

SOZIALE SOLLBRUCHSTELLE

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Vol. I

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SOZIALE SOLLBRUCHSTELLE

Reimagining technology from the German Democratic Republic in the age of planned obsolescence

DARSHA HEWITT

What kind of patterns and juxtapositions emerge when the aesthetics and cultural practices surrounding technology from a historical communist state intermingle with capitalist consumer culture? In particular, what happens when household electronics from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) get a makeover using the sleek aesthetics of present day digital consumer technology? Can this somehow offer alternative readings of western society's gross entanglement with technology?

In 2014 I moved to Weimar Germany for work and I ended up living in the home of a retired television repairman. Wolfgang has lived in Weimar since he was a baby — the majority of his life and career fixing TVs took place in this town while it was under Soviet control. He was a citizen of socialist East Germany. During this period there were severe import restrictions, a scarcity of raw and industrial materials and very limited access to domestic goods and household electronics. At the same time however, there was an abundant skilled workforce and a culture of great ingenuity and repair. Wolfgang openly shared with me his technical knowledge and his expansive collection of fully operational GDR TVs, radios, record players and other household electronics, which occupied pretty much every corner of his three story home. From Wolfgang, I learned that obsolescence is a matter of perspective and a lazy one at that. He also believed that value should only be assigned to a given piece of technology if it can be dis/re-assembled, repaired, shared and repurposed until there is absolutely nothing left of it.

Of the several machines I got to know, I was mainly drawn to his lawn mower. The 'Trolli ESM/II' was one of the very few models of lawn mowers made available to the people of the GDR. Its most striking characteristic is its motor hood, which has two mysterious looking horizontal air vents that make it look somewhat like a spartan warrior helmet. There is an added sinister quality to it, as decades of use has marked it as if it had endured a lifetime of battle. I knew immediately that this machine would be a subject of artistic inquiry, however, I was worried that since Wolfgang's was still in commission, and since it was manufactured as far back as 1962, I would have to embark on a great quest

to track down another Trolli as they would have been disregarded ages ago. Luckily, I was completely wrong. In fact, the Trolli lives on in force thanks to a thriving network of sellers and buyers on the internet. It took no time for me to find a cache of socialist lawn mower parts being sold, traded and bartered for via online classified ads. Most of this activity, which takes place in former East German regions is perhaps a practice of preservation and care for material goods carried over from the lived experience of communism. This mentality could very well be useful for Western culture to learn from as we find ourselves in a time of crisis, where we need to put an end to a lifestyle of boundless consumption and adapt to an increasingly hostile and insecure natural climate.

By transposing the Trolli into the high definition settings of present day consumer electronics design and marketing aesthetics, this series of works treat the old lawn mower like a rarified object of luxury and desire. By concealing and revealing its attributes, viewers are compelled to step into the mysterious universe of the Trolli and confront up close how the glossiness of its setting falls away as the detail of its embattled and timeworn patina takes over. Soziale Sollbruchstelle evokes both a militant history and sci-fi dimension, where the Trolli is at once both worn out and weathered yet primed for combat against a future of unkempt lawns.

THE WATCH

For a media archaeology of emotion

SOPHIA GRÄFE

In a video essay about the archival surveillance films of the former Ministry of State Security (Stasi) of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) I made for an exhibition at the NCCA in Moscow in 2016, I claimed that “History cannot be found in the image. (...) History sits at narrow desks, lies in grey envelopes and in orange and red binders.”

It's the material, specifically the medial foundations of history, feelings, and memory that encourages my cultural historical research. Since then, and together with the artist Darsha Hewitt, I've been thinking about how psychosocial space could be reconstructed in obsolete technologies. And once again, I land in the GDR.

Since meeting in 2014, Darsha Hewitt's art has been extensively profiled.¹ And further, since a lectureship at the Bauhaus University in Weimar and guest professorships in New Media at the Art University of Kassel and in Sound at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design, she rightfully holds one of the most distinct positions in the contemporary media art scene. Her electro-mechanical sound installations, performances and video tutorials are archeological in form. By transforming the act of deconstruction into a spectacle itself, Darsha's works stand in solid opposition to the mystified sleekness of new technology. Where the now Berlin based artist finds her inspiration is in the small, forgotten, and often mundane objects of domesticity. And though commonplace technology somewhat disappears into the background of life, it is no less effective or momentous for our everyday connection to economic, political and even military contexts; which inevitably inscribe themselves on our view of society, our relationships and our body.

