

On a quiet grey night in the late 1980s, a young man wanders drunkenly down an empty street in East Berlin before discreetly entering a bar whose sign reveals its name: “Schoppenstube.” The world inside “die Schoppe” could not be more different than its urban surroundings in Prenzlauer Berg: music blares, colors abound, and the bar is packed with queer men socializing and dancing, many costumed in drag.

re-assembling

Re-assembling East German Nightlife: Scores for Curating from Elusive Archives

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This scene comes from the film *Coming Out* (1989), one of the last productions of the Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft (DEFA)—the state-run film studio of East Germany (the GDR)—and was its only film to thematize queer life in the former socialist state. Filmed onsite in the Schoppenstube, the center of gay nightlife in the GDR and once Berlin’s oldest gay bar before its closure in 2013, it assembles an archival glimpse into a former space and register of nightlife in the GDR. The film premiered at Kino International in East Berlin on November 9, 1989, yet more important events transformed the city that evening. Just north of the Schoppenstube at the Bornholmerstraße border crossing, thousands of East German citizens assembled and eventually breached the border, precipitating the fall of the Berlin Wall. The elusive traces of GDR nightlife remain present today in spite of their physical destruction amid the urban transformation of post-socialist Berlin, as well as their absence in official archives of the GDR and institutionalized narratives of German Reunification. The ghostly specters of “die Schoppe” survive at its former site on Schönhauser Allee 44, where the absent bar is now an unexceptional *späti*; above the entryway, a small mural of a sidewalk crowd hints at the collectivity that once gathered there.

How might we re-assemble the absent traces of GDR nightlife? How might we re-assemble a notion, or notions, of public space that they imagined and enacted? What curatorial processes of ‘assembling publics’ – or assembling publics once again – can stage meaningful encounters with the elusive archives of East German nightlife’s subcultural sociality and political imaginaries? Those that remain at once invisible yet affectively palpable at nearly every street corner? Such questions lie at the heart of *Disco*

Comradeship, our collaborative curatorial research project which takes the forgotten “Disco Films” [Discofilme] produced by DEFA as a point of departure for curating and making public – sometimes for the first time and sometimes once again – the elusive archival remnants of film, nightlife, and urban space under and after state socialism.

To curate the elusive – and even evasive – (after)lives of GDR nightlife, we turn to a methodology of “re-assembling”, which conveys a doubled and belated action of assembling, of bringing into relation the mostly overdetermined macro-policies of the GDR and the overlooked micro-practices of media cultures’ aesthetic, social, political assemblies. We would propose that assembling GDR nightlife was always already an act of re-assembling. To assert this suggests something of the performative temporal loops of pre-figuration that might be understood when it comes to publicness and gathering. While DEFA’s disco films juxtaposed, remixed, and montaged various assemblies of nightlife, music, and urban space, they simultaneously evoke the political specters of bodily assembly, of the liminal role of nightlife as a space of social and political gathering. As a mode of curating from the elusive archives of GDR nightlife, we offer “scores,” which chart the moments in which East German nightlife and notions of publicness therein are re-assembled across space and time, from the disco films themselves, to their early screenings and engagements with urban space, to how such traces might still live in the city’s streets today and become public once again in post-socialist screening spaces. Across the scores, different voices are accessed as we shuttle between past presents and present pasts, the historical and the contemporary, the descriptive and the speculative.

Re-assembling #1: DEFA Disco Films



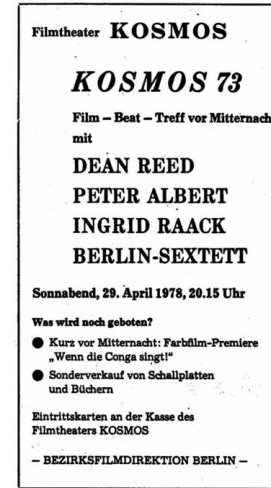
DEFA's disco films were created through processes of re-assembling landscape and cityscape, human and cybernetic form, and real and virtual space into visions of modern socialist life. They montaged various forms of media, constructing a visual grammar that would circulate through spaces of nightlife and teach young people how to understand themselves within emergent socialist pop culture. Produced by DEFA from the mid-1970s onwards, the disco films archived an aesthetic turn that accompanied the increased liberalization, optimism, and international collaboration in the cultural sphere that was marked by the power transfer from Walter Ulbricht to Erich Honecker. Indeed, the first disco film was released in 1976, the year of the dissident musician Wolf Biermann's forced expatriation from East Germany, which intensified alternative cultural practices and activism in the GDR's final decade. Numerous rock bands emerged in the GDR's 1970s cultural thaw, especially as Western music became increasingly sought after.

