

Metabolic Realism

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G e r: Spear. [Old High German] m a n i a: A form of insanity characterized by great excitement, with or without delusions, and in its acute stage by great violence. Heiner Müller, Germania, 1990
Collective forgetting has an archive of its own. Miriam Zadoff, Gewalt und Gedächtnis, 2023

When preparing this article, I consulted the Semiotext(e) issue on Germania (1990) by Heiner Müller. It features three interviews with him from the years 1981, 1988, and 1989, conducted by Sylvère Lotringer, founder and publisher of the Los Angeles-based journal on French theory. Each of these conversations centers on how history was addressed at the time in West and East Germany respectively. East and West. Fascism. Antifascism. Confrontation. Ideology. Victims. Perpetrators. Silence. Third World. Intra-German relations. The silence cast over the interlocking of history and violence – “where death and history have become indistinguishable” – is something Müller squared up to in the East by returning to Greek tragedy. His intention was to use its form of dramatization to bring history into the present: “In order to get rid of the nightmares of history, you have to know about history. [...] Hamlet’s ghost. You have to analyze it first and then you can denounce it, get rid of it.”³ In the very frontispiece, the playwright sets the tone with a psychogeography of Germany: *G e r m a n i a*, mania or the mania of Germanness: “a form of insanity characterized by great excitement, with or without delusions, and in its acute stage by great violence.” This diagnosis is now 36 years old, but we can hear uncanny echoes of it in the current period of authoritarian drift in Europe. Extreme right-wing movements that are growing in strength are seducing the liberal center into putting the much-noted German culture of remembrance of Nazi crimes up for grabs in the electoral wind of ethno-nationalist arguments and open racisms. The media experts’ term for this is mainstreaming the extreme right. In dialog with the work of Andrea Pichl, I would like in the present article to put forward the concept of Metabolic Realism – a form of archive work that does not reconstruct historical materials and instead metabolizes them physically and temporally.

Contexts

As philosopher Susan Neiman noted in 2023, “historical reckoning has gone haywire, as the determination to root out antisemitism has shifted from vigilance to hysteria.”⁴ In other words, we are back in the very middle of a bout of *G e r m a n i a*, a manic delusion of Germanness, of not being the best in remembering, remembering the wrong things, or we are now bearing the brunt not of history but of death. The question is, who is this “we”? Who utters this “we”? At least one thing can be said for certain: In a haywire state, bereft of any control, neglected landscapes of the Cold War get washed back to the surface of debates on the politics of remembrance. The geopolitics of the interests of a divided world has morphed into a geopolitics of remembrance of a divided society. This haywire state in which the work of remembrance finds itself is the context in which Pichl’s artistic practice becomes so urgently compelling. Two points are fundamental here. First: Andrea Pichl’s works should be placed in the contexts of a fact- and research-based practice. Each installation, sculpture, series of drawings, and photography is the result of in-depth research, careful study of source materials, field work, and spadework in archives. Alongside visual notes and sketches, her worktop in the studio at Künstlerhaus Bethanien is strewn with reference books on penal labor, East-West trade, foreign currency procurement, and profiteering in East Germany. Here the focus is clearly on differentiation. Online small ads for IRIS sheer pantyhose and a set of old dolls from Sonneberg for 200 Euros are prime evidence in 2026 of erstwhile East Germany’s consumer socialism. Many of her pieces analyze primarily surfaces, although it is precisely their design that proves to be the driving narrative power behind the ideological crafting of the former Communist one-party state. In a country in which design guidelines were issued by the Socialist Unity Party’s Congresses (albeit indirectly), as Heinz Hirdina outlines in his benchmark reference work *Gestalten für die Serie. Design in der DDR 1949–1985* (1988), surface patterns and materiality can be considered indicators of the interweaving of aesthetics, politics, and state. In other words, they symbolize precisely that restriction on the freedom of research and art that in this country is regularly being called for anew and renegotiated in the justified, and yet partially instrumentalized call for specifically art institutions to assume historical responsibility. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why an occupation with archives from repressive systems such as those in East Germany is currently