When I ask Darsha about what lies at the foundation of her work, it is not Marshall McLuhan, but rather Ursula Franklin (1921-2016) who the Canadian media artist turns to as an inspiration and role model:

“As I see it, technology has built the house in which we all live. The house is continually being extended and remodelled. More and more of human life takes place within its walls, so that today there is hardly any

human activity that does not occur within this house. All are affected by the design of the house, by the division of its space, by the location of its doors and walls.”²

And this is why it is only logical that Darsha works televisions, telephones, home radios and now lawnmowers into her art. Her refiguring of household objects focuses primarily on the inner technical systems, which she often deconstructs and re-assembles after opening and dismantling in a peculiar way. With a hands-on methodology, Darsha's approach observes and recreates the inherent procedures of production and use, thus speculating on the attitude of a community alien to her at first, whose behavior she virtually mimics. As recorded in the 1999 CBC Massey Lecture delivered by Ursula Franklin:

“Looking at technology as practice, indeed as formalized practice, has some quite interesting consequences. One is that it links technology directly to culture, because culture, after all, is a set of socially accepted practices and values. Well laid down and agreed upon practices also define the practitioners as a group of people who have something in common because of the way they are doing things. Out of this notion of unifying practice springs the historical definition of ‘us’ and ‘them’.”³

Although Franklin's pioneering thoughts on the history of science and technology still remain largely unnoticed by European media theory, her work is renowned in Canada, where as a young physicist she emigrated after the Second World War. In her adopted country, she worked until her death with great regard and success as a pacifist, human rights activist and environmentalist. In 1967, she started working as a professor of materials science at the University of Toronto. Of the notable contributions she made while working there, included methods to analyze the accumulation of radioactive isotope strontium-90 in the teeth of Canadian children in the fight against atmospheric nuclear tests conducted by the Canadian government.⁴

It is not by chance that Darsha also approaches everyday technologies on their smallest level, their material construction. She tells me that her father was an antique dealer and as a young girl she learned about materials and processing while helping him seek out antiques and collectible objects. While studying drafting and technical drawing in an interior design program, Darsha was urged by a professor to instead pursue a degree in fine arts. As an undergraduate and masters student in visual art, Darsha transferred her technical skills across disciplines and always held jobs as a technician or research assistant at

2. Ursula Franklin (1999): *The Real World of Technology* (CBC Massey lectures series), Revised edition, Toronto: House of Anansi Press, p. 19.

3. Franklin (1999), p. 27.

4. Find info about the “Baby Teeth Survey” e.g. on Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baby_Tooth_Survey.

1. See Darsha's website for an overview of her previous works and full CV: www.darsha.org.

the university. She invested a great amount of time exploring the technical infrastructures at work within media arts. Though fully embedded in a studio practice, her main interest was in getting to know the ageing equipment she was charged with maintaining as an audio visual technician and this is where she came across Forrest Mims' electrical engineering manuals.⁵ Mim's, a hobby researcher and inventor of the "Atari Punk Console" illuminated the fundamentals of electronic engineering in an alternative and inspiring way. Darsha found that his hand-drawn instructions opened up an almost human trait to often dense technological systems – and, in resonance with Franklin, makes a complex mindset tangible:

"Technology, like democracy, includes ideas and practices; it includes myths and various models of reality. (...) Technology involves organization, procedures, symbols, new words, equations, and, most of all, a mindset."⁶

During her time as a lecturer in Weimar, Darsha befriended a former GDR Television repair man who invited her into his personal collection of immaculately preserved and still operational household electronics from the former socialist state. It is within this setting that she encountered a device whose characteristics sparked our collaboration. Our joint project connected Darsha's fascination for the implicit knowledge of technological structures and the everyday presence of military and gender paradigms with my interest in the dispositive of surveillance in the former GDR together in a media based archeology of emotions.

The original aesthetic of the "Trolli"⁷ lawnmower, was the result of a youth design competition and it was first produced in the former GDR in 1962 by the VEB transformer plant "Karl Liebknecht" (TRO) in Berlin-Oberschöneweide, and later also by the VEB Elektromotorenwerk Wernigerode. On the instruction of the Central Committee (CC) of the The Socialist Unity Party of Germany, the state-owned enterprise was encouraged to produce consumer goods in addition to machines for the energy industry. Despite the fact that more than 500,000 units of the "Trolli" had been produced by 1989, they could not cover domestic demand and became a much sought after object.

