

History is made

Sven Breckstette

*In the UN there's now an empty seat
It used to be taken by a man from Suhl
In Kenya there's now one embassy less
T'was a man from Jena
I'm searching for the GDR, no one knows where it might be
It's such a shame that it forgets me again so swiftly
I'm searching for the GDR and if it comes back to me
(I'll forgive it)
The new atlas is one country short
One of a very special sort
Yes, between FRG and Poland
Looks like a country's gone and got stolen*

Andrea Pichl has a special affinity for Punk. She designed the scenography for the benchmark exhibition on the history of the movement in East Germany entitled *OstPUNK! – Too Much Future* in 2005 in Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin. Her 2019 *weilweilweil* piece consists of cassettes with music by the dissident magnetictape underground, assembled so as to resemble the East German parliament building “Palast der Republik.” As in Punk, this combination is of course full of biting irony. The East Berlin Punk scene may have gathered at the foot of the nearby TV tower, but they most certainly did not enter the Palast der Republik, which also contained a culture hall complete with music club, assuming anyone would have let them in. Things are different today. The building that replaced the parliament, the Humboldt Forum, is a reconstruction of the Prussian city palace at the heart of Berlin and recently hosted the presentation *Punk in der Kirche. Ost-Berlin 1979–89*, which featured a concert with the band Planlos. How history gets overwritten by architecture – as emerges prominently in the demolition of Palast der Republik and the erection of the postmodern conformist city palace – is a central theme in Andrea Pichl's art. Her sculpture *Kiosk– Fragmente einer Zeit* (2023) stands outdoors in front of Kunsthalle Rostock. It is made up of parts that were actually destined for the waste heap when the building was modernized, now reassembled in the shape of a newspaper kiosk. It is a type of building that was to be found in many East German cities but has now largely disappeared. In the installation *Wessen Morgen ist der Morgen? Wessen Welt ist die Welt?* (2023), four current photos of East German buildings being demolished are displayed on construction tarps hung on a square structure made of site fences. A caption explains the fate of the edifices: left vacant, change of ownership with onward sale to dubious investors, demolition. Visitors to cities such as East Berlin, Potsdam, and Rostock could concur with Feeling B and indeed rightfully say: “I’m searching for the GDR, no one knows where it might be.” In these pieces, however, Andrea Pichl is not interested in some nostalgic yearning for a socialist country that has collapsed; on the contrary, she firmly rejects that authoritarian state. On several occasions when interviewed, she has spoken against society and art playing down the harm of East Germany and glorifying it, a trend which Pichl says leads “inevitably to dangerous simplifications” that “sometimes come close to being a kind of historical revisionism.” The key idea here is “historical revisionism,” or forgetting what history was, and Pichl turns on both in her art. Her view of the past is one that is firmly in the here and now. In the exhibition *Geschichte findet statt.* (2025) in Galerie Pankow she concerned herself with the Kreisau Circle, the resistance group that opposed the Nazi dictatorship and formed around Helmuth James Graf von Moltke and his wife Freya von Moltke. During a stay in the Polish village of Krzyzowa (formerly Kreisau), Pichl photographed details of houses in the vicinity: fences, painting on walls, repair work, and annexes. The photos were then printed on lengths of light fabric that were hung from the exhibition gallery's ceiling to form a labyrinth. The images are devoid of any humans and focus our attention on the trivial architectural items that allow us to discern changes to the houses that the inhabitants have made at different points in time. In the accompanying photo-film, she backs up her vistas with

