

Eastern Time: The Race to Curate the Communist Past in Germany

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Berlin. Surrounded by a halo of light, a royal blue pantsuit, circa 1973, hangs stiffly within the museum vitrine. This is a relic of East German popular history, put on view for a demanding public. The garment is fashioned out of an easy care fabric called "Present 20," a one-hundred percent synthetic textile developed by industrial engineers as part of an initiative to better provide for the consumers of the former German Democratic Republic, an initiative issued from the highest echelons of the Socialist Unity Party. First introduced in 1969, the fabric was so named to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of the GDR. At that point, few would have imagined that the party and the constellation of other Eastern European socialist governments would only survive another twenty years of planned production, limited expression, and compromised desires. Fewer still would have anticipated the irony of the fact that the polyester fabric of this pantsuit would outlive the ideology of Marxist-Leninism which, in part, brought it into existence.

This artifact of the failed utopian project of state socialism is one of thousands which are currently being displayed in museums throughout the eastern half of Germany, now called the new federal states. Museum directors there have entered a race to curate the communist past; in the past year alone at least five separate exhibitions of GDR everyday life and popular culture have opened. The shows—with titles such as "The Miracle Economy: Consumer Culture in the GDR in the 1960s" and "Commodities for Daily Use: Four Decades of Products Made in the GDR"—participate in an emerging trend of recalling another way of life, that is life as it was lived under socialism. This mode of recollection has been activated at three different levels: the museum, the archive, and the souvenir. Flanking and buttressing the spate of GDR museums are these two other instances of "memory work." On one side lie an array of pop culture phenomena which look back nostalgically to the GDR everyday, such as trinket-sized Trabant automobiles on keychains. On the other side lies a more somber and complex social and cultural formation, namely, the gradual opening of the archives of the GDR's Ministry of State Security. Following the directives of the party government this ministry, more commonly known as "the Stasi," compiled classified reports which recorded in minute detail the lives of millions of individuals whose daily actions were considered to bear upon matters of national security interest. 22.31 Telephone rings. No one answers. The object continues to read. 22.40 The object converses briefly with spouse. 23.02 Object's spouse draws curtains in north-facing windows. 23.10 Lamps extinguished.

After the armed forces the Stasi was East Germany's largest employer: its archives documented information on more than a quarter of its citizens. The key to the archives, a master repertoire containing a single index card for each Stasi staff member, informer, and object of surveillance, extends for more than a mile. Given that the Stasi archives played such a central role in every aspect of GDR life, not only in the public sphere but also within that of the domestic, they necessarily continue to inform the cultural history which is unfolding in the postcommunist moment. As more details about the Stasi archive surface, eastern Germans struggle to figure these reports into their own memories of life in a communist system. One product of this struggle is the current drive to curate everyday objects and ephemera from the GDR.

Documents in the Stasi archives date from the entire forty-year lifespan of the GDR. Beginning in the late nineteen-forties government officials sought to establish an efficient protocol or template for gathering and cataloguing information culled from a dense network of informants who collaborated with central intelligence experts both officially and unofficially. This template, which remained largely intact throughout the tenure of the Stasi, not only recorded data about the actions of individuals being tracked by authorities, it also served, in a certain way, to produce the content of that which was being archived. What fit in the blanks was recorded, classified, sedimented into place. What little which exceeded this formula could not be housed within the archive. Like the projections for steel and wheat production made by hopeful socialist economists, the building of the Stasi archives can be seen as another facet of the GDR's planned or command economy. In this case, what was being planned was not the production of wares, but rather the production of biographical information about friends and enemies of the socialist state. In 1969 Stasi administrators published a dictionary of official bureaucratic terminology to make their own contribution to the GDR's twentieth anniversary celebration. Proud editors made the dense reference manual available to the general public; their goal was to standardize the usage of Stasi-speak, not only amongst their ranks but also beyond.

After the dissolution of the GDR, one of the first moves made by new political leaders was to gain access to the Stasi archives and to launch the project to declassify its files. In 1990 they established the Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatsicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, an office of federal representatives which sought to investigate the GDR's Ministry of State Security.¹ In the past nine years not a day has gone by when information of critical importance has not been released from these archives to both individuals and the media. Although the truth content of these documents remains to be determined, the effects they have exerted over the hearts and minds of Germans is monumental. The unsealing of this data has disclosed residents who informed on their neighbors in order to appropriate their apartments, clergy who delivered testimonies condemning parishioners with dissident interests, husbands who incriminated their own wives. The massive

¹ Although the reformers, now called the Gauck Authority, commenced this process only a few months after the opening of the Berlin Wall, many critical files had already been destroyed by Stasi officers. In particular, files containing information on foreign agents and details on the supportive and complicitous relationship between the Stasi and the German dissident group the Red Army Faction (recently disbanded) were lost.

impact of such revelations continues to both redefine the way Germans look back on their two histories and to add shape to the nascent culture of unified Germany. Its valence with regard to current museum practices is particularly significant.

Along with the boom in exhibitions on GDR everyday life, the socioeconomic emphasis in the former East Germany is shifting from the mode of production to one of consumption. Smoldering factories which once strove to produce ever-greater quantities of chemical compounds and heavy equipment have been closed and replaced by a frail service economy (modeled after its Western European counterparts) which sustains itself on the fledgling tourist and culture industries. The museum exhibitions which salvage and display artifacts from the recent past of the GDR can be read as symptoms of a new cultural tendency in which consumption is being privileged over and against the kind of production which characterized the planned economy of the former socialist state. This shift—from production to consumption, from *the collective* to *the collection*—operates both within the field of the archive and the field of the museum exhibition in contemporary German culture. What remains to be considered is the critical difference in the way this operation works in the two fields. Both the archive and the museum function as organs of memory—but how might they differ from one another temporally? How, in turn, do each affect the construction of national or cultural identities?