The Object

"In addition to a proper plant, suitable seed and sufficient fertilization and irrigation, a regular cut ensures the formation and preservation of

5. See Forrest Mims website: <http://www.forrestmims.org>.

6. Franklin (1999), p. 21.

7. See NN: *Köpenick von A-Z*: <http://koepenick.net/ober-schoeneweide.htm>, accessed on 27 September, 2017.

8. DEWAG ADVERTISING Erfurt (N.N.): *Electric Lawn Mower "Trolli" Manual for the ESM 35 / II, Berlin VEB Transformer Plant "Karl Liebknecht"*, p. 2. The Deutsche Werbe- und Anzeiengesellschaft (DEWAG) [German Advertising and Promotion Company] designed advertising material as well as publications for political, economic and cultural propaganda.

9. Find information on the transmediale excursion "Imaginaries" at the Langenbeck-Virchow-Haus, a temporary seat of the GDR-Volkskammer [People's Chamber], via: <https://transmediale.de/de/festival/2017/program/excursion-1>, accessed on 27 September, 2017.

10. Franklin (1999), p. 133.

11. Ursula Franklin, quoted from: Judy Rebick (2016): Ursula Franklin a pioneer feminist, pacifist, scientist and social justice fighter. <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/judes/2016/07/ursula-franklin-pioneer-feminist-pacifist-scientist-and-social-justice->, accessed on September 27, 2017.

a representative decorative lawn. A good lawn should be cut at least 15 times a year, with the optimum cutting height at about 3 cm".⁸

Reading the user manual text, which remained almost unchanged over the decades of production of the lawnmower, inevitably arouses curiosity about the practice of observing and controlling the height of grass in the primarily communally used courtyards and front gardens of the GDR. Yet another aspect of the "Trolli Type ESM 35 / II" dominates – its appearance. The so-called motor hood of the machine has two, sometimes three horizontal air ventilation slots on its front, evoking a mysterious-looking iconology of armour, combat and defence.

Our video work "The Watch" and sculptural installation "Armour", which premiered during transmediale 2017 at the Langenbeck-Virchow-Haus Berlin⁹, is dedicated to this impression. It further traces out what Franklin described with the ubiquitous presence of a "credible enemy" during the Cold War:

"In the real world of technology, there are then two tasks for the state, if governments wish to use arms production as an infrastructure for the advancement of technology: the state has to guarantee the flow of money, and the state has to guarantee the ongoing, long-term presence of a credible enemy, because only a credible enemy justifies the massive outlay of public funds."¹⁰

The effects of staging basic threats could not be more relevant in today's climate of escalating social resentment. "The Watch" video starts with a close-up and tests the shape of the motor hood for its emotional quality. It is its ironic reference to the sacral atmosphere of contemporary commercials for design objects that explores the psychic space of empowerment fantasies that adhere to technological advances, and which always argue for a natural need to prevent social exclusion or even deprivation of rights. Ursula Franklin opposed the hysterical thinking of the Cold War and sought by means of solidarity actions the proximity of women in the Soviet Union.

"Feminism isn't an employment agency for women; it's an alternative way of ordering the social space, (...) It is based on collaboration rather than competition."¹¹

In this collaboration with Darsha, this demand for equality as an unconditional condition of justice is updated. The soundtrack of "The Watch" consists of fragments of the composition "Drone Theories" by AGF (Antye Greie-Ripatti). A major concern of the sound artist origina-

ting from the GDR are just these associations - expressions of solidarity and community projects, which in the face of sheer unbelievable impressions of human rights violations, often deprivation based and frequently without compensation, fight for the visibility and indictment of unjust conditions. This also includes their preoccupation with the militarization of societies and the interference with our privacy. Given, for example, the drone warfare that has been staged in Pakistan since 2004, privacy is only to be understood as a privilege for those who are not at the crossroads of military repression, but are indirectly guilty of being profiteers of this imbalance. AGF has sonically processed this involvement on her EP and sends us the following lines:

*technology and space
neither one is neutral
in theory*

*tiny spaces in our bodies
resonate with frequencies
unique to each one of us*

*drone music is about vibration
drones are taking real lives
in defence of a nation*

*billions of people matter
surveillance is an attack
on each and every person*

and the space between us

Thus, technologies of shielding and destruction in their violation of the integrity of life are ultimately directed against the members of the supposedly dominant force. AGF, whose productions explore language, sound and digital communication, stands in solidarity with victims of armed conflict, including through the feminist electronic music network “female: pressure”¹², which recently turned towards the critical situation of Kurdish women, the “women of Rojava” in northern Syria, and their resistance movement to build an egalitarian society in a musical dialogue.

12. Further information on “female: pressure” and Rojava at: <http://www.femalepressure.net/rojava.html>, accessed on September 27, 2017.

13. Ursula Franklin (1986): Peace – A Necessity for an Equal Society. In: Ursula Martius Franklin (2014): *Ursula Franklin Speaks – Thoughts and Afterthoughts*. McGill Queen's University Press, p. 144.

