

Andreas Ludwig:

Discursive Logics in the Material Presentation of East German History. Exhibitions and History „Ten Years After“

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I. Historical Consciousness in GDR

East German officials were extremely cognizant of the historical importance of their state and represented it in museums and memorials. Most important seemed to be the National History Museum (*Museum für deutsche Geschichte*) in Berlin, founded already in 1953 and visited by thousands of school classes and organized groups of adults.¹ It's dominant role for official representation was publicly announced: *„Ministerpräsident Otto Grotewohl verwies bei der Gründung des Museums im Januar 1952 auf seine enge Bindung an unseren jungen Staat und die neue, sozialistische Gesellschaftsordnung. Das Museum sollte die schöpferischen Kräfte der Volksmassen nachweisen (sic!) und insbesondere die hervorragende Rolle der Arbeiterklasse, ihre historische Mission als Gestalter des sozialistischen Staates darstellen.“*² In 1989, a new section showing the Honecker years was added

¹ More than 300 000 visitors saw the museum's exhibition in 1987, Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1988, p. 327. By choice, visits to museums were part of a plan to be fulfilled by working collectives to achieve the title „Kollektiv der sozialistischen Arbeit“.

² „Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl at the founding of the museum in January 1952 referred to its close bond to our young state and the new socialist order. The museum should prove the creative power of the masses and represent especially the excellent role of the working class, its historical mission as former of the socialist state.“ Berlin-Information (ed.): *Museum für deutsche Geschichte*, Berlin 1987, p.4; for this museum's history see Karen Pfundt: *Die Gründung des Museums für Deutsche Geschichte in der DDR*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte B 23/94*, pp. 23-30.

to the permanent exhibit as part of the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the GDR. This exhibit was closed by early December of the same year.

At a local level, the local history museums (*Heimatismuseen, Stadtmuseen*) in the GDR were obliged to integrate the history of the working class movement (starting with the year 1789 according to the official chronology) up to present day, as well as to portray local economic and social change since 1945 with an emphasis on progress. A typical form of presentation would be a tableau of photographs showing positive results of these changes under the title „See how far we have come!“ (*Seht, was aus uns geworden ist*). Nearly all of the exhibits of this kind were closed shortly after the fall of '89, except where re-interpretations or commentaries were developed in the wake of the East German civil revolution.³

Almost every factory had a so-called „tradition chamber“ (*Traditionskabinett*), a small museum consisting of objects, photographs, and other materials showing the history and the overall development of the place. They were visited regularly by staff members, as well as by official guests and delegations. All of them have since been closed and, to my knowledge, destroyed.

In addition, one should mention the hundreds of memorials commemorating the antifascist tradition, the battles of

³ Andreas Ludwig: Zum Wandel lokalgeschichtlicher Museen in der ehemaligen DDR nach der Wende 1989, in: Bernd Faulenbach, Franz-Josef Jelich (ed.): Probleme der Musealisierung der doppelten deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte, Essen: Klartext 1993, pp. 93-101 (= Geschichte und Erwachsenenbildung, 1). Visiting several museums in Brandenburg in winter 1990/91 with Hans Ansorg, East German specialist on local history museums, we have found only one example of critical re-interpretation in Salzwedel.

the Sovjet Army in 1945, and noteworthy places in working-class history. Some of them were re-worked after 1989, but many were closed, mostly for financial reasons.⁴

Until 1989, the GDR had one of the highest concentrations of museums worldwide and, as we have seen, the GDR state used historical objects and sites to represent the country's official historical culture.⁵ At the same time, however, we must keep in mind that the culture of everyday life - the popular culture of the time - was not integrated into this concept. The „Museum of Working-Class Life around 1900“ (*Museum Arbeiterleben um 1900*), one of the very few museums that treated worker lifestyles, culture, and social history, did not mention developments after 1945.⁶

In the GDR, popular (material) culture (*Alltagskultur*) and history of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) - the terms should be further discussed under aspects of proper fit and equivalence - were presented strictly historically and at the same time integrated in a more

⁴ Institut für Denkmalpflege in der DDR (ed.): Gedenkstätten. Arbeiterbewegung, Antifaschistischer Widerstand, Aufbau des Sozialismus, Leipzig/Jena/Berlin: Urania 1974.