In this sense, the disco films were a state-approved vision of the GDR's music scene, as well as of ways of "living alternatively." Produced on 35mm film, their short music video-like structure is characterized by sharp juxtapositions of space and time, bringing together live musical performances, narrative footage, animation, photographs, interviews, and voice-overs to form a local and hybrid genre that preceded the rise of music video culture (the first music video was released on MTV in 1981). In the disco film of Karat's hit song "Albatross" from *Discofilm 51* (1979), for instance, footage of the band performing in the City Theater in Hildburghausen, Thuringia, is intercut with shots of birds flying over the expansive horizon of the Caspian Sea. The film's voice-over declares Karat as the "best beat-formation in the GDR" [*beste Beatformation der DDR*]. Elsewhere, in the film of Pudhys' songs

"Steine – Kinder – Sonntagsfahrer – Lebenszeit" from *Discofilm 16* (1976), black and white still photographs of the popular band are intercut with blurry, handheld sequences of Alexanderplatz, the center of East Berlin. These jump cuts, intercuts and other techniques produced a punctuated vision of the city and its nightlife space; and, at the same, they archive the city and nightlife culture an opaque vision that eludes a single take.

Re-assembling #2:
Public Screenings in the GDR

On the wall of their work bench at the state-owned Berlin machine tool factory in Marzahn, a worker has collaged a spread of tickets from cultural events, concerts, and balls, especially those held at the former Palast der Republik the Schauspielhaus and the Staatsoper. Here, the worker has re-assembled their cultural milieu. Though positioned in the Museum in der Kulturbrauerei today as evidentiary prop of the pervasiveness of work life in the GDR, this workbench is also an impromptu archive of nightlife in the GDR, charting the coordinates of an ephemeral multi-sensory world that eludes direct visualization and exceeds traditional modes of archiving. The tickets do not show us how this worker experienced the concert or the ball but, instead, key into the historical opacity at play in the affective and often deeply personal orientations to public gathering. What remains today of East German nightlife are not images of its existence but rather such traces of its opacity, in the quotidian evidence of something like event tickets.



If the worker has mapped one register of nightlife, where might traces of opacity for others lie? As their title implies, disco films were produced by DEFA to be screened in nightlife spaces like the discotheque, as well as in cinemas as pre-screening entertainment or hybrid multimedia events such as the "Film-Beat-Treff vor Mitternacht" held at Kosmos cinema on Karl-Marx-Allee in East Berlin, the second largest cinema in the GDR. DEFA's filmic promotion of local musicians in nightlife spaces was intended to draw a younger generation back into socialist culture and away from negatively coded influences of Western popular culture. Nonetheless, it relied on the aesthetic influences of Western and transnational disco, psychedelia, rock and pop, evincing a complex appropriation and adaptation of subcultural activities to fit East German life contexts. This tension of identification that emerges in public screenings of disco films is one of places where their elusiveness resides. In the gap between their socialist intention and the effect, a doubled and belated "re-" joins the assembling: the DEFA apparatus brought bodies, film and music together at places like Kosmos, making public the future intermixing of ideologies and political imaginaries.

Re-assembling #3:
Film to Urban Landscape



Bourdieu says that space is the book the body reads by traversing.¹

We could add that space is a film the body re-assembles in narrative unfolded by navigating.

Histories of walking methodologies abound in the histories of the humanities and social sciences with the urban landscapes of industrializing Germany, and particularly Berlin, serving as key touchstones. Public space and personal memory – but also personal space and public memory – weave together in a dense fabric of textures that remap the city over and over again.

