

ARTS AND LETTERS

The Artists Questioning Nostalgia for East Germany's Past

Contemporary works are casting a new light on sentimentality for Communism.



A detail from Henrike Naumann's "Welcome to Bedrock" (2022), from her show at SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens, which incorporates furniture from the era of German reunification into scenes inspired by "The Flintstones," a touchstone from the artist's youth. Credit...Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Charles Benton

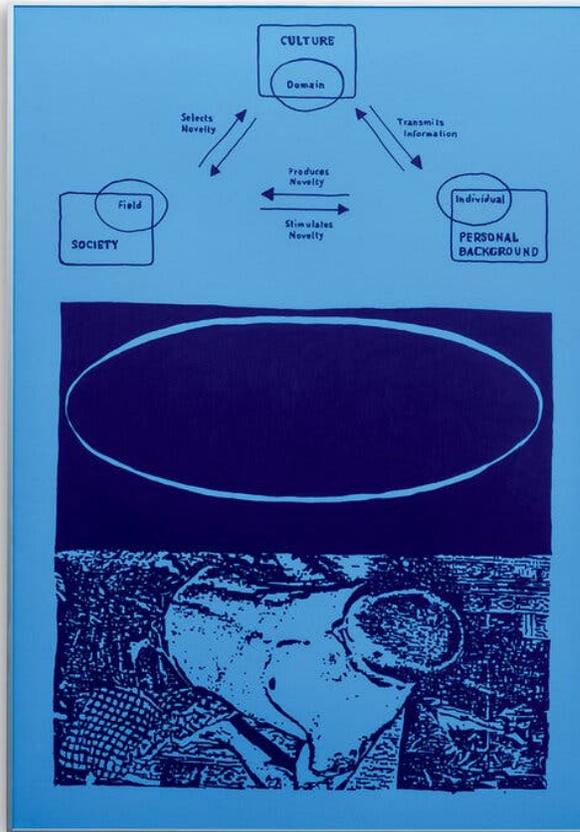
By Evan Moffitt
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WHEN THE ARTIST Henrike Naumann first saw "The Flintstones" on TV, she thought it depicted what life was really like in the United States. This was in 1990, when she was 6 and the Berlin Wall had just fallen, flooding Zwickau, the East German town where she was raised, with previously inaccessible Western media and products. For Naumann, the classic 1960s cartoon's primitivist fantasy of consumer culture was foreign and exciting; revisiting the show more recently as an adult, she was shocked by its scenes of dinosaurs working as cranes and trash compactors, which the Marxist

doctrine of the German Democratic Republic would have denounced as labor exploitation.

These days, “the G.D.R. seems as long gone as the Stone Age,” says Naumann, now 38 and living in Berlin. Yet it haunts “Re-Education,” her first solo exhibition in the United States, which opened last fall at SculptureCenter in Queens. Within a gloomy back gallery, she reconstructed a cavelike living room, complete with fur rugs and a bone telephone, all of which would be at home in Bedrock. Most of the furniture, sourced from places like eBay, was designed in the late 1980s and ’90s, around the time of German reunification. Naumann recalls the arrival of these wacky postmodern designs in Zwickau as a stark departure from the post-Bauhaus functionalism then prevalent in the former Communist bloc. “Suddenly there were triangular cabinets, furniture in crazy shapes,” she says. “As a child, I loved it because it was like something out of a cartoon. I didn’t understand the politics, but I saw there was this aesthetic shift.”

If reunification feels like ancient history today, many of the divisions that defined Germany three decades ago persist: The eastern half of the country lags behind by many economic metrics, from income to unemployment. Many voters there, feeling abandoned by global capitalism, have flocked to the far-right, anti-immigrant party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) — although, paradoxically, they’re often likely to express a certain longing for the look and feel of the G.D.R. There’s a German word for this kind of fantasy that one often hears discussed in places like Zwickau or the former East Berlin: *ostalgie*, a portmanteau of *ost* (“East”) and *nostalgie* (“nostalgia”). Often attributed to the East German cabaret performer Uwe Steimle, it became prevalent in the early 2000s, when, under the chancellorship of Gerhard Schröder, former citizens of the G.D.R. saw their landmarks demolished and their social safety net dismantled. A number of comedic films like “Sonnenallee” (1999) and “Good Bye Lenin!” (2003) sentimentalized East Germany as a scenic backdrop. The remaining Communist relics became objects of tourist kitsch: Now, visitors to Berlin can book a joyride in a Trabant, a discontinued clunker car, and purchase refrigerator magnets in the shape of the Ampelmann, a pedestrian in a broad-brimmed hat who still appears on traffic lights there.



Constantin Hartenstein's "Untitled (II)" (2017), a drawing the artist made using pigment, protein powder and acrylic in a shade of blue reminiscent of those popular in East Germany. Credit...© Studio Hartenstein

For Naumann, such fetishization falls far short of a reckoning with the past. Instead, she aims to destabilize nostalgia by inducing a sense of historical vertigo. "Ostalgie," another recent exhibition of hers, which traveled to Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery in January 2022, just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, featured postmodern furniture installed on the wall and geometrically patterned wallpaper laid down on the floor: The effect was that of a room that had toppled on its side. "It was a spatial representation of what it feels like when the system changes, or when a state ends," she says.