receiving more interest. Second: One would nevertheless be wrong to limit Andrea Pichl's oeuvre to East Germany as a singular phenomenon. As early as the days of the global Cold War, (wherever geopolitical interests were involved) to quote Philip Ursprung's analysis of "Values and Surfaces" of Communist space always reflected the other side, too.⁵ As in the case of rivalry between siblings, in this instance a qualitative competition over remembrance ensues, namely over which of the two sides 'better' worked through its complexes of injustice. Given this tense rivalry, the work of remembrance cannot be undertaken without losses. Specifically at times when it is also deployed geopolitically, it is not enough to act as if the legacies of the West in the East and vice versa did not exist. Although a focus on your own socialization is effective and important, complete blindness toward this tangled web would be tantamount to narcissistically treating the self as exceptional or adopting some unsettling ethnologizing outlook. This needs to be resisted. Andrea Pichl also rejects any re-nationalization of East Germany through artistic interventions in (chronological) reality. The residues of an architecture of Socialist Modernism (former prefab blocks, ministries, weekend summerhouses, the villas in the gated community preserved for senior Party members) become research material and assist Pichl, born and socialized in state-socialist East Berlin, in her self-analytical process of remembering. Her landscape photographs of Groß-Ziethen (nr. Berlin), Ketzin (outside Berlin) or Schönberg (nr. Rostock) document the way the latent infrastructure of East Germany's hard-currency economy also included disposing of toxic waste from the West. Her drawings of barred windows, doorhandles, staircase banisters, or fragments of facades in places such as today's German Federal Ministry of Finance, the former ensemble of INTRAC buildings in Pestalozzistraße in Berlin's Pankow district, or the "Colossus of Prora", the kilometers-long East German prefab housing and barracks on the Baltic coast provide an analysis of the layers of history. Instead of some historicizing farewell to the past, her method seeks to offer an archaeology of remembering by means of built volumes. Exhibit and display In the formation of three different standardized houses, namely the Nazis' temporary shelters in white, the GENEX specimen house that was part of the East German hard-currency economy in black, and the neoliberal OBI allotment garden hut in silver gray, vividly portrays the transgenerational interlocking of architecture. These three generations of standardized houses are both exhibit⁶ and display at once: As exhibits they function like items of evidence, as material testimony to historical strata. As displays, they structure the exhibition space itself and become walk-in vitrines for other artifacts (photographs, drawings, objects). The houses double up as exhibits and exhibition architecture. They structure the artistic exploration and presentation of East Germany's "double economies"⁷ with all their ties across generations and geographies. Pichl chooses white for the standardized house representing the temporary shelters for people whose houses had been destroyed by bombing raids, namely the "standard war type" that the Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production commissioned Bauhaus architect Ernst Neufert to design in the early 1940s. Black denotes the GENEX houses that you had relatives in West Germany buy for you by paying in hard currency and which they could then have sent to East Germany. And silver-gray promises the comfort of today's flatpack allotment garden huts from the DIY store round the corner. In total there are six of these houses, three per story, populating and structuring the exhibition halls. Each uses facts from archives to flesh out a different chapter in the history of East-West Germany; however, this is not a matter of reconstructing the history of the day, but of presenting evidence and proof of how the generations of the different Germanies crisscrossed, corresponded, and misunderstood each other. The construction methods are inter-related, but each is (generationally) unique. From the one generation to the next, something always gets lost, and something is added, just as the metabolizing of archive materials always brings forth absences, things of which we cannot speak, and things that cannot be digested that describe a reality in the here-and-now, in what Terry Smith terms contemporaneity. From concrete to colored pencils Pichl's choice of monstrous architectures such as today's Federal Ministry of Finance, which she designated a Palimpsest (2024) in an installation, speaks of this trans-generational complexity. She does not shy away from it. On the contrary. You need time, endurance, and physical effort to transform the working photos of design details of the building complex into a drawn template that functions as an exhibit, as proof of a used place. Layer after layer of ideologies fly past your eyes. With its reinforced concrete skeleton frame, today's Federal Ministry of Finance, built in 1935–6 as the Reich Ministry of Aviation, and thus as the command center of the Nazi's air-force armament effort, is a palimpsest of German expansive rule through terror. Not only was the command structure of the Nazi aerial war based here, but also in this building, under the criminal cover of inhuman research, concentration camps were commissioned to conduct experiments with