At its founding the Stasi archival system faced the future: the genesis of its protocols set the stage for the way life would be lived in the GDR. Indeed this repository of information would become an archive par excellence, since the roots of term “archive” reach back to the Greek verb *arkhein*, which carries two meanings at once: not only “to begin” but also “to rule” or “to command.”² In contradistinction the word “museum,” a cousin to “mausoleum,” looks back to the past, its gaze alternately mournful or melancholic. As a result of this retrospective orientation, the exhibitions of GDR everyday life couple together with the development of a splinter of a market sector which caters to Germans’ nostalgic whims. Just as the public rushes to see the GDR shows, they are also choosing to spend more and more of their deutschemarks on products and services which harken back to days gone by. For instance, despite the recent proliferation of literary memoirs about life in the GDR, bookshops must backorder the most popular texts; the same shops also prominently display memorabilia and board games inspired by collective memories of the GDR. In one game, called “*Gedächtnis*” or “Memory,” players can prove their mnemonic powers by recalling the placement of overturned pairs of cards depicting images and icons once current in East Germany. At the new restaurant “*Mauerblümchen*” or “Wallflower” in East Berlin there is a two day delay for reservations; the menu features *Soljanka*, a Ukrainian sausage stew which was a mainstay in factory canteens and often the signature dish at German-Soviet Friendship functions.

A new German word has surfaced to describe this trend: *Ostalgie*, derived from *Nostalgie* or nostalgia. Wrested of the letter *n*, the first syllable becomes *ost*, the

² Like “archive” the words “autarchy” and “menarche” also derive from *arkhein*, a verb which the OED considers to be “of unknown origin.”

word for east; from the Cold War up to the present this word has been loaded with meaning for German speakers. Now that citizens from both halves of the country are laboring through the process of unification, the struggle for the survival of local traditions has come to the fore. Since former GDR General Secretary Egon Krenz took the fateful decision nine years ago to open the Berlin Wall for free travel between the two Germanies, the cultural and ideological transfer from west to east has steadily accelerated. But many easterners have resisted the drive to unify, choosing instead to "test the west" not only by launching a critique of its political economy, but also by posing questions about the dominance of western culture and custom. The product of this inquiry is a new German-German culture, a split national identity forged by the sparring of different sensibilities.

The former GDR maintained its fair share of museums and monuments before the wall came down. Policy makers recognized the imperative to discern a heritage separate from that of West Germany and so generously directed funds towards memorials which would legitimate the new socialist nation. Exhibitions which highlighted the antifascist resistance movement, the Soviet liberation, and the life of the proletariat filled both museums of fine art and the galleries of historical societies. Today many Germans express their skepticism about the continuing desire to organize exhibitions about GDR life; in this postcommunist cultural moment, the notion of nostalgia is highly contested. While some (mostly western) critics dismiss this focus on the GDR past as overly sentimental, attributing it to a dysfunctional vanguard which has languished in its leftist delusion far beyond the point of decency, others seek to rescue from opprobrium the right to wax nostalgic, arguing for the importance of cultural memory at this time of transition. Indeed many commentators argue that the Federal Republic's politics and technologies are mutating the life world of the new states beyond recognition. As a result, the institution of the museum has become one of the main sites upon which the battle about how to remember the GDR is being waged. Such museums have become places of reckoning, in which viewers might work through the complexities of Germany's divided history as well as the legacies of fascism and totalitarianism which subtend it.

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Already in August of 1989 West German curators organized the first exhibition of GDR popular culture at the Habernoll Gallery near Frankfurt am Main. But this show, "SED: Stunning Eastern Design," merely lampooned the "pallid universe" of demodé East German consumer goods. The selection of GDR products depicted in the exhibition catalogue—from faded packets of vulcanized rubber condoms to cartoons of "Speechless" cigars—appears aimed to prove by object lesson the superior tastes of sophisticated westerners. But the more recent series of GDR shows, curated predominantly by easterners, strive to present a more complicated image of everyday life under socialism by focusing on the gains as well as the losses of living with goods produced for a "classless" society. One of the best examples of this kind of museum exhibition is the Open Depot. Located in the former model city of Eisenhüttenstadt, the Open Depot draws heavily from its urban surroundings, bring-

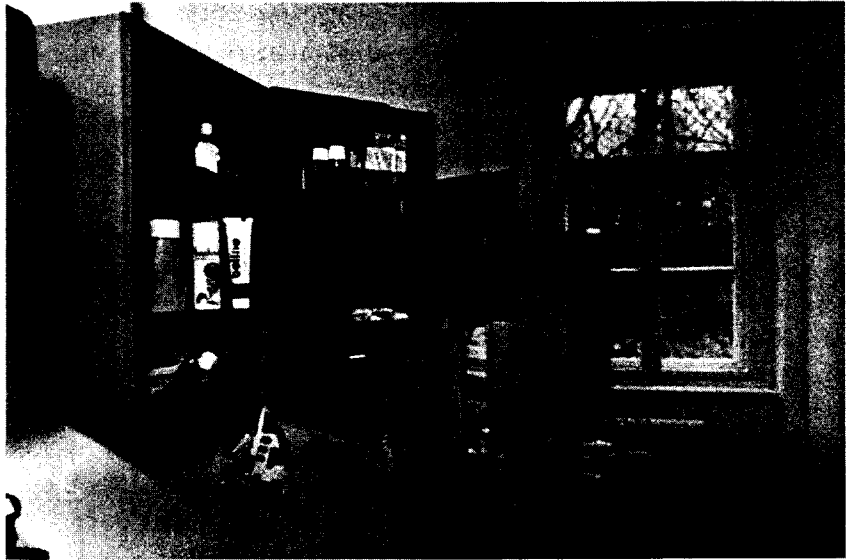
ing the everyday right into the calm of the museum gallery.

