

The history of customary convention

On concealed memory in Andrea Pichl's spatial objects

Carsten Probst

The decades-long public processing of both the impact of the Third Reich and the division of the country into East and West Germany can easily lead one to forget that to this day there are large gaps in the historical understanding of the dynamics and interlinkages underlying it all. There is a dearth of documents and statements by contemporary witnesses, and where these have been found they are little researched, to the extent that it is now almost impossible to reconstruct the path of many inner linkages. One monumental metaphor of this is the mountains of shredded State Security Service files; reconstructing them would take decades and has already been scaled back dramatically owing to a lack of resources, to the point where it has been as good as abandoned. Another example is provenance research into so-called Nazi-looted art that has at least spawned the one or other research finding suited to catching the media eye (such as the Gurlitt Collection). However, in the relatively short period of time in which art-historical forensics has dedicated itself to this aspect of 20th-century German history and in which it has received public funding, there has been clarification of at most two percent of the minimum of 500,000 cases of cultural assets stolen, expropriated, and sold off during the Third Reich. In other words, here, too, there is no comprehensive and above all overarching view of the profiteers and victims of the conflicts between political systems that not seldom shaped politics and society in East and West Germany and in their successor state, today's Federal Republic. A historical X-ray examination of the concealed underbelly of most recent history can bring to light structures and interconnections that have not been immediately recognizable on the surface of the images we are shown, or which prevail, of the post-war period and the creation of East and West Germany. Very recent research at the German Lost Art Foundation in Magdeburg paints a picture of East German procurement of hard currency that makes the division between the two Germanies appear by no means as fundamental, seen in terms of trade policy, as East and West Germany respectively communicated to the outside world and as is presented in the media and schoolbooks. It is known that after the war, millions of cultural assets from mansions, libraries, and private collections were stored in numerous depots in East Germany, and that a large number of valuable items from these depots were sold through the GDR's foreign exchange procurement agencies to museums, collectors, or art dealers in West Germany and other countries. To this day, their provenance has neither been documented nor, in the majority of cases, identified as a research priority. If one looks into the details of the individual processes and the list of those involved, then some of the connections seem truly absurd – for example, that East Germany used galleries in Switzerland that had already helped to place the tooth gold from the Nazi death camps on the precious metals market in order to offer antiquities from Dresden's Grünes Gewölbe to international auction houses. Such research findings, however, were always only occasional results. Where historical research will require a lot of time for material or systemic reasons or because of the political interests involved (at least for decades to come), in order to reach conclusions that will stand up to public scrutiny, artistic research can be far more flexible in its approach. While it cannot be a substitute for scholarship in the long term, it can nevertheless find a language for hidden remembering and thus at times shed light on the past far earlier than can academic research. This is the starting point of Andrea Pichl's artistic practice. Hidden remembering is not forgetting, nor is it re-fabricating or denial. Rather, it relates to what Julien Gracq, who trained as a geographer and historian and was active throughout his life as a high-school teacher and writer, called the "path of dreams and thus also memory." Gracq suggested that the "nature of secondary things," which for him exists in the realm of visible objects and at the same time does not neglect the interstices, is what also constitutes the perspective taken by artistic research: "I stand between a view of the future and remembering, and thus it appears to me as if I have hardly ever stepped out of a four-dimensional universe." Andrea Pichl's historical universe is clearly four-dimensional, it both overshoots and falls short of the opportunities of academic research, while at the same time keeping its distance from any idealistic foundations of historical knowledge. As spatial volumes and pictorial media, her works are consciously in space and she likes to place them within the public space; they constitute an emphatically illusion-less, indeed laconic form of visualizing the invisible, a far cry from any romantic or surrealist idea of artistic claims to creating the world. What her art visualizes does not reference reasons or primordial origins; rather, it is surface-bound, infinitely ramified power structures, overseen