Furthermore, “The Watch” deals with questions of gender roles in labour and in the context of hegemonic technologies. The cover of the user manuals for the “Trolli” always shows a woman operating the machine. The connection between work and gender invites to simple theses. Some present day perspectives aim to dignify the unjust GDR state in relation to women rights by referring to the iconic imagery of the working women. This stance however is uncritical as it overlooks its connection to the political agenda of a totalitarian mobilization of workforce – which rather does a disservice to feminism.

Lastly, this work draws out boundaries between public and private space in the confrontation of historical material with openly capitalistic models. The lawn is considered a place of negotiation and a sphere for the discipline of bodies, neighbourhood and nature. It is important to ask which concepts of intimacy are associated with the respective product culture. Finally, in a speculative-archaeological gesture, both “The Watch” and “Armour” trace the technological control of affects. For Franklin’s memory is true to her most important thought:

“(…) peace is not so much the absence of war as it is the absence of fear.”¹³

Sophia Gräfe, the 27th of September 2017

“The Watch” and “Armour” were developed at the Graduate School of the Berlin University of the Arts and with the financial support of the Einstein Foundation Berlin and the Canada Council for the Arts. The video was made in collaboration with Jemma Woolmore and the soundtrack was created by AGF (Antye Greie-Ripatti).

About the Author:

Sophia Gräfe is a media culture scholar, curator and editor based in Berlin. Her academic work explores the sociological and epistemological meaning of pictures within cultural processes. This includes work within the fields of video and digital art. As an assistant curator she has worked with various media and experimental film festivals such as the transmediale festival, Werkleitz festival and Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen as well as galleries and artist studios. She is currently working as a research assistant at Humboldt-University Berlin and at Philipps-University Marburg.

Darsha Hewitt is a Canadian artist known for her examinations of communication technology in the domestic sphere and her use of DIY aesthetics and practices as an artistic method. She makes electromechanical sound installations, drawings, audio-visual works, how-to videos and experimental performances with handmade electronics. Her artistic and pedagogical methodologies maintain a strong feminist critique of technology centering on models of empowerment and notions of the female body within technological environments. Through deconstruction and experimentation with obsolete household technology and defunct media, her work aims to demystify hidden systems within technology as a way to trace-out structures of economy, power and control embedded throughout capitalist culture.

Her internationally recognized contributions to do-it-yourself electronics communities and ‘critical-hacking’ workshops and lectures are integral to her discipline. Her work in this field was a subject in the Music, Digitization, Mediation: Towards Interdisciplinary Music Studies project based in the Faculty of Music at Oxford University. Darsha is a collaborating facilitator of the Music Makers Hack Lab with Create Digital Music. From 2016-18 she was a fellow at the Berlin Centre for Advanced Studies in Arts and Sciences (BAS) in the Graduate School at the Art University of Berlin. From 2017-18 she held a guest professorship in Sound at the Karlsruhe University of Art and Design and from 2015-16 she was a guest professor in New Media at the Art University of Kassel. She is also a Lecturer in the Media Arts Environments Research Chair at the Bauhaus University Weimar.

Recent presentations of her work include: Hartware MedienKunst-Verein (DE), West Den Haag (NL), Microwave Festival – Hong Kong City Hall (CN), Halle14 (DE), Museum of Art and Design (NYC), Chaos Computer Congress (DE), Future Flux Festival (NL), Transmediale (DE), Asia Culture Center Gwangju (KR), Elektra Festival (CA), Resonate (RS), Spectrum (DE), Goethe Institute (CA), Halle14 (DE), Modern Art Oxford (UK), WRO Media Art Biennale (PL), FACT Liverpool (UK) and CTM Festival (DE). She has been awarded several commissions and production stipends from Canadian, German and EU funded Programs such as The Art and Civic Media program at the Innovation Incubator at Leuphana University of Lüneburg and an international prize from The Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art (DE). In 2013 she was nominated for the Marler European Sound Art Award (DE) and completed a Fellowship in the Sound Art program at Hochschule für bildende Künste, Braunschweig (DE).