passages read out loud from the correspondence between Freya von Moltke and Helmuth James Graf von Moltke written after the Gestapo had arrested him and shortly before he was executed. What do these occupied houses tell us about the different historical occurrences at this place, which has such a striking history? What role does the past play for our present? And quite decisively: What does (this) history has to do with me? In her artworks, Andrea Pichl confronts us with precisely such questions. "Palimpsest," a term from codicology describing how texts on parchment scratched out and then written over, is a key concept for Pichl's understanding of history and the traces it has left on life now. In 2024, she named a sculpture accordingly: a gold-colored structure with a titled roof and an observation slit through which viewers can peer into the inside. There, they see patterned wallpaper, while the back of the sculpture features a door. In this piece, the artist explored the checkered history of Detlev Rohwedder House, the official seat of the German Federal Ministry of Finance, which extends from the Nazi period, when it was built as the Reich Aviation Ministry, through East German times to present-day Germany. The shape, materiality, and appearance of Palimpsest trigger all manner of associations with these historical strata: The structure brings to mind emergency shelter in the closing days of World War II. Designed by Ernst Neufert, who had previously developed norms for industrial buildings on behalf of Hermann Göring's Reich Ministry of Aviation, this standardized type of building was intended to provide accommodation for families whose homes had fallen victim to bombing raids. The slits in the wall also bring to mind a border-guard control point on one of the "ghost railway stations" of the kind that were deployed after the Berlin Wall was built on the platforms of discontinued lines in East Berlin, such as Potsdamer Platz. The gilt concrete façade, for its part, could be read as referencing privatization by the Treuhandanstalt of what were formerly stateowned properties in the days of GDR, including real estate. At the time, above all affluent people from West Germany were able to invest in "concrete gold" at favorable terms, and to this day this shapes the unequal nature of property relations in cities in eastern Germany. Palimpsest was created for a presentation at the Detlev Rohwedder House. And there were other occasions, too, when Andrea Pichl responded to the specific site where she was exhibiting. For the 2009 group presentation entitled *Reconstructed Zone* in Kunstverein Wolfsburg, her starting point was a barter deal concluded between the Volkswagen Group, based in Wolfsburg, and the East German government. It centered on East German engineer Ulrich Müther, a specialist in the construction of concrete shells. For his technical design for the Planetarium in Wolfsburg, the Volkswagen Group supplied 10,000 VW Golf models to East Germany. Quite unlike his West German colleagues, Müther's fundamental contribution, a real achievement, went as good as unmentioned at the inauguration of the Scientific Theater in 1983. As is the case with many of her pieces, her installation entitled *Proraer Chaussee* is based on intense research conducted in archives and libraries. Pichl transposed the dynamic-futuristic structure of a predecessor building of the Planetarium dome into a weave of taut threads; dematerialized in this way, the structure resembles a phantom – indicating that the architect himself was squeezed into the wings for the Planetarium project. In 2024–25, Andrea Pichl exhibited at Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart in Berlin and thus became the first woman whose biography was rooted in East Germany to have a solo show there since its foundation in 1996. In her presentation entitled *Wertewirtschaft*, the focus was once again on economic relations between East and West Germany and the impact that can still be felt today. The fundamental concept entailed an architectural intervention: A curtain that was as monumental as it was light, made of floral patterned colorful fabrics, divided the exhibition space in two. In both sections there was one smaller and one larger black bungalow sculpture, aligned strictly symmetrically on a mirror axis. The volumes each had an entrance, and inside there were further works by the artist. These also included a series of crayon drawings which incorporated details from the office of Erich Mielke in the Ministry of State Security HQ in Berlin, such as colorful carpet designs and decorative potted plants. The curtain's patterned fabrics were also made in East Germany, where the textile industry possessed a special economic importance for the socialist government. In return for hard currency, the industry produced woven goods on behalf of West German companies who willingly accepted the low wages being paid or, in the case of bed linen and hosiery, forced labor. The bungalows' shape sees Pichl emulating

prefab building types that West Germans could buy from catalogs of Genex Geschenkdienst GmbH for friends and relatives in East Germany. Initiated in 1956 by the East German leadership, this mail-order service likewise generated hard currency. The range offered in the Genex catalogs included goods from West Germany, but also East German products, that could be obtained far quicker through Genex than otherwise. The curtain and the true-to-scale bungalow sculptures took up almost the entire exhibition space and thus considerably constrained visitors' movement. This meant Pichl's staging gave the space a strong psychological impact as it exuded a feeling of confinement and mustiness. The effect allowed visitors to sense the ideologies behind the bungalows that were praised in the Genex catalogs as symbols of a private idyll, as the "realization of your weekenddream." Andrea Pichl is continuing the focus on the transfer of money and goods between West and East Germany in her *deutsch deutsch* exhibition, staged to mark her winning the Ernst Franz Vogelmann Prize at Kunsthalle Vogelmann, Städtische Museen Heilbronn. Once again, she presents a historical panorama stretching from the days of the Third Reich via the division of Germany to the present day. The walk-in architectural sculptures contain a number of seemingly harmless landscape photographs. But, as is always the case with Pichl, things are deceptive: The depictions of nature are actually waste dumps on the border of Berlin, where West German toxic waste was dumped as part of the hard-currency deals between East and West Germany. The biting satirical title of *Blühende Landschaften* cites a legendary pronouncement by then German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall prophesied a rosy economic future for the five new German federal states that arose following East Germany's accession. The narrative of the post-war period was defined by the competition between the two systems: capitalist democracy in the West and Communist dictatorship in the East. If one considers the historical lines that Andrea Pichl draws in her exhibitions, this situation was not so much one of economic rivalry and more one of mutual support. East Germany received hard currency to survive, West Germany got affordable goods based on low wages or indeed forced labor and even the opportunity to get rid of its toxic waste – or, to exaggerate slightly, prosperity made in GDR. The exhibition title *deutsch deutsch* with no hyphen emphasizes not the political division but the mutual dependency of the two states. After the fall of the Wall, new low-wage countries had to be found – as a glance in our own wardrobes readily shows. Ostentatious buildings, monuments, memorial plaques, and street names are the official means in the public realm that the state and society use to define their history and identity. Andrea Pichl's art makes it clear to us that testimony to the past is to be found in our everyday surroundings, and we quite literally live with or in them. We simply need to consciously perceive them. To return to music, this time to the West German Post-punk band Fehlfarben from North Rhine Westphalia, the following excerpt is from the lyrics of the song *Ein Jahr (Es geht voran)* on their 1980 album *Monarchie und Alltag*. Andrea Pichl used a quote from it as an exhibition title in order to point out that history is not some complete process; indeed we will never cease to wrestle with it, and the question has always been the position we take on it. Hence:

*No pause for breath
History is made
Onwards we go!*

Speech in praise of Andrea Pichl,
April 25, 2026, Heilbronn