Doorway to Dissidence: The 1979 Doors Exhibition in the GDR

a response by Iman Salty

In October of 1979, a group of eight German Democratic Republic (GDR) artists in their twenties organized an exhibition designed to reflect the sentiments of their generation. It took place on a year that would mark the 30th anniversary since the formation of the GDR.[1] Held at the Leonhardi-Museum in Dresden from October 27-November 11, the Doors Exhibition [Türen-Ausstellung] overwhelmingly represented experiences of being caught at a threshold—enclosed, separated, and alienated, yet on the edge of possibility, openness, and connection—as metaphorized through the everyday structure of the door. How was it that the symbol of the door came to hold such significance and potential at the time?

In this exhibition, each artist created their own "door" constructions by salvaging and repurposing objects from demolished houses and junk yards, a strategy that in itself challenged the "official" government sanctioned art of Socialist Realism by reflecting the intention of these artists to create work in a so-called "non-official" or "non-

[1] The GDR was established in 1949, politically dividing Germany into East and West, which would later be marked geopolitically through the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. The Doors Exhibition is retrospectively documented in amazing detail supported by personal artist interviews conducted by art historian Angelika Weißbach. The artists who participated in the exhibition include Michael Freudenberg, Volker Henze, Ralf Kerbach, Helge Leiberg, Reinhard Sandner, Cornelia Schleime, Thomas Wetzel, and Karla Woisnitza. See: Angelika Weißbach, "'Das ist der Anfang der Überwindung des falschen Bewußtseins!' Die Türen-Ausstellung im Leonhardi-Museum in Dresden 1979," *OwnReality* 5, (2014): 1-46, http://www.perspectivia.net/content/publikationen/ownreality/5/weissbach-de.

conformist" manner.[2] For then 26-year-old Cornelia Schleime, her work *Room of the Poet* [*Raum des Dichters*] critiqued the banning of many poetic texts and, more broadly, encapsulated feelings of creative constraint in the GDR.[3] She positioned two upright doors facing opposite each other, maintaining significant space in between them. Their exteriors were painted with black and white geometric shapes. They stood upon a large sheet of blue paper representing a body of water in between them, and yet they were propped up together and connected by thin wires. On this "ocean" floor lay scattered broken glass that had come from a smashed windowpane from one of the doors. A drawing of a face was also on the "ocean" floor, whose "reflection" was caught in a papier mâché head hanging from one of the doors above it. Paper eyes, paper ships, and strands of poetic texts were dispersed between the doors and caught in the wires that bound them. Strung up on the wires between the doors was also a saw, because for dissidents in the GDR "one was not immediately decapitated as with a guillotine, but rather their head was sawed off slowly and agonizingly."[4] Though not literal, it conveyed in other words that in this installation attempting to move *through* one door to the other would make occupying this threshold untenable without inflicting damage to the body, the senses, and the psyche. As documented by art historian Angelika Weißbach, upon visiting the exhibition A. R. Penck—the pseudonym of Ralf Winkler, an influential non-conformist artist from Dresden at the time who was frequently surveilled by the Stasi and often prohibited from exhibiting work—reportedly described the group exhibition as "the beginning of overcoming false consciousness!"[5] By 1980, Penck would move to West Germany, and by 1981 Schleime herself would be barred from exhibiting work, a common fate of non-conformist artists.

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[2] It is important to note that while it can be helpful in our understanding of artistic practices in Cold War-era Central and Eastern Europe to create the distinction between "official" and "non-official" art, this binary should be challenged as artistic practices were more nuanced than this. In the context of the GDR, there were still many non-official artists who were painters, and therefore engaged with more traditional forms of art making but in a non-official way that rejected Socialist Realism. According to Weißbach, the artists in the Doors Exhibition intentionally created works that would be different than academic conventions of art in the GDR, such as painting and other non-experimental forms of art. Weißbach, 4.

[3] Unfortunately, many of the door objects exhibited were likely destroyed after the exhibition. Weißbach's phone interview with Cornelia Schleime discusses the exhibition, her contributing door construction, and her interpretation of the installation and what it meant at the time: Weißbach, 32-35. To view a rarely found image of this sculpture, see Weißbach, 7. Also visit: https://perspectivia.net/receive/pnet_mods_00000087.

[4] Cornelia Schleime as quoted in Weißbach's interview documenting the exhibition: "*man in der DDR nicht gleich wie mit einer Guillotine geköpft wurde, sondern langsam und quälend den Kopf abgesägt.*" Cornelia Schleime, "'Das ist der Anfang der Überwindung des falschen Bewußtseins!' Die Türen-Ausstellung im Leonhardi-Museum in Dresden 1979," *OwnReality* 5 (2014), interview by Angelika Weißbach, March 18, 2013, phone conversation, 33.