⁵ 721 Museums in 1987; 128 of them were classified history museums (*Geschichtsmuseen*), 363 local history museums (*Heimatismuseen*), *Statistisches Jahrbuch der DDR 1988*, p. 327. For a prospect of East Germany's museums at the time see Bernd Wurlitzer: *Tourist-Führer Museen. Galerien, Sammlungen, Gedenkstätten*, Berlin/Leipzig: Tourist 2nd ed. 1983.

⁶ Erika Karasek a.o.: *Großstadtproletariat. Zur Lebensweise einer Klasse*, Berlin: Museum für Volkskunde 1983 (exhibition catalogue); the exhibit was developed in cooperation with the Sektion Kulturtheorie at Berlins Humboldt University, see Dietrich Mühlberg, *Autorenkollektiv: Arbeiterleben um 1900*, Berlin: Dietz 1983. Sigrid and Wolfgang Jacobs' „*Illustrierte Alltagsgeschichte des deutschen Volkes*“ was planned for 3 volumes covering 1550 - 1945, 2 vols. were published before 1989/90. Soon after 1989/90 the museum faced GDR history in its exhibits, see Kurzwort: *Ewig blühe - Erinnerungen an die Republik der Lobetrotter. Requisiten aus einem Stück deutscher Geschichte zwischen 1946 und 1989*, Berlin: Westermann-Kommunikation 1992.

general conception of the historical tradition of progress achieved by the working class movement.⁷

II. The sudden change of '89

With the opening of the Berlin wall on November 9, 1989, the situation suddenly changed. Practically overnight, private collectors started to explore the GDR as a new field of activity and collected objects of this „strange“, foreign culture right off the store shelves. Matchboxes, clothes, ashtrays and posters: everything was worth collecting because every object suddenly acquired value as a historical and cultural object, not to mention a value as collector's item - in the sense of rarity and completeness. It should be noted that while this formerly unknown, unconsidered, even neglected culture was explored, millions of East Germans were at the same time throwing things away, and were prepared to replace them with much-esteemed Western goods. In museum theory, the term „garbage phase“ (*Müll-Phase*) - a term first explored by Michael Fehr⁸ - denotes the time lag between the object's use value and its cultural value. In our case this „Müllphase“ was nearly instantaneous.

While museums in the East were closing down their exhibits, others in the West began collecting objects of popular culture, in some cases systematically - like the

⁷ Peter Hübner: „Revolution in der Schrankwand?“ Die Objektkultur des DDR-Alltags und ihre Musealisierung in der Perspektive sozialhistorischer Forschung, in: Gerd Kuhn, Andreas Ludwig (ed.): *Alltag und soziales Gedächtnis. Die DDR-Objektkultur und ihre Musealisierung*, Hamburg: Ergebnisse 1997, pp. 152-169, p.155; Dietrich Mühlberg: Die DDR als Gegenstadt kulturhistorischer Forschung, in: *Mitteilungen aus der kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschung* 33, 1993, pp. 7-85, p. 65 f.

⁸ Michael Fehr: Müllhalde oder Museum: Endstationen in der Industriegesellschaft, in: ders., Stefan Grohé (ed.): *Geschichte-Bild-Museum. Zur Darstellung von Geschichte im Museum*, Köln: Wienand 1989, pp. 182-196.

West-Berlin „Museum of Objects“ (*Museum der Dinge*) - at times haphazardly and stimulated by the political situation of the time. When the Kommern *Freilichtmuseum* purchased a complete East German household, paid for in Western appliances, a controversy broke out on whether this was pre-cautious collecting policy or a colonialistic move.⁹

III. The perspectives on history in current exhibitions

As early as 1990, a series of exhibits about GDR material culture appeared, beginning with industrial design and advertisement, and later including arts and history.¹⁰ In 1999, the tenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall, re-presentation of East German history reached its climax. What do museums represent „ten years after“? What perspective towards history do they present, and how do they differ in this respect from the historical debates elsewhere? I will report on three observations:

First, looking at the topics of exhibitions on East Germany, we find the ambitious overview of about 50 years of the Federal Republic of Germany in Berlin's Martin-Gropius-Bau, symbolically opened on May 23rd, the anniversary of the West German Constitution of 1949.¹¹ I will not discuss this exhibition in general here; I will only mention that the popular culture in the GDR was

⁹ Dieter Pesch, Sabine Thomas-Ziegler: *Alltagsleben in der DDR. Vom Zusammenbruch des Dritten Reiches bis zur Wende*, Köln: Rheinland-Verlag 1991 (exhibition catalogue); Sabine Thomas-Ziegler: *Alltagsleben in der DDR. Eine Ausstellung des Rheinischen Freilichtmuseums und Landesmuseums für Volkskunde in Kommern*, in: Faulenbach/Jelich (ed.), pp. 85-91.