Not far from the Polish border, Eisenhüttenstadt is a city marked by the history of Central Europe. After the founding of the GDR, Eisenhüttenstadt was established as Stalinstadt, the “first German socialist city,” only reassuming the name Eisenhüttenstadt, or literally Steelworks City, in the mid-fifties, after Stalin’s death. Yet despite this name change, the city, with its grid of wide boulevards and great chunks of socialist realist multi-storey buildings, betrays its Soviet satellite past. Intended as an industrial center where workers and their families would strive together to build a bright socialist future, the steel foundries—once the beating heart of the collective—were erected on the site of a mass grave of Soviet troops.

Unlike many other East European cities, Eisenhüttenstadt has not yet renamed most of its streets, so its citizens still reside at addresses named after communist revolutionaries like Karl-Liebknecht-Straße or Clara-Zetkin-Ring. And the cityscape still bears a striking resemblance to the model metropolises of other socialist or formerly socialist nations, cities like Tallinn, Beijing, and Havana. Standing in the middle of one of Eisenhüttenstadt’s boulevards (which even in midday poses little danger, since the traffic is so light), one might catch a glimpse of a retired or unemployed resident perched at a window, elbows propped on a cushion, taking in what-

Audio equipment at the Open Depot, Eisenhüttenstadt, Germany. Photo by Alan Chin.





Bathroom panorama at the Open Depot,
Eisenhüttenstadt, Germany. Photo by Alan Chin.

ever is to be seen below. Upon closer inspection, one might also notice the small holes drilled beneath the window, just within arm's reach. In recognition of various state holidays, it was once compulsory for good GDR citizens to plug these holes with flagpoles from which would flutter either the red, black, and gold tricolor of the GDR or perhaps small banners bearing the image of the peace dove, a ubiquitous symbol in East German everyday life.

Since the *Wende* or "turn" which signalled the advent of the new Germany in 1989, urban change has begun to manifest itself in Eisenhüttenstadt, albeit in fits and starts. Retail spaces once controlled by the state have been privatized and let out to independent entrepreneurs who are trying to fill the gaps left by the collapse of state-controlled collectives with leaner, meaner businesses. A greengrocer that was once called "Fruits and Vegetables" now bears the family name of its new proprietor; a small café once simply known as "The Buffet" now brandishes the patently western moniker, "C'est la vie." Such transformations of Eisenhüttenstadt's toponymy started early on on the road to a market economy. They also set the stage for later changes of a more monumental scale. In the past year construction was completed on Eisenhüttenstadt's flagship commercial center, a sprawling shopping mall called City Center. This mecca of consumption bears a greater similarity to the American-style strip mall than just its name. As has been the dominant trend in urban and suburban development in the United States in the postwar era, Eisenhüttenstadt's City Center stands at a remove from the traditional center of the town where most everything lies within walking distance. Deceptively named, it squats over black asphalt acres of new parking lots which are accessible by car or the infrequent municipal bus.

In the effort to reconstruct East European cities following the devastation of



Donated objects in storage at the Childcare Museum, Oranienburg, Germany. Photo by Alan Chin.

World War II, state socialist urban planners sought to define the centers of important cities with imposing architecture like East Berlin's futuristic Television Tower and Warsaw's bombastic wedding cake of a high-rise, the Palace of Culture. Visible from the furthest reaches of town, such structures operated to unify urban life and consolidate the central power of the state administration. To this extent these structures complemented the operations of Stasi archive custodians. Although Eisenhüttenstadt was once defined not by a vertiginous tower, but rather by the trundling, uniform blocks of the *Wohnkomplex* or Living Complex designed in the early 1950s, the construction of the new shopping center has shifted the weight of the city, emptying the concrete arcades once peopled by workers mobilized to meet the socialist plan. Originally erected to support a lifestyle of purported socialist freedom, equality and unity, the Living Complex has been abandoned to those who cannot (or do not want to) meet the exigencies of market competition. Meanwhile, developers lay claim to the untapped profit potential of outlying areas. The city is decentered and begins to sprawl.

This transition prompts a series of economic, social and cultural questions about the city's socialist legacy and the uncertain future which awaits citizens of the unified Germany. How can someone who grew up within state socialism navigate the evolving landscape? What are the consequences of learning to adapt? With the reorientation of financial resources towards new concerns such as service, tourist, and high-tech industries as well as the trafficking of lighter consumer goods, operations such as Eisenhüttenstadt's steel works, which once formed part of the industrial base of the GDR's economy, are collapsing and being decommissioned, leaving behind the hulking masses of obsolete technologies. With the dismantling of heavy industry in the new states has come the attendant trend of massive unemployment:

in 1996–97 the number of jobless rose to 10.6% nationwide; although official statistical reports indicate 16.8% unemployment in the eastern regions for that period, real figures for the new states are estimated at over 30%. In an attempt to alleviate the present economic depression, the European Union plans to direct some DM 100 million (\$US 60 million) towards the renovation of the Eisenhüttenstadt factories. But what of the structures and programs, both commercial and social, which are considered too outmoded, too inefficient to be revitalized and fast forwarded into the late capitalist cultural moment? What to make of the lingering vestiges of “real existing socialism” as it was practiced in the GDR?