Armour, 2017
 Sculptural Installation
 Found Objects, pedestals, acrylic display
 covers 12 units, each 35 x 35 cm
 In collaboration with Sophia Gräfe



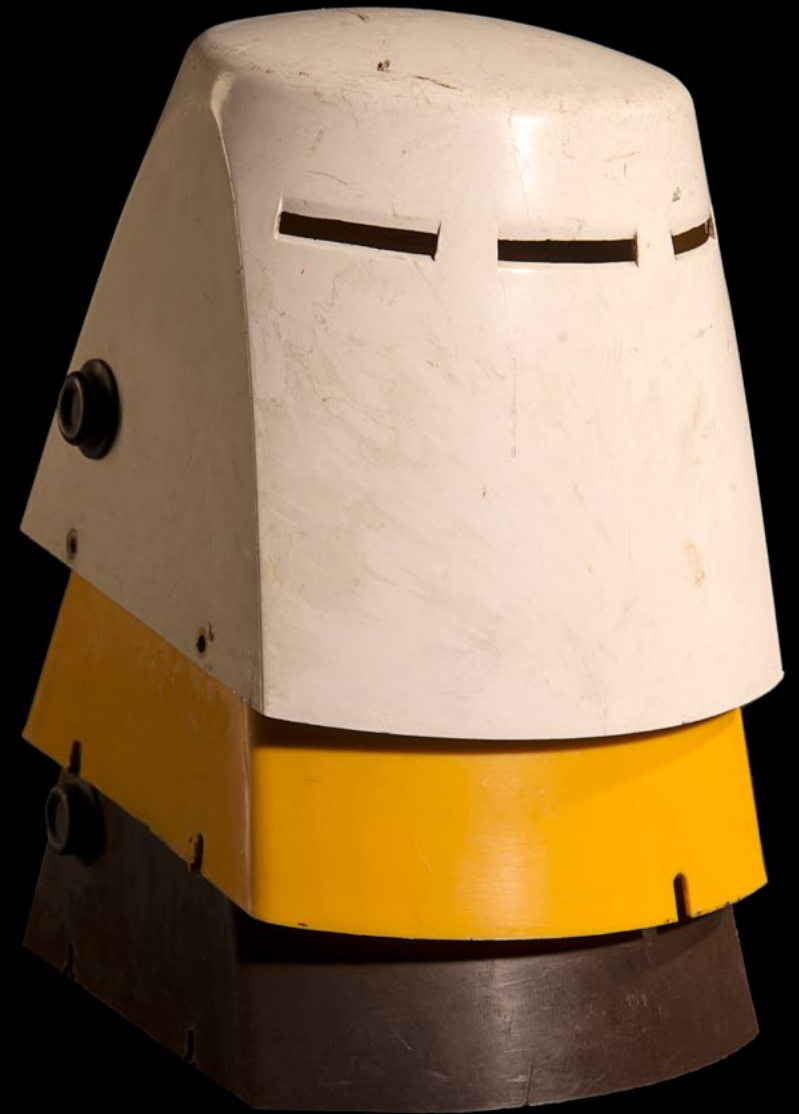


Infekt
21 Jahre
Deutsch
Kolonisierung
Hilf
Bodo Brückner
2015





Tower, 2017
Photograph, 140x100 cm







Operation Manual, 2018
 Photographic diptych, each 50x70 cm



Lookout, 2018

Photo ptych mounted to Acrylic glass, 140x100 cm



Government Issue, 2018
Photograph, 40 x 60 cm



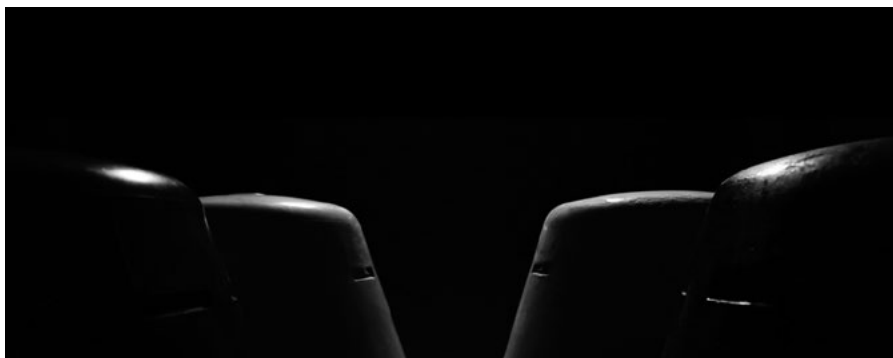
Sirens, 2018

Sound Installation

Custom built HIFI speakers, found objects, 120x60x60 cm

In collaboration with AGF (Antye Greie-Ripatti)

consult Vol. II for more information



The Watch, 2017

High Definition Video with Audio, 3:00 minute Loop

In collaboration with Sophia Gräfe

Sound by AGF (Antye Greie-Ripatti)

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Darsha Hewitt, Sophia Gräfe

Translation

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pp 14-19 Installation views by Falk Messerschmidt

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