¹⁰ Some examples in Andreas Ludwig: *Objektkultur und DDR-Gesellschaft. Aspekte einer Wahrnehmung des Alltags*, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte B 28/99*, pp. 3-11.

¹¹ Katalog anmerken; a co-operation of the two national history museums in Bonn and Berlin.

presented as a descending platform displaying an apartment stocked with household goods, photographs, and several pieces of furniture. This was identified and criticized by visitors as a symbol for the steady descent of a whole society, and for its unclear choice of object, just to name a few arguments in public reaction. The GDR in this exhibition seemed to be an appendix to West German history and, more than that, a rather negatively politicized standard for comparison with the successful Western development. The culture of every day life, which could have offered an explanation to the East German society, had been reduced to an insignificant vestige.

By contrast, a remarkable number of exhibitions were shown at the local level. Two examples will suffice: three large cities in the southern region of former GDR showed GDR history as a part of local history. None of these three discussed urban history in a traditional way, but instead favoured aspects of living conditions. In Dresden, there was „The Other Past“ (*Die andere Vergangenheit*), which pointed out that one fifth of the German population had different experiences before 1990: „Many people in GDR did not really want to be any different from other Germans ... But being different was the proclaimed goal of the party und state leaders of GDR.“¹² The exhibit flyer not only accentuated the differences between officials and people but could also be taken as an explanation of the differences between East and West.

In Leipzig, the Museum of Local History (*Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig*) decided on the title „It goes its own way“ (*Es geht seinen Gang*), an

¹² *Die andere Vergangenheit. 40 Jahre Leben in der DDR. Ausstellung im Stadtmuseum Dresden 13. März bis 7. Oktober 1999 (flyer).*

expression for both the slowness and its bureaucratic character of life, which the writer Erich Loest once used for his well-known novel on the city's destruction during the GDR period.¹³ Loest after being imprisoned for political reasons emigrated to West-Germany, and he has still be seen as a local hero in the East. The stitched cloth bags used to advertise the exhibition were the talk of the town and of the the museum community.

In Halle/Saale, some 20 miles northwest of Leipzig, the title of the current exhibition is „Gebeutel“, a play on words that links bags as a symbols for the everyday struggle against supply shortages with the rather negative circumstances of life to a person's fortune in general. It seems that the cloth bag one carried every day in order to be prepared for a sudden appearance of rare goods has become a symbol of every day life in East Germany, a reminder of the past and common consideration about the collective ability to combat the struggles of every day life.¹⁴

Example two: the Berlin-Brandenburg region. Twenty-four smaller museums in this region coordinated their activities by publishing a flyer and a newspaper under the title „New Times (*Neue Zeiten*), 1949 - 1989 - 1999“ - recalling that there have been new times several historical moments during the last 50 or 60 years that influenced people's lives. Every new regime promised new and better times and caused fundamental social change in the region.¹⁵ All the participating museums were local

¹³ Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Leipzig: Es geht seinen Gang. Leipzig 1979-1989. Ausstellung 5. September 1999 bis 27. Februar 2000 (brochure and flyer); Erich Loest: Es geht seinen Gang oder Mühen in unserer Ebene, Halle: Mitteldeutscher Verlag 1978 (zugl. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt 1978).