OTHER ARTISTS ARE conjuring memories of the G.D.R. in ways that similarly unsettle nostalgic yearning. In their work, the objects most immediate to them as children, such as furniture, clothing or household appliances, symbolize unresolved ideological conflicts. For several years, the artist David Polzin, 40, has been mining the legacy of design under Communism. Recalling the Modernist furniture he grew up with in a suburb of East Berlin, he searches for these relics online and picks them off the streets near his studio there. After the fall of the wall, many East Germans were eager to acquire things that hadn't previously been available to them, and so they discarded wood laminate tables and steel-tube chairs to make space for Western goods. Even now, G.D.R. design remains undervalued: According to the curators of "German Design 1949-1989: Two Countries, One History," an exhibition that opened at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am

Rhein in 2021, collectivization meant that most product designs were unsigned, which made them less desirable on the contemporary antiques market than those produced by their West German counterparts.

In response, Polzin began constructing his own fantasy archives. In 2012, he disassembled one of his streetside finds, merging the steel legs and vinyl seat of a G.D.R. industrial chair with the back and arms of a plastic monoblock West German deck chair. Polzin has since made over 100 similar works: He regards the awkward results, which he calls “reunificated furniture,” as a metaphor for his hastily sutured country. “A chair is a simple tool to address complex issues,” he says, suggesting that modern Germany is just as unstable as these constructions.

The Berlin-based artist Constantin Hartenstein, 40, still remembers hearing stories about the Stasi, or East German secret police, interrogating his mother when he was 5, after his father fled their home in Brandenburg to seek professional opportunities in the West. In his recent sculptures, Hartenstein has been incorporating a cerulean pigment developed in the G.D.R. for industrial lacquers, which he recalls seeing his grandfather use for carpentry. He bought the deadstock pigment, produced by VEB Farben und Lackfabrik Leipzig (a now-defunct state paint and varnish factory), on eBay to use in his 2022 exhibition at Kunstverein Dresden, where blue resin relief panels hung from the walls and ceiling. Hartenstein, who identifies as queer, cast the surface of one work from the facade of a gay cruising site in East Germany; he carved others with images scanned and rendered from 1980s queer zines, bringing visibility to a subcultural history largely forgotten in his reunified state. “I compare ostalgie to the phenomenon of a phantom limb,” he says. “I am revisiting a past I never got to fully experience.”



David Polzer’s “Reunificated Chair” (2012), which combines old plastic West German components with industrial German Democratic Republic ones. Credit...Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Charles Benton

The shocking presence of bright blue in a white gallery space also counteracts East Germany's reputation as a colorless place. When the Norwegian Pakistani designer Benjamin A. Huseby, 42, was growing up outside of Oslo, he felt East Berlin had an exotic appeal. In 2016, Huseby, who's now based in the city, founded the fashion label GmbH with Serhat Işik, a child of Turkish immigrants who grew up in the Ruhr Valley, West Germany's industrial heartland. The brand launched with a men's wear collection that scrambled together East and West stereotypes: Business and sports attire were stitched from deadstock industrial fabrics like PVC. The company's hammer-and-pick logo recalls both the Soviet emblem and Ruhr mining firms, and its name, the legal designation for corporations in Germany, is so anonymous it seems almost authoritarian. "We've always been very inspired by German industrial and bureaucratic aesthetics," Huseby says. "When people see gray, drab clothing or architecture, they associate it with the East, but this is just as much an aesthetic of the West." GmbH found a market just as the French fashion house Balenciaga, under the directorship of Demna, was garnering wide acclaim for its update of vernacular fashion from the former Soviet Union. That sort of ostalgie is common across the former Eastern Bloc, where favorability ratings for Communism in some countries remain high, even as it's become trendy in the West among audiences eager for escapism.

Like Huseby and Işik, the artist Sung Tieu sources cold, bureaucratic aesthetics from her own memories of the German immigration system in ways that complicate ostalgie. (This spring, the Berlin-based Tieu, 35, will open two solo exhibitions — her debut in the United States — at the Amant gallery in Brooklyn and M.I.T.'s List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Mass.) In "Song for VEB Stern-Radio," her 2021-22 exhibition at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, a group of East German portable radios, tuned to a dead channel, sat on a pristine, white-carpeted floor in a chamber of mirror-polished steel. The radios were assembled by Vietnamese contract laborers not unlike her father, who had left Vietnam in 1987 — the year Tieu was born — to find work at a steel mill in Freital, in the East. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Tieu joined her father there, spending countless days in immigration offices, where furniture was often made of steel and the lighting was fluorescent. "I feel a sense of both trauma from and belonging to these kinds of spaces," she says.

The radios, Tieu says, are "highly ostalgie objects, but by revealing the invisible and precarious labor that produced them, I want to infuse them with a more complex history." Visitors to the exhibition were required to remove their shoes and walk in booties or stockinged feet on the velour carpet. Nostalgia tends to gloss over the conditions that produced the thing being missed, but Tieu's work makes these conditions impossible to ignore.

Naumann, too, has sought to complicate nostalgia for East German history by invoking its political consequences. Her 2012 project "Triangular Stories" used postmodern furniture from the time of reunification to recreate the childhood bedroom of a neo-Nazi terrorist from her hometown. It was an attempt to understand how a life that once closely resembled her own could have led to such a drastically different conclusion. Yet there is a playful

inquisitiveness to Naumann’s art too, as seen in her Flintstones tableau. It stems from the perspective of having been a child at a time of cataclysmic change, she says, one she shares with other children — and artists — of reunification. “I don’t have as much baggage,” she says. “Because I was a child when Germany was reunified, I have this freedom to ask very naïve questions.”

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