hypothermia and decompression. And then after May 8, 1945, these inscriptions were scratched from the surface [palimpsestos] of the building because it was then given a new function. On Oct. 7, 1949, in its festival hall, the foundation of the German Democratic Republic was formalized by the People's Council of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, and the East German House of Ministries was forthwith established in the complex, complete with lottery ticket POS, a hairdressing saloon, and a bespoke dressmaker's. Until 1990. Then, it was the turn of Treuhandanstalt, the West German fiduciary organization that pressed the pedal on the turbo-capitalist conversion of East Germany's nationalized companies into private property, before it was for its part replaced by the Federal Ministry of Finance. The basement is still storage home to male fantasies reminiscent of Arno Breker, which were already lodged there in 1949 and, hard to believe, possibly also remained there for the entire lifetime of East Germany (p. 83). And were most certainly stored there when Andrea Pichl as part of her preparations for Palimpsest used a camera to take visual notes, of which some were later transposed into drawings made in color pencil in her studio. The color pencil becomes, if you like, an analytical instrument for approaching spatial situations that resist photography, such as the current seat of the Federal Ministry of Finance. Line by line. A visual metabolization of these surfaces, the massive impact of historical layers. This metabolization recognizes historical responsibility and at the same time lays claim to generational independence by means of the scaled transfer of something monstrous into something experienced, from the building block to the colored pencil. "The confrontation with power, this is history for me as a personal experience."⁸ For Pichl, the technique of copying things by pencil does not possess the decidedly stringent conceptual continuity that it does in Hanne Darboven's "Schreibzeit" (Writing Time), but essentially achieves something similar: The drawings embody the temporal effort Pichl experiences when producing them and mounting them as exhibits on the wall in purpose-created small exhibition houses. With Bertolt Brecht we find ourselves in the very middle of the "Realism" debate through the revelation of reality as an artifact, or, as he put it, "a situation with a decidedly demonstrative character" (my emphasis). The interaction of material infrastructures of the past in the guise of an archive of the present can be characterized with reference to Andrea Pichl's piece as Metabolic Realism. This aligns with a concept that I have developed through years of research in and with unedited archives: 'archival metabolism'. The term denotes the ability of an archive to not only store the past, but also, without forfeiting the critical potential of an analysis of the past, to generate things in the future, through gestures, movements, repetitions. Composer and scholar George E. Lewis puts it thus: "I take archival metabolism as the sense in which an archive actually enacts a repertoire, so you get an apparently disembodied memory that nonetheless produces gestures, orality, dance, and movement."¹⁰ Pichl's work searches for and generates resonances in such a repertoire: Her drawings, photographs, and houses are not "representations" of historical objects but metabolic (intermediate) products, namely forms of a memory that cannot be brought to a halt.

Violence and geoeconomics

While in relation to the seat of the Federal Ministry of Finance, Pichl's archaeology of remembering uses the colored pencil as the analytical instrument and drawing as the medium of artistic metabolization of this complex history, the walk-in standardized houses reflect the interwoven nature of history, the horror of "Hamlet's ghost". The little standard houses embody three different "double economies": the Nazi temporary shelters point to the interfacing of war emergency and Neufert's standardizing modular logic of living, the GENEX houses to the linkage between the East's economy of deficiency and the inflow of hard currency from the West (through Swiss letterbox companies), and the DIY allotment garden huts transpose the allotment garden dreams into the age of individualized self-optimization. Each segment of trade between the two Germanies conceals another "form of insanity characterized by great excitement." It bears examining House III more carefully to understand the intensification of the economic in Pichl's work, something that for the first time was explicitly and extensively placed at the center of things in her 2024 solo show Wertewirtschaft. Why House III? Because it is a prime example of something that runs throughout Pichl's art: the linkages between the "value of the surface," labor, and the economy. Here, the present does not leave the past "behind", but "continues" it. House III, a silver-grey allotment garden hut courtesy of the OBI corporation stands for the period of post-1990 mass consumerism that champions self-optimization, and in terms of the piece's content focuses on the hard currency deals East Germany made through waste disposal, its textile industry, and even art dealing. A sheer pantyhose qua exhibit symbolizes this linkage. Pichl relies in her research on the textile industry on historian Tobias Wunschik, who has taken