relationships in the surface of everyday life, and continuities in collective adaptation that disguise themselves as nature and are actually the congealed patterns of collective pain. In the mnemonic landscapes that Andrea Pichl explores, this pattern is manifest in various visible forms: in houses, architectures, and urban structures, in everyday things and ruins. And also in non places: former toxic waste dumps and indeed in all manner of significant legacies of the so-called industrial age extending deep into the future that seek as such to essentially remain latent. At the same time, Andrea Pichl moves in the interstices of things in which invisible, immaterial forces are at work, precisely through that domain of the “secondary,” which maintains the image of these landscapes without itself being geographically perceptible: The life between the lines that enables her research leads almost invariably to those things that, on the outside, seem utterly unobtrusive and customary when meant in the derogatory sense and therefore actually as not worthy of mention suddenly appearing in a quite different light.

Temporary shelters, for example, were such a customary phenomenon. Indeed, no one talked about temporary shelters for very long because of their transitory purpose and the unpleasant memories they bring to life. That is innate in the actual word “temporary shelter”: Whatever has such a name is presumably somewhat “inauthentic,” negligible, not a real shelter, not an expression of a home and sedentariness, but the opposite, a temporary aid for something existential – one could even say a euphemism for pure necessity. “Whoever has no home now will not build one in the future.” A temporary shelter offers makeshift lodgings in order to have some sort of roof over your head (the emergency that prevailed everywhere after World War II in the landscapes Pichl examines). If we consider such a German temporary shelter to be a thing, a material object that can still be found in the one or other big city in both east and west Germany, then it also points to an intrinsic hope for survival, a right underpinned with a special legal status to return to more reliable structures. And here commences the domain of the secondary that suddenly gives temporary shelters a voice. In this interim realm, notions, ideas, views all appear, irrespective of the country’s later political division. It is above all in cities that suffered severe damage during the war, such as Berlin, Dresden, or Heilbronn, that the history of these shelters starts around 1940 after the first blanket bombing by the Allies with initiatives by Deutsches Wohnungshilfswerk (DWH). This is the launch of the “Reich uniform type” of temporary shelters that were designed by the former Bauhaus architect Ernst Neufert (and later by Hans Spiegel) to boost construction efficiency, and by 1944 around 180,000 units had been erected, with a further 230,000 under construction. In keeping with the way the Nazis saw the auxiliary housing system of the Wohnungshilfswerk, a large number of forced laborers were involved, procured from one of the more than 40,000 local labor and concentration camps in the Nazi state.² Settlements consisting of temporary shelters, such as in Müggelheim, Hermsdorf, and in Berlin’s Karlshorst district, are today still fixed parts of the local residential structures, and down through the decades they were converted, with annexes, stories, or even balconies added, and in this way their lease of life was extended. Pichl connects the silhouette of such a stable provisional structure – which, in its own way, wanders as a witness through most recent German history and has thus become one of its forms of expression – with other forms of improvised buildings: a so-called “Genex bungalow” made in East Germany, and a now conventional commercial garden hut from a DIY catalog of the OBI chain. All three are walk-in sculptures; they are spaces and outlines at once, unique exhibition spaces within the exhibition. What links them is that they show how something provisional was gradually imbued with a different value: from emergency shelters into a promise, into a discreetly courageous endeavor in some suggested personal autonomy. With its capitalist logic, this change in value does not serve to subvert rule but to shore it up, for it can be classified – as Janna Mareike Hilger notes in her investigation into “Safe Spaces” – as one of those “integrative measures that promises improvement and tames critique” that political regimes preferentially deploy to engender feelings of belonging and safety.³ Genex bungalows were a group of items available to purchase from “Geschenkdienstund Kleinexporte GmbH,” an East German mail-order service known as Genex for short. Their mail-order catalogs were something citizens could send to their relatives in West Germany, whereupon the latter could gift them the Western goods that were listed in the catalogs as well as good as unavailable luxury articles made in East Germany. In the decade between 1971 and 1981 alone, orders totaled 1.4 billion Deutschmarks, and the hard currency flowed directly into the treasury of the “Operative Staatsdevisenreserve” (Operative State Hard Currency Reserve), which had been set up by the KoKo (Commercial Coordination Office) under chief hard currency procurer Alexander Schalck-Golodkowski and which maintained permanent trade subsidiaries in Switzerland, West Germany,

