmissen wird, aufheben...”⁵ Only if we save these objects will we be able to trace their stories, using them to probe and question the master narratives.

A cultural palimpsest: The East/West German Garden Egg Chair

The particular story of my accessioning the Garden Egg Chair (Fig . 2) for the Victoria and Albert Museum and the *Cold War Modern* exhibition, in particular, is fascinating on three levels. First of all, it illustrates some of the fundamental issues that curators “collecting the GDR” have to deal with. Second, the different stories—the oral histories of the chair’s designer, the general director of the production company, and the production manager—enable the chair to act as a cultural palimpsest wherein we can see the changing perspectives on the chair over time and across East and West. Third, as the historical evidence surrounding the chair will show us, it discloses hitherto unseen interrelationships between East and West Germany in production and manufacturing. Looking at one object in this way helps to underscore not only the shifting nature of historical narratives discussed above, but also the importance of preserving GDR material culture for its historical value.

Pictured below is the very Garden Egg Chair that the Victoria and Albert Museum acquired for the *Cold War Modern* exhibition. Designed by Peter Ghyczy in 1967/68, it is a bright, plastic-lacquered, low-slung chair made of polyurethane. Its UFO (or literally egg-shaped) form, portability, and suitability for informal lounging make it very characteristic of the period, reflecting the progressive, utopian visions prominent in contemporary designs. In recent years, the Garden Egg Chair has become a collector’s item that

5 “As long as things are being thrown away, keep them.” Günter Höhne, phone interview by Jana Scholze, December 9, 2010.

can frequently be found at antique sales and auctions. This new popularity even prompted Ghyczy to put a revised version into production.

Yet these new versions and the sheer numbers of Garden Egg Chairs available point to the first fundamental issue curators have to address when they seek to obtain an object for a collection: authenticity. How do we know that a particular object is an original or early example (which museums generally prefer) rather than a later imitation? As knock-off reproductions of the chair have been found as far afield as China, Thailand, and South America, what information can we use to verify its genuineness? In essence, one has to rely on whatever information is available and also seek out information in an act of piecing things together through archival materials and oral history, using consistency of information and discernment to evaluate the reliability of the information thus gathered. In this particular case, as there was not a lot of information about the Garden Egg Chair available, I looked where the chairs originated.



Figure 2. Tangerine and yellow version of the Garden Egg Chair from the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Cold War Modern* exhibition.

The first contact was the designer Peter Ghyczy himself. Surprisingly, given the chair's popularity, hardly any scholar had contacted or spoken to him about it before.⁶ Ghyczy was a Hungarian émigré to West Germany who, after studying architecture, became the chief designer at the polyurethane factory Elastogran GmbH in Lemförde, West Germany, where he was responsible for developing a design department for polyurethane products. Contacting him proved to be beneficial: He was, foremost, able to point us to an early example of the chair with an interesting provenance. The daughter of Gottfried Reuter, who owned Elastogran GmbH, possessed the particular chair we selected, having used it by a swimming pool. Moreover, Ghyczy provided us with a lot of pertinent information that prompted further searching, ultimately leading us to uncover new trails to follow. The Garden Egg Chair was one of his very first designs, which he had developed to inspire clients and stimulate ideas as the material, polyurethane, was new and its possible applications were seemingly limitless. He also told us that the Lemförde factory

⁶ I conducted this interview together with Jane Pavitt.

only produced a couple of prototypes of the chair in testing the new material. The lacquering process required substantial manual labor, making mass production too expensive for West Germany.⁷ According to Ghyczy, the company then transferred mass production to East Germany because “production was much cheaper there.” This comment prompted us to continue our research as this form of outsourcing did not officially exist between the two German countries. Ghyczy himself knew very little about the East German history of the chair. He had never been in touch with the East German production company, VEB Synthesewerk-Schwarzheide, nor had the company contacted him despite changing the design for its own production needs. In addition, Ghyczy never sold the rights for his design, nor was he ever paid any royalties from East Germany, and he only had a vague idea of how many chairs were ever produced.

Although our particular chair turned out to be a prototype from the Lemförde factory, we did not immediately know this but had to dig deeper, following the trail to East Germany. From the start, one of the motivations for the research was the confusing provenance of Garden Egg Chairs as some were marked as being manufactured in Lemförde (former West Germany), whereas others were marked as being made in Schwarzheide (former East Germany). When we first examined the new acquisition, we found a label indicating a quality inspection that read “In Ordnung, Abt. Qk, 9. Juni 1971.”⁸ At first, we assumed that this confirmation of quality referred to East German rather than West German production, but this assumption proved to be incorrect. This points to a second, basic issue curators have to deal with: discovering information about an item’s provenance and collating as many details about it, including who produced and used it and in what circumstances. An appointment at the archive of the former East German company led to an interview with the former general director of the VEB Synthesewerk-Schwarzheide, Dr. Hans-Joachim Jeschke.⁹ Together with documents in the company archive, Jeschke revealed the exact dates of production, which began later in East Germany than this label indicated. Accordingly, the chair was one of the few prototypes made in Lemförde, and the label marked the end of a certain testing process there.