IRIS pantyhose as the basis for his examination of East Germany's dubious hard-currency deals.¹¹ The product was manufactured direct by VEB Esda Thalheim and delivered to Western discount stores through the East German Foreign Trade Agency. Both sides sought to mask the geoeconomic chain of transactions by changing the product's name. What was a product in short supply in East Germany (where it was called ESDA, SOFTY, COLOR DE LUXE) was sold in the West as "IRIS" or "Sayonara", fantasy names with no indication of their origin on the label. The pantyhose was made by political inmates in the Hoheneck Women's Prison. The buyers in West Germany (ALDI, Karstadt, Quelle, Neckermann), so witnesses say, collected the goods straight from the prison gate. Price in West Germany: 0.79 DM, a real bargain, with the price paid by the female political prisoners, whose forced labor brought East Germany hard currency and the West German corporations clear profits. Just how crucial pantyhose was for East German consumer communism and its desire for an international market can be seen from the episode "Me and the Boss" in the film *Erzählungen aus der neuen Welt* (Stories from the New World, 1968), which the Künstlerische Arbeitsgruppe Profil led by dramaturg Joachim Hellwig produced in the DEFA Studio für Dokumentarfilme. *Erzählungen aus der neuen Welt* is a fascinating, agitational black-and-white documentary shot by a film collective to mark the 150th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth. In its six episodes it shows people fighting against capitalism and colonialism for a "new world," from Cuban fishermen and West African freedom movements to a boss named Liesbeth in a textile factory in Oberlungwitz in East Germany as well as persons involved in setting up science cities to conduct atomic research in the Soviet Union. While the episode from East Germany celebrates pantyhose production in the "new world" in the filmic context of internationalism, Pichl's (re)searching work exposes the Communist profiteering in the inter-German trade zone, and how it was driven by force and violence. In the publication and exhibition project entitled *Doppelte Ökonomien* (Double Bound Economies) the focus is on the photographs taken by freelance photojournalist Reinhard Mende, which he took in East German state-owned companies, and on the question of the degree to which working conditions in the Communist state could be photographed. These images were used as background design material for consumer goods advertising at the Leipzig Trade Fair, whereby the photo of a female worker in a spinning mill of course says nothing about the underlying geoeconomic production conditions. Nevertheless, a metabolic realism must engage with the different forms of fragments. It requires historical research. And archive images. Each presents a layer, none show everything. Andrea Pichl appropriates the historical layers of materials by drawing or reproducing them and does not consume them in the sense of pure consumerism; she instead metabolizes them in the sense of transformation: What Hellwig champions, Mende photographs, and Wunschik historicizes, morphs in Pichl's piece into an exhibit of the present networked on all sides and across all times, a present that has not yet dispensed with its past. The generations of standardized houses as an artistic strategy are metabolized products of this archive work, readily digestible and unappetizing remains that form a new reality. Why take Heiner Müller as the point of comparison for Andrea Pichl's oeuvre? Both share the methodological confrontation with history as a structure of the present that has an influence on the future and is not some narration of past occurrences. Müller used Greek tragedy as a method for analyzing the present, while Pichl uses the archaeology of built form to the same end. Her standardized houses, drawings and photographs are not illustrations of history but instead analyses of ongoing material social relations. Both Müller and Pichl ask: How can the ghost of the past be banished without repressing it? The metabolic realism I think one can discern in Andrea Pichl's artistic project could be understood as an answer to *G e r m a n i a*, or that "mania of Germanness" that was Heiner Müller's diagnosis shortly before 1990. While Müller resorted to Greek tragedy as the pattern of interpretation used to analyze and banish Hamlet's omnipresent Ghost, Pichl relies on the transformative exposure of transgenerational layerings of architecture, design, and labor. Her standardized houses, drawings, and photographs are not reconstructions, but metabolic products of her research and her work with archives. They are destined to visualize collective forgetting and repressing and make us aware of it: from the huge concrete edifice to the color pencil, from the Reich Ministry of aviation to the IRIS pantyhose, and thus to exhibits in a present that has not yet dispensed with its past. In times in which the politics of remembrance are once again being instrumentalized for geopolitical reasons and the haywire processing has switched to become a delusionary *raison d'état*, Pichl's work intimates to us that to get rid of the nightmares of history you need to expose their layers line by line. It is an incomplete, incompletable process that at times is digestible, at others unappetizing, but always proves to be multidirectional and self-determined.

1 Heiner Müller, *Germania*, 1990, frontispiece.

2 Ibid., p. 57.

3 Ibid., p. 24.

4 Susan Niemann, "Historical Reckoning Gone Haywire," in: *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 19, 2023, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2023/10/19/historical-reckoning-gonehaywire-germany-susan-neiman/> (last accessed Feb. 23, 2026).

5 Philip Ursprung, *Values and Surfaces: Art, Economy and Architecture*, (Zürich, 2025), Zürich 2017.

6 The term "exhibit" is deliberately used here in terms of both of its meanings, as a noun and a verb.

7 Estelle Blaschke, Armin Linke, and Doreen Mende (eds.) *Doppelte Ökonomien. Vom Lesen eines Fotoarchives aus der DDR (1967–1990)*, 2013.

8 Heiner Müller, *Germania*, 1990, p. 47.

9 Bertolt Brecht, *Über Realismus*, (Frankfurt a. M., 1971), 5th ed. 1982, Suhrkamp.

10 George E. Lewis in "Resonating Struggles: Paul und Eslanda Robeson in Ost-Berlin," in: Doreen Mende and Avery F. Gordon (eds.), *The Missed Seminar. Worldmaking after Internationalism*, (Leipzig, 2024), p. 94f.

11 Tobias Wunschik, *Knastware für den Klassenfeind Häftlingsarbeit in der DDR, der Ost-West-Handel und die Staatssicherheit (1970–1989)*, (Göttingen, 2014).