and other countries. Along with the Intershop system and the Handelsgesellschaft INTRAC trading company, Genex played a key role in this arrangement. It is hard for research today to uncover all the ramifications of such a complex corporate structure, which invariably includes cases of covert patterns and whose epochdefining scale can be far more clearly presented through artistic research and practice than with the fragmented, archived knowledge of a few specialists. Genex bungalows exist to this day, although many have since been torn down owing to their asbestos content. The garden hut of the type available from the OBI DIY retail chain, founded in 1970 in Hamburg, is the characteristic counterpart in a democratic-capitalist aesthetic of pseudofreedom: an inflationary mass commodity whose international dissemination is hard to gauge today. The OBI DIY chain is the largest West German corporation to have emerged from the DIY movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Its lowkey anti-capitalist principles initially set out to promote clients' self-empowerment, self-organization, and ability to improvise in the face of a commodity world that was felt to be manipulative and to erase all differences. As so often, this rebellious gesture soon evolved into a lifestyle trend and a business model. External interchangeability and standardization of these DIY buildings thus also align with an only seemingly paradoxical desire among clients for personal agency. Andrea Pichl places three of these building types, which she had repurposed as sculptures so as to give them a laconic presence, as a tableau of a historical landscape. She has their innate historical dialectic disappear behind the illusion of social self-organization, something that drove the social desire for renewal that prevailed in the post-war period just as much as did the country's division into two separate states. These forms say everything about the very narrow limits in which social self-organization was at all possible amid the massive competition between the two sides in the Cold War, to the extent that it was not simply staged. From improvisation as the suggestion of liberated life, a hitherto under-researched cultural bridge between East and West Germany, Pichl's research moves on to other traces of repurposing and economic linkages. Pichl's site-specific installation titled *Palimpsest*, which she realized in 2024 in the German Federal Ministry of Finance building, functions as an all-in-one structure bringing together various building formats that reflect on the history of the ministry building, which was originally erected as the Reich Ministry of Aviation for Hermann Göring. The plain shape of a rectangular concrete volume alludes to the shape of the temporary shelters from Nazi days, while its narrow slits emulate the lookout windows in the former ghost railways stations in Berlin. A door from a prefab apartment and wallpaper made in East Germany complement each other in evoking the building's former past as the House of Ministries in East Germany, while the installation's lick of golden paint is an ironic comment on how the East German economy was plucked apart by the Treuhandanstalt that was located here from 1990s onward. Another research path that goes back to the history of the provisional (in this case temporary shelters) relates to the system of forced labor. Forced labor performed by prison inmates in East Germany constitutes an important economic factor in the trade between East and West Germany; it involved furniture companies such as IKEA, mail-order companies such as Quelle and Neckermann, and chemicals corporations such as BASF and Bayer. Highly cherished export products such as Sonneberger dolls were made by jail inmates, as were the products of the East German textile industry, which Andrea Pichl highlights through promotional material and objects. Seen from the vantage point of the subcutaneous links, the division into two Germanies actually seems to have been a German bond

1 Julien Gracq, *Carnets du grand chemin*, (Paris, 1992).

2 See „Mehr als 40000 Nazi-Zwangslager in Europa“, in: „Die Zeit“, 4.3.2013 <https://www.zeit.de/wissen/geschichte/2013-03/holocaust-studie-ghetto>.

3 Janna Mareike Hilger, *Safe Space: Sorge und Kritik nach Michel Foucault und Eve Sedgwick*, (Frankfurt a. M. / New York, 2023), p. 13.