Curator and cultural historian Andreas Ludwig, a citizen of Eisenhüttenstadt, is one of many eastern Germans trying to come to terms with such questions. For the past several years he has been working to secure funds from the German Ministry of Culture to found a museum of GDR history and popular culture. In December of 1996 he succeeded in this goal, establishing the Open Depot, a museum which strives to collect and exhibit everyday objects produced and consumed in the former GDR. One of the programs fostered by the Center for the Documentation of Everyday Life in the GDR, the Depot takes up residence in the defunct nursery unit of Eisenhüttenstadt’s Living Complex. Although most of the nursery’s original fix-

*Visitors at the Open Depot, Eisenhüttenstadt, Germany.
Photo by Alan Chin.*



tures have been removed, one can detect traces of the building's childhood: safety guards on the windows, toddler-sized toilets in the restrooms. Yet until its reincarnation as a museum, this building had fallen into disuse and had become a ghost of its former self.

Now living a kind of life after death, the Open Depot struggles to smooth into place the imbricated layers of different cultural moments. With the influx of western consumer goods in the post-unification period, many residents of Eisenhüttenstadt have chosen to outfit their homes and workplaces with upgraded furnishings and appliances. Up through the 1980s GDR families usually possessed no more than one television, manufactured by the "people's own industry" or the *Volkseigener Betrieb*, more commonly known by its acronym, the V.E.B. Waiting lists of three to seven years for a pattering but reliable Trabant or Wartburg automobile were to be expected, and nearly every home was furnished with a vaguely Scandinavian blond particle board wall unit of shelves and cabinets. Now, on trash collection days, the sidewalks of Eisenhüttenstadt are littered with such standard issue possessions which have been cast off in order to make room for more up-to-date wares.

Yet for some Eisenhüttenstadters, this gesture of jettisoning the outmoded seems to be arduous; supplanting the trusty old family radio with a Japanese-made stereo system is a freighted act for them. So, instead of leaving the radio, the face of which bears the names of satellite radio stations in distant Bucharest and Minsk, to wait for the sanitation workers, some Eisenhüttenstadter's opt to bequeath these artifacts to Ludwig's Open Depot. It is the belatedness of both these bequests and the curatorial gesture on the part of the museum administration which distinguishes the Open Depot from an archive. Whereas the order and structure of an archive determines its future content, Ludwig's museum answers back to the past, it responds to a desire that certain aspects of GDR history not be forgotten. While the archive is formulaic, the Open Depot is spontaneous, responsive. Because of this the smart display of V.E.B. goods must seem odd to many of the museum's visitors, since these objects were designed explicitly for their use value and not their exhibition value. As recent scholarship by historians of East German industrial design demonstrates, GDR designers were forced to conform to industry standards which explicitly privileged function over (and even at the expense of) form. The artifacts amassed by Ludwig and his team were not manufactured with the endpoint of the aesthetic or collectible object in mind. Nevertheless the museum can mobilize these objects like any other commodity to effectively record part of the GDR's history.

In the acquisition process, a group of museum staff, trained by Ludwig in the methods of oral history, interview the donators, posing questions not only about the provenance of the objects, but also about the donators' memories of the way they once lived with them or amongst them. Each artifact, then, is coupled with the institutional record of a memory—in this way it becomes a bearer of the past. Often donators recall the exact prices paid for their goods; many of the bequests come

bundled together with their original receipts. Although the interview records have yet to be made accessible to the public, much of the collection is open to view as are the densely inscribed guest books where visitors write their responses and, importantly, reflect upon the thoughts of those who have come before them.³ The museum's objects range from paper products to heavy machinery. The paper collectibles—books, food wrappers, and the like—are of materials so fragile, so acidic, that they appear much older than their true ten or fifteen years. In contrast, the clumsy, leaden, but still functional household appliances and office equipment, blenders which weigh in at twenty pounds, adding machines at thirty, seem built to last an eternity, whether carefully curated in museums or wantonly cast off to the rubbish bins of history.

Whereas some rooms of the Open Depot contain case after case of barely distinguishable appliances, stacked catacombs of the GDR's industrial history, elsewhere the curators have staged the objects in panoramas of life as it was lived in the recent, but rapidly receding past. One such room, conceived as a representative bathroom, puts on show the gamut of health and beauty aids available to the East German consumer. Instantly recognizable are small pots of Florena hand creme, the blue disk-like containers virtual clones of the Nivea tins which were (and are) a common sight in the Federal Republic of Germany. Although the Florena tins are collected by the Open Depot, they resonate differently in the register of memory than many of the other objects. For unlike most GDR products, they have not been relegated to the past, but rather are still being produced and distributed to drugstores and groceries. One woman from the eastern state of Brandenburg remarked that she remains a loyal Florena consumer. "It's an effective product," she insisted. "Why change?"