¹⁴ Gebeutel im Labyrinth der Versorgungslücken. Sonderausstellung des Stadtmuseums Halle zum Alltag in der DDR. 26. September - 28. November 1999 (flyer)

¹⁵

history museums. But in a region that was heavily affected by the contradictions of the Cold War, the topics differed from those in the South of the former GDR. In Brandenburg, almost all of the participants chose either the border situation, with Berlin being an open city until 1961 and the Berlin Wall a dominant sore in collective feeling until 1989, or economic changes as relevant. The half industrialized, half agriculturally structured province of Brandenburg gained industrial importance during the forty years of GDR and, after 1989, lost it again. Therefore, the social consequences of reunification have been favored as a relevant topic for historical debate. High unemployment rates and a political majority on the left¹⁶ in Brandenburg may be the reasons for this, but it seems that the intensified economic development of the area after 1945/49 is still remembered in a positive light.

Example three: „Ten years after“ some museums have begun to present interpretations of the East German society as a whole and as a theoretical problem. In Leipzig, again, the „*Zeitgeschichtliches Forum*“ was founded as an affiliate of the House of the History of the Federal Republic (*Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn*), one of the two existing national history museums. Its aim is to present East German history from the perspective of repression and resistance; the place was chosen in remembrance of the civil revolution, which had its most important center in Leipzig. The brochure published about the newly-opened standing exhibition describes its goal as depicting a

¹⁶ Unemployment rate Nov. 2000 15,3 %, average in West Germany 7,2 %; Landtag elections 1999: SPD 39,3 %, PDS 23,3 %; nevertheless, the leading SPD favored a coalition with the Christian-Democratic Party.

country „between seduction and despotism, consent and repression, partial identification and total authority“.¹⁷ The exhibit shows, in chronological order, the development of GDR, comprising such historical themes as the Cold War, the founding of the two German states, the consolidation of the SED, the building of the Berlin wall, German-German relations and negotiations, economic and social policy under „real-existing socialism“, opposition, the repressive Ministry for State Security, and the Peaceful Revolution, among others. One should have expected a political memorial, but the exhibit itself goes much further, and its strongest element is in telling how a separate society was built and how it worked under the existing historical circumstances by integrating an individual sight on society as well as arts.

In November 1999, the „Documentary Center for Every Day Life Culture“ (*Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR*) in Eisenhüttenstadt opened the exhibit „*Fortschritt, Norm und Eigensinn*“, an overview of society during GDR times, consisting of 17 sections meant to show the internal structure and functioning of the country. The exhibit covers such topics as symbols of power, Cold War, cultural ties and cultural communication between the two divided societies, social policy as gender politics, education, economic efforts as structural politics, consumption, supply and private trade networks in a society that accustomed to scarcity, foreigners living in GDR and other confrontations with otherness.¹⁸ The title of the exhibition purports to name the poles

¹⁷ Ausstellungsbroschüre „Einsichten“, S.7.

¹⁸ Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR (ed.): *Fortschritt, Norm und Eigensinn. Erkundungen im Alltag der DDR*. Berlin: Ch. Links 1999.

between which the East German society may have fluctuated: „*Fortschritt*“ - progress - names a common goal that reached far beyond propaganda; „*Norm*“ - meaning norm or quota - denotes the systematic will to control through rules and orders; and „*Eigensinn*“, a term coined by Alf Lüdtke, describes the partly self-determined and self-defined daily goals and actions by collectives and individuals in a dictatorship.

Thus, two different approaches to museum exhibits can be identified: On the one hand, we saw the correlation of local history and national history linked by individual experience, in museum exhibitions reaching from historiographically based analysis to identificational assemblages of objects of collective remembrance, from a retrospective of historical circumstances of life to a long-term social change. On the other hand, we found a rather structurally based view of East German society that seeks to discuss general aspects and specific functions and conditions, that may explain the country's daily life as well as long-term character.

IV. The emergence of „Everyday“.

What does this mean for the type of history transmitted by individual reception and public debate?

First, places and materials have to be considered: museums are the places where current history can be seen - public places that almost every city has to offer. It is not the isolated reader but the publicly acting visitor who exposes him- or herself to the subject matter

on offer, to the artefact being revealed. There are also considerably more visitors to museums than readers of history books. But modes of reception are different. Visitors come mostly in groups, with their families or with friends. That means there is probably a certain amount of communication between people in face of the objects exhibited.