[5] Weißbach, 14.

Among an abundance of interpretations, one could make sense of the (im)permeability of a door as a reference to the border enforced by the Berlin Wall. The experience of confinement and its extension beyond the Wall into the public and private spheres of everyday life in the GDR is investigated by contributing author to this volume Emine Seda Kayim in "Surveillant Movements: Policing and Spatial Production in East German Housing." As Kayim conveys, movement through *any* space in the GDR—especially presumed niches of refuge—was often not simple. The home was subject to great scrutiny by the Ministry of State Security (MfS), or *Stasi*, precisely because of its assumed place of privacy.[6] Focusing on mass housing and mediating spaces like corridors in residential complexes, Kayim investigates how architecture at times functioned as a co-conspirator of the Stasi, who studied, mapped, drew, photographed, and frequented these sites to orchestrate an elaborate system of surveillance over its citizens. Throughout its operating years from 1950–1990, the Stasi would produce a vast archive of knowledge amassing a total of 111,000 meters worth of observation files, which can be accessed today.[7]

As the MfS constructed these systems of surveillance, the East German government developed their own lexicon for state productions, curating mass and cultural media to align with the beliefs of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), which many non-official artists at the time became attuned to and resisted, even if only in private.[8] Extending from Kayim's article, this response discusses the methods through which non-official artists in the GDR responded to government control of art and literature by citing and metaphorizing the visual, spatial, and performative lexicon of surveillance as a means of dissent. The 1979 Doors Exhibition offers a distinct instance in which non-official artists made tangible—on a concerted and public scale—the widely felt yet evasive surveillance of everyday life in East Germany, through the symbol of the door. In particular, Cornelia Schleime's *Room of the Poet* represents the GDR's spatial, cultural, and ideological boundaries by reimagining the materiality of the Wall based on lived experiences of creative restriction, constructing an architecture of isolation rather than one of imagined geopolitical stability.

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[6] Kayim situates her essay alongside Michel Foucault's discussion of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon to complicate and expand on the role of "watchers" in the GDR context.

[7] "About the Stasi Records Archive," Stasi Unterlagen Arhiv, accessed April 7, 2023, https://www.stasi-unterlagen-archiv.de/en/archives/about-the-archives/.

[8] What non-official or non-conformist art looked like was by no means standardized and varied greatly throughout Central and Eastern Europe at this time. For example, in the context of the GDR, Dominic C. Boyer discusses the significance for non-official artists of East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg scene to create their work in private and/or shared spaces amongst themselves. They were influenced by post-structuralist literature like Foucault and their similarly post-structuralist approach to art can be seen as an interpretation, Boyer argues, of their artistic practices. Dominic C. Boyer, "Foucault in the Bush: The Social Life of Post-Structuralist Theory in East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg," *Ethnos* 66, no. 2 (2001): 207-236.

The power of language, visual and textual, is central to Schleime's *Room of the Poet* as it represents the threat of individual expression in literature and art and its regulation by the GDR's Ministry of Culture for the purpose of controlling critical dialogue through these media. The repurposed doors in this work operate as borders restricting the movement and accessibility of poetic texts that challenged SED party ideology, thereby effecting the demise of a potential "niche" of refuge found in poetry. Schleime's two doors—bound together and yet opposite each other, as they stand afloat within a blue "ocean" floor—realizes the experience of living in the GDR as an island, isolated geopolitically, ideologically, and culturally.[9] Yet, similar to how we know the Iron Curtain was in fact not as impermeable as it seemed, Schleime's construction features subtle opportunities to see through the door, with broken window panes offering a sightline of possibility.

In addition to critiquing the regulation of poetry, the two doors facing each other in *Room of the Poet* may offer a reflection of East Germany against the "Other," West Germany. The notion of the Other is an effective framing of the geopolitical divisions marked by the Iron Curtain. Historians of German culture and geography Marc Silberman, Karen E. Till, and Janet Ward in *Walls, Borders, Boundaries*, describe how the Berlin Wall was "not just a real physical object but a metaphor for the Cold War's division of the world's two major geopolitical systems, generating symbolic confrontations and grand narratives of systemic struggles on both sides." These systems "demanded ideological mirroring…. In the abstract sense, the Other…became a necessary condition for the common line of separation."[10] The notion of the Other provides an oppositional comparison against which a collective group identity is grounded and fortified. This appears in *Room of the Poet* not only through the doors operating as mirror images of each other, but also in the drawn image of a head on the "ocean" floor reflected from a larger papier mâché head hanging above it. These heads behave as mirrored images of the self, contributing to an Other imaginary.[11] While this could project an alternative future for oneself beyond the border, in the context of surveillance this could be read temporally to convey the restricted future of artists and poets. The sculpted head hanging above denotes public visibility and prominence,

[9] Schleime talks of the idea of doors floating on an "island" in her phone interview with Weißbach. Weißbach, 34.