Florena has a liminal status. Not only can it be found both on the drugstore shelf and in the museum vitrine, it also straddles the eras marked apart by glasnost, the "velvet revolution," and the incipient process of unification. Yet Florena tins are just one miniscule detail characterizing the complexity and contradiction of contemporary German-German culture. Similarly, when browsing amongst the objects in the GDR exhibitions, the visitor's gaze is frequently arrested by the uncanny resemblance between the objects staged for contemplation and those actually used in the management of the museum. For instance the curator's office, furnished with a wall unit identical to those set out in the museum, might be mistaken for part of the exhibition, were it not for the cellular phone poised on the desk. A curious *Doppelgänger* effect is at work: returning home, the visitor reencounters objects similar to those just seen in the gallery. The line blurs between museum and real life, between past and present. If so many residues of the GDR remain present, even beyond the museum, how then to understand the growing desire of Ludwig and other eastern German curators to collect artifacts from the so-called "eastern time"? Or the public's increasing demand to extend museum shows about GDR popular culture and to set these exhibitions in motion, sending them to travel from cities to

³ Guest books were a common sight in GDR museums, as were notebooks for recording comments and complaints for the managers of many institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and shops. Citizens were meant to understand they played a decisive role in policy making and that their public criticism would be taken seriously by administrators.

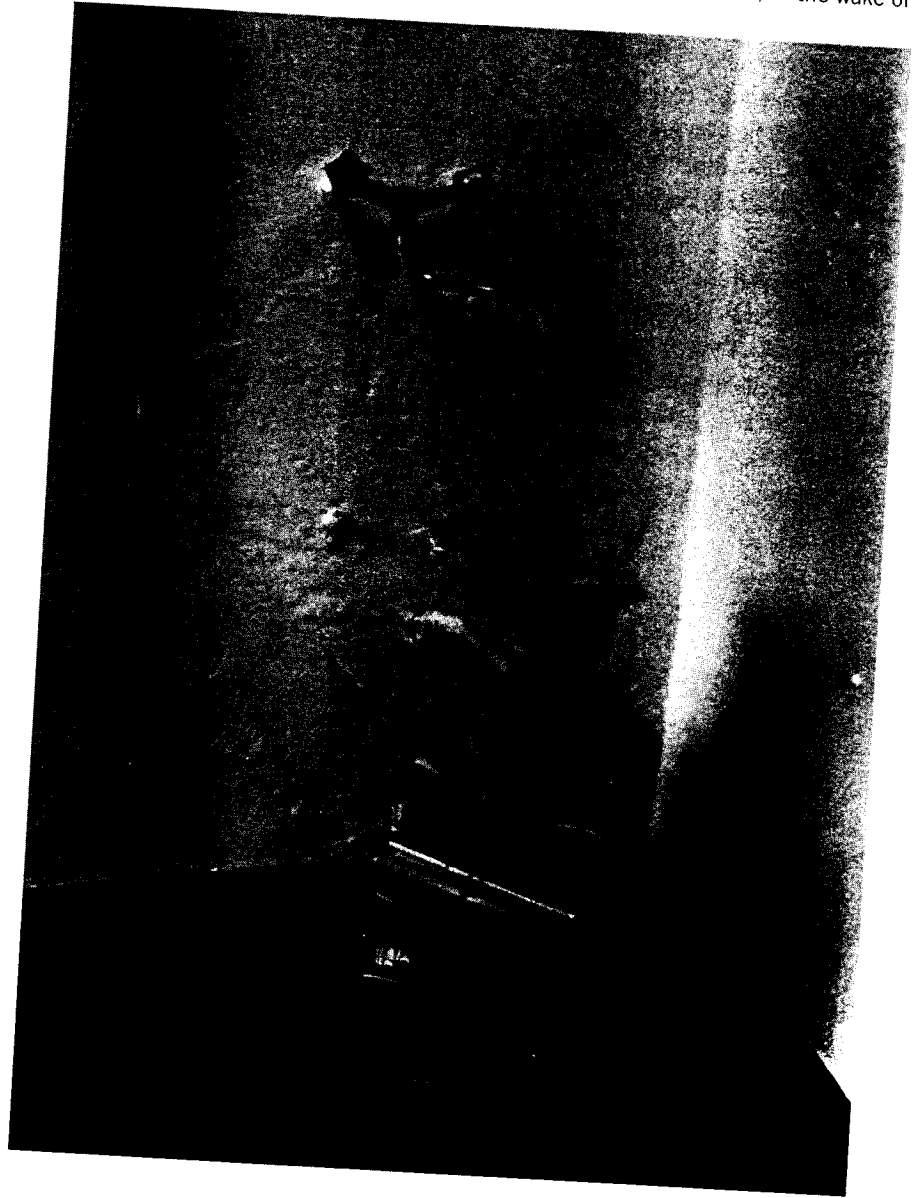
more remote communities? Perhaps the interest in these exhibitions stems out of a desire to legitimate the many positive memories eastern Germans still associate with the V.E.B. object world, a world whose traces still linger within their homes. Or, alternatively, perhaps these exhibitions work towards a "laying to rest" of state socialist culture.

One critical point to consider with regard to these questions is this: the curators have chosen to employ different installation strategies for artifacts associated with private life and those associated with bureaucratic institutions. While objects used in the space of the home, such as those in the above-mentioned bathroom scenario, tend to be propped in lifelike settings, those from public offices—typewriters, telephones, binders for filing documents in triplicate—are simply laid out on shelves, catalogue-style. This difference in display technique suggests that the curators prefer to reanimate the moments which were lived behind closed doors while allowing the artifacts of public life to hibernate, albeit within view. East Germans were just as likely and just as entitled to be house proud as people from any culture, but it should not be forgotten that the space of the domestic was the only place where any discontented resident of the GDR could imagine for him or herself an internal emigration. The fact that the collected instruments of bureaucracy lie dormant within the galleries of the Open Depot implies that eastern Germans still prefer to distance themselves from the former state institutions. By placing these office wares on shelves the curators deliver them to the dead, consigning them to a separate register of historical memory, one not unlike that of the archive.