People spend between half an hour and 1 ½ hours time in museums, a very short time compared to that spent reading a book. What do they see? What kind of information will a visitor get, and how will he transform the visual information into historical knowledge and historically oriented consciousness? One can only answer these questions with difficulty, but it should be noted that obviously the main information people get in museums is clearly that connected with objects, and of course the object itself. We know that an object cannot simply explain itself but has to be described, analyzed, interpreted, and set into contexts of different dimensions. This may be called the narrative of the exhibition makers. But is this narrative identical with what people see in the object presented? We must therefore ask first what kind of museum is showing the objects of everyday life and, secondly, what public they attract. We have to ask for types, sites, and people.

GDR-history is presented in a variety of museums: The two National Museums of History, local history museums and special museums. One might expect that the culture of every day life would be displayed by museums of popular culture, but they still concentrate much more on pre-industrial folklore than on showing industrialized

cultures, urban life or current folk traditions. Both national history museums nowadays refer to the culture of everyday life as an integral part of history, but not in every project this goes beyond mere illustration. The terms „Alltagsgeschichte“ or „Alltagskultur“ symbolize a turn towards „history from below“ as we might call it, a legacy of the critical emancipation of the 1970's. This move changed local history museums that integrated the new ideas into their mixture of topics, sources, and scholarly background.¹⁹ A turn towards popular culture seems to be relatively easy for museums, as compared with academic historiography, perhaps because the traditions of the museums partially resulted from the popular culture movement of the 19th century.

Paying attention to sites, the two national history museums are situated in the two German state's capitals Berlin and Bonn which seems to be as appropriate as symbolic. In the same way placing the *Zeitgeschichtliches Forum* in Leipzig means that the Civil Revolution today is interpreted to be the most important event in East German history. Having a *Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR* in Eisenhüttenstadt, first newly founded industrial center of GDR in the early fifties and symbol for the upcoming achievements of a socialist society (as well as its slow but constant decrease), many visitors find matching while others criticize that this town never suffered the constant decay of the country. During the last years many „border museums“ were founded to commemorate the divided country and were situated directly at the former barbed-

¹⁹ Museum der Arbeit (ed.): Europa im Zeitalter des Industrialismus. Zur „Geschichte von unten“ im europäischen Vergleich, Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz 1993; Berliner Geschichtswerkstatt Hg.

wired borderline or at checkpoints of the West-Berlin transit routes. All these places tell as much of real history as they are of symbolic character. These museums show history as much as the places recollect memory.²⁰

What we also notice is the emergence of current history (*Zeitgeschichte*) in museums during the last ten years, with the history of GDR selected more often than the history of Western Germany. Changes in society provoke cultural reflection through museum exhibits, so it seems. Five years ago Rosmarie Beier, historian and curator of the exhibiton „Stations of Life in Germany 1900-1993“ shown at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, analyzed visitor books in order to learn about people´s ideas about history. Her results are quite informative. The visitors´ interest in history was provoked by the close connection between the objects shown and their personal rememberances. Visitors felt like part of history and wanted to find out if history was presented „right“. They were aware of the distinction between the official framework of laws, rules, party directives, structures, on the one hand, and „real life“ or individual experience, on the other. Comparison of current society and historical society were another dominant aspect registered by visitors. Many of them used the opportunity to express their feelings and their experiences from the GDR to participate in a public discussion about the good and the bad in earlier East German life. Visitor books also seemed to become a battlefield of opinions and prejudices carried by Eastern and Western visitors about

²⁰ With the exception of Eisenhüttenstadt where practical reasons led to the founding of the museum and the symbolic character of the place being controversially debated afterwards. See in general Pierre Nora´s „lieux de mémoire“.

each other and an opportunity to articulate individual analysis of contemporary German society.²¹

Although many visitors pointed out the advantages of former East German life and regretted the loss of social cohesion, social security, and moral standards, I am sceptical about calling this „Ostalgie“.²² Like any other person, visitors to a history museum want to find something that touches them, that reminds them of a situation connected with personal experience. But the typical „Oh, I remember that“ is soon followed by stories about circumstances of life, by an analysis of reasons, by comparison, by discussion with other visitors. The confrontation with the museum's objects gives occasion for further communication; public discussion led by media is extended into the museum's show room and to be not only repeated but restructured around the objects shown and the memories recalled. One may ask whether this should be called nostalgia, or whether it should be interpreted as a distinctive key to initiate historical analysis on the basis of personal significance.