[10] Marc Silberman, Karen E. Till, and Janet Ward, "Introduction: Walls, Borders, Boundaries," in *Walls, Borders, Boundaries: Spatial and Cultural Practices in Europe*, ed. Marc Silberman, Karen E. Till, and Janet Ward (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 6.

[11] In describing the piece, Weißbach states how the heads in Schleime's installation reflect one another but does not elaborate on what this could mean. Though, the notion of the mirror and the metaphor of reflection is mentioned retrospectively by several of the exhibiting artists in the interviews with Weißbach.

while the 2D "drowned" head in the ocean floor predicts a death of the artist or poet into obscurity, indicative of the banning of poetic texts and artwork.[12]

The overwhelming presence of doors throughout the exhibition, each door another reflection of the other, expresses a feeling of liminality. Moving through the exhibition space, one finds themselves repeatedly confronting an ambiguous threshold. In this way, the door is a powerful symbol because it performs the lived experience of non-official artists in the GDR. Beyond being a commonly found object, doors are prevalent in public and private spheres as architectural demarcations of space, signaling a separation from a surrounding environment precisely because they operate as thresholds. And while they can be understood as a border, barrier, or limitation, thresholds also function as mediating spaces offering opportunities for connection, protection, and transportation. The ubiquity of doors and their display on such a concerted, united scale make the Doors Exhibition critical as it attempts to articulate to the public the precarity and ambiguity of what lies within, and beyond, the confines of a given interior or exterior. The doors enact both spatial and performative qualities that viewers would encounter with state-sanctioned surveillance, for anyone, neighbor, friend, or co-worker, could be an informant. As Kayim discusses, even sounds of movement, such as the shuffling of steps between corridors and stairs, and the opening and closing of doors, might be recorded for Stasi observation.

The Doors Exhibition and Schleime's *Room of the Poet* confronts spatial politics in the GDR by referencing walls, barriers, and thresholds as a strategy of institutional and geopolitical critique. The mass presence of doors without surrounding frames and infrastructure, as is the case for many of the objects in the Doors Exhibition, highlights spatial displacement and dysfunction: the doors are bound to be ineffectual. The defunct door operates as another symbol of criticism in the GDR, a system of governance founded on geopolitical divisions performing a spectacle of high efficiency. It thus embodies instability and unsustainable habitation, perhaps foreseeing the collapse of the GDR. Schleime's installation performs its untenableness by recreating reality as it is being felt and experienced concurrently in 1979.

It is not insignificant that the Doors Exhibition was organized at a state-owned art institution, Dresden's Leonhardi-Museum. The Leonhardi-Museum was one of the few venues where contemporary non-conformist art was continuously exhibited throughout nearly 30 years of the GDR. It became a well-known space for non-official artists to exhibit their "officially unwanted fine arts," in part because it was known to

[12] In this way, the mirroring positions the reality of non-official artists or poets against the narrative of the "dissident" artist constructed by the Stasi in observation files. Schleime confronts the image the Stasi constructed of her by engaging with her own surveillance files in her later "Stasi Series" from 1993. An excellent article that focuses on Schleime's "Stasi Series" is Sara Blaylock, "Being the Woman They Wanted Her to Be: Cornelia Schleime Performs Her Stasi File," *Third Text* 35, no. 2 (2021): 227-247.

have Stasi informants.[13] The artists exhibiting in the Doors Exhibition likely knew they were being watched, but in turn, they were watching and publicizing the false spectacle of the GDR, shining a mirror on the state and showing it to itself as a means of contradiction. Perhaps this is what Penck meant by describing the exhibition as the "beginning of overcoming false consciousness!"

[13] My translation is of Weißbach's description of the museum as a space for "*offizell unwerwünschter bildender Kunst.*" Angelika Weißbach, "Frühstück im Freien – Freiräume im offiziellen Kunstbetrieb der DDR. Die Ausstellungen und Aktionen im Leonhardi-Museum in Dresden 1963-1990," (Ph.D. diss., Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 2009), 4.

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