Ludwig's interests are shared by a handful of eastern curators; the exhibitions they have organized in the last year weave together to form a matrix of collective remembrance in the new states. But one show in particular stands out for its remarkable relation to the Open Depot, namely "The Celebration of Holidays in the Everyday Life of the GDR Kindergarten," the debut exhibition at the Childcare Museum of Brandenburg, located in the city of Oranienburg. Like the Open Depot, the Childcare Museum rechristens a municipal space that city planners had originally conceived as a nursery. Due to demographic changes in the post-turn period, many such day care facilities have been closed down: since 1991 forty-eight Berlin-area centers have ceased operation. Faced with an uncertain future in the unified Germany, many women of the new states opted to forestall or forego pregnancy. From the turn until late 1995 eastern birthrates dropped by nearly half. With the concomitant tendency for many women to be downshifted to part-time jobs or even to complete unemployment, many nurseries and kindergartens have been rendered superfluous. Wittingly or not, the programming of the new museums in Eisenhüttenstadt and Oranienburg works to fill the vacuum, to close a gap marked by an absent generation of children aged from one to seven.

The Childcare Museum was planned and is now directed by Frau Doktor Heidemarie Waninger, an educator who, some thirty years into a satisfying and productive career, lost her job in the Brandenburg school system. Likewise,

Eisenhüttenstadt's Open Depot is staffed by a team of a dozen youngish women and men, individuals who once would have left their children off at the nursery in the early morning hours before punching the clock at the steel works. Instead of striving to meet the state goals of industrial production, today these women and men attend to the task of collecting the relics of the GDR past. Most of the museum staff lost their jobs when the Eisenhüttenstadt factories cut back their operations in the early nineties; the local cultural authorities hired them to work at the Open Depot under the condition that they complete a vocational retraining program. Where the communal energies of East Germans were once directed towards the twin plans of heavy industry and the steady growth of the labor force, now, in the wake of



*Donated objects in storage at the Open Depot,
Eisenhüttenstadt, Germany. Photo by Alan Chin.*

state socialism's collapse, the emphasis has changed. Where once the goal was *reproduction*, both industrial and biological, today the *raison d'être* for many in Eisenhüttenstadt and Oranienburg is one of *remembering* and *recollecting*. With the destruction of the Marxist grand narrative citizens of the new states no longer heed the modernist battle cry of "make it new." Instead they find themselves stirred to action by a different aesthetic and political imperative: to research and conserve the past, recoding it for the more consumer-friendly society of the new Germany.

A short walk from the Oranienburg railway station, the Childcare Museum draws more visitors with each month, many of whom once worked as teachers in the former GDR. Here the curatorial team has extensive contact with the public, as they devote hours each day to accepting donations of school supplies and furnishings from visitors who then assist in staging objects like felt puppets and unused boxes of chalk in classroom scenarios. As with the Open Depot, the Childcare Museum's collection works to trigger many memories of the not-so-distant past; the box of chalk, seemingly banal to the uninitiated, might trigger a reverie of the same magnitude as Proust's chamomile-infused madeleine. Eavesdropping on the visitors to the two museums one can vicariously experience their wonder as small gasps occasionally punctuate the silence of the galleries. "Oh, we used to have one just like that," said one. A kind of pride of possession, product loyalty from a time when the state sought to divert or sublimate the desire to consume. Remarks such as these belie the fact that, even as the GDR regime aimed to inculcate a productionist ethic in its citizens, the pleasures of purchasing and owning property were never entirely usurped.

Although few non-Germans have had the opportunity to visit the little Childcare Museum, or for that matter even know that it exists, many are at least somewhat familiar with the history of the city which surrounds it, namely Oranienburg. For in Oranienburg, not far from this museum, loom the gates of Sachsenhausen, the concentration camp which was turned into a memorial site in 1961, the same year the Berlin Wall was erected.⁴ Over 100,000 prisoners were killed in Sachsenhausen between 1936 and 1945. After the Soviet Army liberated the camp at the end of the war, they used the facilities to contain political prisoners; by 1950 10,000 of them had died. Efforts have been made in the post-turn period to renovate the site into a more substantial memorial; architect Daniel Libeskind was appointed to redesign the museum and construction is currently underway. Yet these steps have not been taken easily. Some Oranienburgers would prefer that the government apportion more of its limited funds to develop and maintain memorials to the history of the GDR and fear that the Sachsenhausen museum will overshadow smaller projects such as the Childcare Museum, distilling the city's complex history down to a single, overdetermining historical moment: the Holocaust. Discord about the funding of the Sachsenhausen memorial is growing in Oranienburg, but to date no one has lodged a complaint about the establishment of the Childcare Museum.

⁴ After unification state officials reviewed the budgets and planning prospectuses of Brandenburg's museums and memorials and revised them to coordinate with the directives already in place in the FRG. They also considered a proposal to significantly expand the Sachsenhausen memorial site, an expansion which would reappropriate all of the camp's former territory. The renovated memorial would thus include not only the grounds and buildings where prisoners were held, but also, critically, the surrounding administrative and living quarters of the SS Guards and many camp employees, that is, buildings which currently house several dozen Oranienburg citizens.