V. Museum collection and memory

Exhibitions are at once presentations and representations of historical developments. They are re-interpretations of the past, just as much as any

²¹ Rosmarie Beier: Bericht zur (mentalen) Lage der Nation, in: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte B 27/95, pp. 10-18; Rosmarie Beier, Bettina Biedermann (ed.): Lebensstationen in Deutschland 1900-1993, Giessen 1993.

²² The expression combines the two terms „nostalgia“ and „East“ (Ost). It is negatively connotated and shall describe a special East German feeling for collective experience and discontent about current Western dominated politics, the turbo-society. The news magazine Der Spiegel first populated the term about 1993, but it is said to be created by a cabaret artist: Deutschland macht mich rasend, Der Tagesspiegel Nov. 10, 2000.

historiography. But the museum reaches further down. As a final aspect, then, I would like to discuss the museum collection itself as an important factor of historical consciousness and to recall that history is „made“ from the beginning.²³ Like archives, museum collections are pre-interpreted and structured collections of objects. Only what has been collected can be displayed, what has been neglected remains invisible. It is important, therefore, to decide how collections will need to be constructed. Do artefacts confirm a historical narrative, or do they have their own informational character? What plan curators are following when they collect, when they decide on what will be and what will not be history, makes a considerable difference. The problem becomes extremely important when discussing the most recent past, such as GDR history.²⁴

In Eisenhüttenstadt, we have tried to avoid these interpretive decisions in order to give as much space as possible and to people who were participants in the historical process. That means not only postponing the problem but also unlocking the door to the privileged field of archive building. Therefore, we have asked people to bring into the museum what they intend to be relevant in informing others about their daily life. Interpretations of this question varied considerably. Some people brought the objects documenting their professional achievements; others brought what they had been reading; still others collected household furnishings typical for the GDR and inspired their

²³ Susan M. Pearce: Museums Objects and Collections. A Cultural Study, Leicester U.P. 1992.

²⁴ The relevance of the museum for current history is discussed under different aspects in Kuhn/Ludwig, 1997.

neighbors to participate, while others again simply wanted to get rid of unnecessary things piled up in the basement. Nonetheless, the collection assembled in this way is by no means random. It covers the private side of GDR society as far as people have been willing to give it away for public use. It may be also understood as a collection of objects representing a collective interpretation of what should be preserved from East Germany's culture of every day life. That means that certain objects have been donated repeatedly (such as „My First Radio“) while others will remain missing because of their private character or because they are not seen to be of public relevance (private photographs for example).²⁵ We did anticipate that all information gathered around the object could be documented and would provide inside information on „how life really worked“ in the GDR. One has to consider that we were rather naive. Instead of information closely connected to the distinct artefact, we acquired either scarce commentary or well prepared stories of the donor's life. Stories told about objects are just a beginning, they may be an offer to continue the interview that very soon may lead from the artefact described to personal life if both the interviewer and the witness agree.²⁶ To cover this aspect of museum work we try to cooperate with academic institutions. We have been greeted with openness and perceived a good amount of professional interest, but one must also consider that museum work does not easily fit into the academic schedule. Nevertheless we are optimistic

²⁵ Frau G. aus Berlin schenkt dem Museum etwas, in: Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR (ed.): Tempolinsen und P 2. Alltagskultur der DDR, Berlin: be.bra 1996, S.103-108.

²⁶ Far too seldom the museum is able to follow this invitation because trained personell cannot be provided for financial reasons.

about the prospects for working out programs that will fulfill all sides' wants and needs.

VI. Conclusion:

One may discuss whether exhibitions are cultural events or whether they are able to affect historical knowledge and consciousness over the long term. Exhibitions are part of the historical and cultural debate, open to a broad public and, as mostly subsidized by the taxpayer, an affordable channel of access to historical objects and information. Museum exhibits do find their public; they are widely accepted as an integral part of the cultural offering used by professional visitors as well as by curious spectators. But, unfortunately, we do not know much about the way information and perception are working. Visitor book are one way to analyze how exhibits work on the long term; others will have to be found out. Collections, as the heart of the museum's visual work on history, are themselves result of an interpretive act. Artefacts of GDR history have been gathered in large numbers and will provide a formerly unknown range of illustrative material. But since public and private collections were put together quickly after 1989, one should ask about their meaning for both history, for current, and for future re-interpretations.