Jeschke’s story about the East German production of the Garden Egg Chair not only enlightened us with regard to our chair’s provenance but also highlighted the depth of interaction between East and West Germany in the process. Jeschke explained that the

7 Peter Ghyczy, interview by Jane Pavitt and Jana Scholze, Swalmen, January 26, 2007.

8 This translates as “OK, Quality Control Section, June 9, 1971.”

9 Hans-Joachim Jeschke, interview by Jana Scholze, Schwarzheide (in the archives of the former VEB Synthesewerk, now owned by BASF), April 11, 2007.

GDR was quite interested in producing polyurethane in the late 1960s but, like other Eastern Bloc countries, lacked expertise in

the field. However, in the short period between the late 1960s and early 1970s, East Germany had begun to exchange expertise and technology with the West, establishing contacts with relevant West German companies. In early 1970, the VEB Synthesewerk bought manufacturing technology from Elastogran, for which it was to manufac-



Figure 3. "Ebba Ghyczy Carlborg," future daughter-in-law of Peter Ghyczy, in the garden of her grandmother's Josef Frank home in the south of Sweden, 1985. Photo by Björn Carlborg, used courtesy of Felix Ghyczy and Ebba Ghyczy.

ture 15,000 pieces of polyurethane furniture as part of the payment, including a substantial number of Garden Egg Chairs. In the autumn of 1973, Elastogran went bankrupt, so production continued solely for the East European market. But since Garden Egg Chairs were expensive both to make and sell, production was halted in 1975 after a total of about 14,000 chairs had been made. Reflecting on the production of the Garden Egg Chair, Jeschke concluded: "This furniture was just a fashion article and as such far too expensive with a sales price of 430 marks, comparable to a general salary...No one in the company knew the designer's name or was specifically interested in the chair."

While this last comment reflects the different, lower status of designers in the Eastern Bloc, where they mostly worked collectively (and anonymously) in bureaucratic design institutes,¹⁰ an interview with the production manager of the VEB Synthesewerk, Günter Dämmig, calls Jeschke's assertion into question.¹¹ Dämmig confirmed that he knew the designer's name, Peter Ghyczy, but had not been allowed any contact. In fact, he would have liked to contact him about production details when the design had to be slightly altered. Not only did Dämmig refute Jeschke's claim of the anonymity of the designer, but his perception of the chair and people's reactions to it was markedly different from Jeschke's. Far from

10 See Jane Pavett and David Crowley, "Introduction," in *Cold War Modern: Design 1945-1970*, ed. idem (London, 2008), 1-25, 21.

11 Günter Dämmig, interview by Jana Scholze, Bernsdorf, April 8, 2009.

being indifferent to the chair, most VEB workers, Dämmig averred, were proud to be involved in its production because they regarded all production for the West as something special. Moreover, East German consumers, according to Dämmig, happily paid the high price for the chair as they construed getting one with ownership of a Western product. It was not necessarily the price but the limited space of their dwellings that restrained many from buying one, as only people with a house and/or yard had a suitable place for such a chair. What is remarkable is that the prestige conferred on this “Western” item persisted for two years of East German-only production after West German production ceased.

In an interesting side note, despite the differences in perception of the chair that the three interviewees presented, they did have one thing in common: one person dominated all three stories: Gottfried Reuter, a chemist with hundreds of patents to his name and the owner of the Elastogran company in Lemförde. Ghyczy even praised Reuter highly since our interview with him for his “visionary attitude” and the “total creative freedom” he gave Ghyczy and his crew in the design center at Lemförde in the BASF customer magazine *PUR*.¹² From the late 1960s to the 1980s, Reuter’s life appears to have been interwoven with the East in multifarious ways, not the least of which was the sale of parts of his Lemförde plant to the Schwarzheide facility.¹³ He landed in financial difficulties several times and was involved in a variety of scandals, finding a mysterious death in a hotel room in East Berlin in 1986, in the end.