Sachsenhausen was originally conceived as a prototype prison camp, in which the proximity of the camp

grounds to the administrator's offices and homes would ensure model management and optimal efficiency. Yet when Sachsenhausen became a memorial site, it only included the camp grounds proper, since the administrative and living quarters had already been appropriated by the GDR's People's Army. With the reinclusion of these areas, Sachsenhausen would be the first and only camp memorial to clearly disclose the fluid and essential link between a concentration camp and the rest of the city which surrounded and maintained it. The memorial would demonstrate that Sachsenhausen was not a prosthesis to the otherwise normal body of Oranienburg, but rather functioned as one of its vital organs.

In 1992 Daniel Libeskind, architect of the new Jewish Museum in Berlin, entered the competition to renovate Sachsenhausen. He proposed a project which would demarcate the original grounds of the camp with low lying markers, but would leave the enclosed space empty, a testament to the immense losses incurred there. The city eventually accepted his proposal, but only with substantial modifications. In the project which is currently underway only half of the grounds will be left fallow, while the other half will be developed to support a thriving residential community. This juxtaposition would disclose the passage of time which has elapsed in the past fifty or sixty years. Libeskind concedes that this compromise may in fact prove fruitful: it could make plain the symbiotic relationship between public and private life, both in the present and in the past.

In the autumn of 1996 Karin Naß, an office clerk and citizen of Oranienburg, learned of the Sachsenhausen project and responded by organizing a protest group to resist the memorial's expansion. Like sixty of her neighbors, Naß disagrees with the planners' vision of subjecting her home to memorial protection. Although the residents would not be dislocated, they would lose sovereignty over decisions to renovate or structurally modify their houses. But aside from these questions of architectural and aesthetic freedom, Naß maintains that the incorporation of the outlying SS buildings would only serve to glorify the memory of the officers and would run the risk of inciting neo-fascist fervor. A large poster outside her house declares "A memorial for the perpetrators? We say 'no!'" Naß still has clear memories of the 1992 desecration of part of Sachsenhausen at the hands of neo-fascists, and contends that "[our] biggest fear is the skinheads." To date the dispute remains unresolved.

For research on the debates about the competing histories of National and State Socialism in Oranienburg I am indebted to Andrew Piper.

The dynamic of protest about the different Oranienburg museums seems to disclose an economy of memory and history, a circuit generated by the competing but not fully discrete histories of National and State Socialism, a circuit which Germans constantly retrace and redefine. This dynamic commands the attention of many social and cultural critics in Germany today. One such critic is Annette Simon, a practicing psychotherapist, whose recently published essay "An Attempt to Explain the East German Morality to Myself and to Others" analyzes the unification process and its consequences. Simon's essay, illustrated with a smattering of somber photographs of eastern cityscapes, offers one of the fairest portrayals of the GDR past of all the books on unification which currently crowd the shelves of German bookshops. Anchored in Simon's own lived experience, the essay then broadens and develops to reflect on contemporary German-German society. The author dispassionately recalls her engagement with an oppositional student group and the price she paid for supporting Czechoslovak dissidents in the seventies. Her parents, the well-known writers Christa and Gerhard Wolf, enjoyed professional and private privileges accorded by the government to but a few intellectuals. Until 1989 Christa Wolf was one of the GDR's best-known writers; her novels *The Quest for Christa T.* and *No Place on Earth*, among others, were hailed by critics in both the east and the west for their subtle critique of state socialism and introspective literary voice. But despite her parents' prestige, Simon's activism, minor though it was, was enough to excommunicate her from the inner sanctum of what some might have called federal support, what many others would have called state control.

Training her gaze on the fundamental problems which undermined the GDR's legitimacy, Simon takes up the question of how the state socialist legacy figures into and modifies the larger history of Germany in the twentieth century. She argues that many Germans accepted the country's division according to the London and Paris Treaties of 1954 and 1955 as the due punishment for the crimes committed under Hitler, and saw the Berlin Wall and the barriers which clove the country in two as signals of collective guilt and atonement. As long as these architectural structures remained intact, as long as the separated German twins were moving apart from one another, each developing her own institutional structures in resistance to her perception of the other, many Germans managed to convince themselves that, through this severing, amendment and reconciliation for the Holocaust could be realized. Simon maintains that, with the Wall's dismantling and the transition to unification (or rather, as some would have it, to *reunification*), Germans must reconfront the legacy of fascism in a new geopolitical landscape. Given this, the current press to musealize German history, not only in the form of Holocaust monuments (and the heated, even theatrical debates which surround them) but also via the recent explosion of GDR exhibitions, can be seen as an attempt to ground German-German identities in the material objects and structures which remain behind. In the absence of the Wall and other Cold War symbols of the nation's punishment-by-division, Germans see these museums as the enduring stigmata of their



School supplies on display at the Childcare Museum, Oranienberg, Germany. Photo by Charity Scribner.

violent history.