Walk under the U-Bahn tracks.

Count the layers of wheat-pasted posters, like the rings of a tree.

There are other worlds under there to be read. The city is an archive, and the publicness of it language is one that inhabitants know even if it goes unspoken out of sheer habit.

I came to realize that the sidewalk space of the city IS the city to most people.

Under the U-Bahn tracks – or maybe over them – pause at a stop you know well. “The subway station, as any city-dweller knows, is a critical site in urban space—a kind of artery in the lifeline of the city—that allows inhabitants to move around. Like an artery, its constant operation below the surface makes everything possible.”² What is pulsing out from here? See what histories the staircases and escalators visualize. See what eludes that: see what is on the corners around you; see what is on the pavement below you.

Legitimacy and the pavement.

Register the shops, the informal business transactions, the orientation of the available seating, the people bustling past, the people not bustling past. What day is it? What season is it, climatologically or politically?

Processes of urbanization are challenging the rules about the sidewalk and raising the possible legitimacy of other livelihoods and lifestyles that it could serve.

What does the smear or the spill or the tag tell you about inhabitants’ affective relations to this space, this doorway, this threshold of publicness? What is allowed to flow and what is getting blocked?

This divergence between how places are designed and how they are used can be powerfully and poignantly revealed with fieldwork.

Re-assembling #4: Public Re-screenings in Post-Socialist Space



Between 1960 and 1962, as the Berlin Wall was erected in Berlin, Kosmos cinema was built on Karl-Marx-Allee in East Berlin. Opening to the public on October 5, 1962, it was, along with Kino International, the most modern film theatre in the GDR, serving as an important prestige project of the socialist state. From the eponymous Kosmonaut sculpture that stood atop the massive cinema to the theater’s interior lights, which were built to appear as the jets of a rocketship, the building stood as a prefigurative monument to the socialist future.

Under these ideological cues, Kosmos, Kino International and other cultural venues like Palast der Republik or Café Moskau, functioned as sites of aesthetic and political experimentation in both their visual appearances and their choreographies of use. From the 1970s onward, DEFA’s disco films were screened at Kosmos and other multi-media events that attempted to assemble bodies together into state-approved nightlife milieus. These attempts remained just that, yet elusive traces of alternate modes of collectivity accumulated, re-assembling those spaces into something else. But amid today’s destruction of socialist cultural heritage in neoliberal urban space, Kosmos is a pricey event venue rental where clients become symbolic kosmonauts with whom the “event universe grows a little bigger and a little brighter.” So, what is re-assembled when screenings and other multi-media events take place again in what are now “post-socialist” spaces?

Re-assembling today might mean to gather once again and screen something like the disco films in sites where elusive specters of a socialist future continue (however anachronistically) to be active and activated—familiar spaces like Kino International or Kosmos, but also more recent ones like Sinema Transtopia within the Haus der Statistik just down the street, the former hub of GDR bureaucracy and its dreams of calculability. Spaces, in other words, that key into the constant re-assembling of publicness and nightlife in the urban post-socialist spaces of Berlin, and that archive the histories and possibilities of alternate futures.

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“Universal” type Western museums convey a wisdom based on collectibles frozen in space and time – and ruthlessly sorted into “departments” and “chronologies.” Drained of their dynamism and ambiguity, objects are classified according to Eurocentric criteria: art or craft, nature or culture, modernity or antiquity, Western or non-Western. Objects that fall outside of such a scheme can find themselves relegated to the museum’s storage.

With the demise of Western hegemony and the collapse of its museological narratives, many museum lovers have started to look beyond the bad old story of Enlightenment. After all, modernity was never only a Western endeavor; it was always a global, transcultural project (even if many of its key players did not participate voluntarily).

The time has come to release museum collections from their ideological fixations. Just as “I is another,” so are many museum objects. They can easily be “Chinese” and “antique” and “modern,” at least if we study them attentively and follow up on their singular histories of exchange, conquest, translation, and recombination.