The different perspectives on the chair that the three foregoing interviews by the chair’s designer, the general director of the production plant, and the production manager offer illuminate yet another problem that curators and historians alike face: the reliability of memory and perception in oral interviews. As we saw, three different people involved with the chair had different perceptions of it when they were interviewed: for Ghyczy, it was a progressive, modern design intended to inspire clients; for Jeschke it was an expensive fashion article he himself would never have bought and cared little for; and for Dämmig, it was, to be sure, a desirable product that he was proud to manufacture because of its Western associations. These differences arise from their different experiences and preferences, making it difficult for us to know which of their assertions are historically accurate. In addition, with more than thirty-five years having elapsed between the design and production of the chair and the interviews, it is possible

12 See “Ingenious: The PU Egg Chair of Peter Ghyczy,” interview with Peter Ghyczy, *PUR*, no. 18 (1/2010): 12-13, here 13, available online at http://www.polyurethanes.basf.de/pu/solutions/en/function/conversions/publish/content/group/News_und_Medien/Kundenmagazine/magazin_1_10_en.pdf. In addition to several colorful pictures of the Garden Egg Chair and the polyurethane design center where Ghyczy developed it, this article mentions the exemplar at the Victoria and Albert Museum to highlight the chair’s historical value (12).

13 See “Abgehört und eingebrochen: Konzerntöchter der BASF setzten auf eine Fachzeitschrift und ein Konkurrenzunternehmen Spitzel an,” *Spiegel*, May 3, 1976, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-41252004.html>.

that their perceptions of the chair changed over time. Was it pure pragmatism and sales numbers that made Jeschke indifferent to the possible popularity of the chair in East and West? Did he see value in production for the Western market being motivation for the workers producing the chair? Was Dämmig only proud because of the association with the West or was he simply interested in design, or did his attitude possibly change because of inquiries in the early 1990s?

It is likely that their perceptions have changed because the attitudes of the general public toward the chair certainly shifted over time and from West to East. First of all, when it was initially produced, the chair, though an icon of progressive, utopian design, apparently failed to generate enough response in the West to make production viable, though we do not know exactly why the Western business failed. Was it because the chair was too expensive and mainly regarded as a fashion product? Was it known that the chair was produced in the East? In the East, on the other hand, it was precisely the perception of the chair as a Western product that made it attractive, though it was never commercially successful. Consequently, did production in both countries ultimately falter because of the chair's high price? Over time, too, the desirability of the chair shifted in both East and West. In 1990, when the first West German garden stores opened on eastern territory, East Germans discarded a large number of original Garden Egg Chairs in favor of new and cheaper West German versions. Apparently, the chair they had previously associated with the West was no longer Western enough in light of reunification, having been produced in the East long before that. Yet, just a few years later, Garden Egg Chairs became sought-after collector's items that fetch high prices at auctions and antique shops. Owners in East and West lucky enough to have them guard them carefully and place them in prime locations. It is worth mentioning that it was not nostalgia for the East that motivated this latest transformation in the chair's desirability but its inclusion as a "design icon" in the design history canon. The Eastern context seems to have played no role in this inclusion and, hence, no scholar had undertaken research into it despite the obviously conflicting provenance of the chair.

While we cannot necessarily know exactly what drove these shifting perceptions, they serve to highlight the unique interrelationship between East and West that the particular history of the East/

West Garden Egg Chair discloses. Was it an East German object, or a West German one? Or a German object at all? Designed in West Germany but by an émigré from the Eastern Bloc, the provenance does not absolutely determine this for us. Nor do the production or perception of the item. As we saw, prototypes were manufactured in West Germany, but it was mass-produced in East Germany, where East Germans desired it as a status symbol of Western consumption, even though production extended two years longer for the East German and not the West German market. And it is now a collector's item because it finally became what it aspired to become at its outset: a design icon of its time. The chair's history provides a tangible marker of East/West economic exchanges and a rare instance of outsourcing manufacturing from capitalist West Germany to the socialist East. Although this sort of outsourcing did not "officially" exist, the example of the Garden Egg Chair shows us that the "official" history, a product of the simplistic master narratives on either side, is not the only history and needs to be called into question.

In conclusion, the East/West German Garden Egg Chair can teach us a lot, underscoring the value of preserving material culture for deepening our understanding of history. The history of the object itself—the intricate entanglement of West and East German design, production, as well as perceptions of its provenance—exemplifies the complexity of fact that often hides behind the simple master narratives that interfere with people's ability to come to terms with historical changes. The process of accessioning the chair for the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition *Cold War Modern: Design, 1945-1970* illustrates the issues of authenticity, provenance, and reliability of witness testimony that curators, like historians, struggle with in the face of a general lack of information. But the information we managed to gather, as well—the paper trails but especially the memories prompted by the presence of the chair itself—further highlights the ways that material culture can enrich historical understanding, particularly in acting as cultural palimpsests that can reveal a whole array of perceptions and interactions over the history of their production and use. Consequently, exhibitions like the one this chair was a part of, as well as museums devoted to East German history and culture, play an invaluable role in advancing historical knowledge by preserving and presenting material culture. It is to be hoped, especially, that exhibitions and museums like that of the Victoria and Albert Museum and the

Wende Museum in Los Angeles, by stepping outside the conflict zone of inter-German struggles to make sense of Germany's divided past, will help German curators of GDR material culture find fruitful and healing ways to interpret and present this history.

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