Germans are not the only Europeans consumed with a kind of museum fever; ministries of culture in other countries have also devoted ever-greater resources to the project of historical commemoration. Many of the new monuments which have been unveiled and museum exhibitions which have been opened aim to sweep up broad expanses of history. Like their fellow neighbors, Germans have participated in this trend of marking time. As Jane Kramer points out in *The Politics of Memory*, politicians once labored to bring to term a proposed Holocaust monument which would occupy five acres of central Berlin with its monolithic weight. Ultimately, however, their efforts were in vain. On a similar scale, curators in Budapest have undertaken the salvaging of the colossal socialist realist statues which former Soviet blocs remaindered after *perestroika*. But the rapid proliferation of GDR exhibitions sets itself apart from this museal tendency in several ways. While most memorial projects tend toward the monumental, these GDR exhibitions focus on the miniature, the minor detail, the ephemeral. The conservation of these everyday objects seems to insist that the moments which dotted the line between 1949 and 1989 not be forgotten, that the indelible stain of the Holocaust should not obscure all other memory of recent history.

In the same vein as certain provincial museums of popular culture, such as a small host of French sites maintained by curators schooled in the *Annales* tradition, the shows in Eisenhüttenstadt and Oranienburg set memory work into play on a more human scale by concentrating on household objects. By amassing and displaying these mundane artifacts, the curators Ludwig and Waninger create a space where viewers can not only come together to debate their past and future, but where they can also identify and insert their private lives, their own memories of countless tiny details, into the larger timeline of German history. Yet this practice also raises

a series of urgent questions about the historicization of the GDR. Even during the brief forty-year life of the GDR citizens were troubled by the notion of a German national heritage or *Erbe*. What did it mean to be East German? What were the lines of filiation amongst the historical moments of the first unification of German states in the nineteenth century, the legacy of National Socialism, and the work-in-progress of Soviet-style communism? These questions continue to register in the space of both the archive and the contemporary museum.

To what extent might the curators and visitors of the GDR everyday life shows be seeking refuge from the most difficult issues concerning German heritage? After all these GDR museums concentrate on the private and the domestic, the realm of what East Germans called "niche culture." They assert that private lives were indeed led under communism, despite the state's attempts to deny individualistic indulgences. But the museums' emphasis on niche culture comes over and against the documentation of larger, state sanctioned practices. In general these GDR exhibitions do not encompass residues of state-organized events or represent many of the customs which once engaged citizens as a mass, such as those recorded in the Stasi archives. What would be the implications of an exhibit which aimed to make manifest the patterns of identification which connected the private to the monumental, the personal to the political in the GDR past?

Paradoxically the Open Depot and the Childcare Museum realize some of the goals which Soviet ministers of culture once envisioned. As Boris Groys, professor of philosophy at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Karlsruhe, argues, communist administrators sought to divest the museum of its bourgeois legacy and to mobilize art for the cultural revolution. In an attempt to break down the barriers separating the active life of the worker from the contemplative life of the aesthete, new socialist realist plans were drafted: not only to multiply the number of museums and to make them readily accessible to the masses, but also to install art outside the museum environment, virtually saturating public spaces with statues and murals which would constantly signal the totality of state power.

To some extent the GDR museums participate in this aesthetic, be it in reverse, as they gather objects from the very recent past, or in some cases remove them from still-current popular culture and display them for contemplation. The curators' principles of selection and the viewers' responses to these shows (which are diligently recorded in the guest books set out at the end of each exhibition) raise interesting questions about the sister dialectics amongst public and private space and memory. For while the inclusion of still-current objects like the Florena tins works to connect the museum experience to the present moment, the effort to represent, in a larger sense, an outmoded way of life helps the viewers, particularly those from the east, to work through the awkward process of unification without losing a critical sense of difference—both from their own past and from the past of West Germany. Indeed the practice of keeping these guest books is essential to the work being undertaken in these museums, since it both refers back to the GDR custom of public critique

and establishes a forum for the exploration of collective memory in the post-turn period.

It is easy to dismiss the Open Depot and the Childcare Museum as so much retrograde nostalgia, as many critics have done. Or perhaps to see these museums as the anaesthetic to the most painful symptoms of the absorption of the GDR into a market economy, where rage and despair are conveniently encrypted, segregated from the rest of life, submerged into the unspeakable. But on closer examination, cannot it also be argued that these places of reckoning might set the stage for a requiem for communism in this moment of transition? Although the opening of the Stasi archives is a critical element in the process of coming-to-terms with the GDR past, it is only part of the picture. The narratives registered in these archives were prescribed and limited by a system which aimed to regiment both the practice and interpretation of real existing socialism; they cannot tell the whole story. Although the GDR museums also cannot make any such totalizing claims, at least they provide a forum for the exchange and contestation of individual and collective memories. These institutions work together, then, the discourses of the archive custodian and the museum curator interpenetrating one another, suturing together the remains of GDR popular history and keeping them present to memory.

Rather than diagnosing the GDR exhibitions as the fetishization of a diseased past, perhaps they can be regarded in a more positive light. For not only do they remind viewers of Germany's divided history, a history determined by the crimes of fascism and totalitarianism, these exhibitions also help to concretize the work of memory for the successes and failures of the socialist project. By recuperating household objects from the obsolete communist industries, the exhibitions also work to distinguish two cultural moments, to mark the difference between the eastern time before 1989 and the today of late capitalism as it is practiced in the European Union. By supporting these museums through patronage and the private donation of objects, citizens of the new states are working to more clearly define the mark of difference which simultaneously separates and binds together Germany's two histories. Instead of anxiously hoarding these GDR relics in their own homes or sentencing them to oblivion, eastern Germans are setting them apart, laying them to rest by installing them in the museum environment. A kind of tender rejection, the growing desire to support and visit these museums can be seen in contradistinction to the more saturnine kind of memory, the melancholy fixation on the past.