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DDR-Literatur und die Avantgarden. Herausgegeben von Jutta Müller-Timm und Lukas Nils Regeler. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2023. 263 Seiten. €32,00 broschiert oder ebook.

The Creation of an Avant-Garde Brand: Heiner Müller's Self-Presentation in the German Public Sphere. By Jens Pohlmann. Oxford, Berlin, Bruxelles, Chennai, Lausanne, New York: Peter Lang, 2023. XII + 198 pages + 3 b/w and 6 colored images. \$67.95 paperback or ebook.

The last decade has seen a renewed interest in the question of the underground artistic and literary scenes of the former GDR, as expressed in recent publications including Sara Blaylock's *Parallel Public: Experimental Art in Late East Germany* (2022), Seth Howes's *Moving Images on the Margins: Experimental Film in Late Socialist East Germany* (2019), and Sarah E. James's *Paper Revolutions: An Invisible Avant-Garde* (2022). Similarly, Heiner Müller's relevance in contemporary scholarship continues unabated, as witnessed by the work of the Heiner-Müller-Gesellschaft, which brought out the first *Heiner Müller Jahrbuch* in 2024, the comprehensive *Material Müller*, edited by Stephen Pabst and Johanna Bohley (2018), and the forthcoming *Heiner Müller Handbook*, ed. Janina Ludwig and Florian Becker, which will hopefully catalyze a deeper engagement with Müller's work in the Anglosphere. While Müller and the unofficial cultural practices of the late GDR scene, often subsumed under the Prenzlauer Berg scene label, stood in a complicated and ambiguous relationship to one another, they both carried about them an aura of avant-gardism, which they continue to project into the present, and a part of this weak glow is surely their common association with the socialist other, East Germany. This linkage of the GDR and the avant-garde appears initially counter-intuitive, since "avant-garde" was a largely negative term in East German cultural politics. Yet, as David Bathrick has pointed out, even the most rigid conceptions of Socialist Realism contained the avant-garde impulses of bringing art into life and overcoming the divide between mass and elite culture. In addition to this persistent tension between notions of heritage and avant-garde in socialist culture, "die antimoderne Affekte der Kulturpolitik lenkten den Blick unabhängig Denkender geradezu zwangsläufig auf Kunst und Literatur der Moderne," including the historical avant-garde, as Birgit Dahlke notes in her contribution to *DDR-Literatur und die Avantgarden* (28). If the GDR continued to provide conditions of relevance for an avant-garde practice that in the west, according to critics like Peter Bürger and Hans Magnus Enzensberger, had become just another set of techniques to be deployed on the art market, then perhaps practices nourished in the GDR can offer models of the persistence of the avant-garde in the contemporary public sphere. This, at least, seems to be the wager of Jens Pohlmann's analysis of Heiner Müller's turn to the interview after 1985, and especially after the Wende, as itself a form of avant-gardist confrontation with the capitalist public sphere of the Federal Republic, but also by implication, of Jutta Müller-Timm and Lukas Nils Regeler's edited volume.

Müller-Timm and Regeler frame their volume in terms of East Berlin's underground art scene of the 1970s and 80s as a cite of collaboration, relationships, and networks that also extended beyond the GDR's capital. Yet the volume is not just a collection of essays on various artists and writers connected with this scene but attempts to theorize the actuality of the "Avant-garde Begriff" for the late GDR and the present. Müller-Timm's opening chapter provides a sort of genealogy of the term in the GDR, dating back to the condemnation of both modernism and Proletkult as reflections of formalist decadence in the debates of the 1950s, debates which were themselves rooted in the so-called Expressionism Debate of the late 1930s. Here, the avant-garde

at large was condemned by Communist critics like Georg Lukács and Alfred Kurella for its elitism and lack of influence on the masses. As late as the 1960s, Kurella and Alexander Abusch continued to critique the commercialization of the neo-avant-gardes in the West, and the 1970 *Kulturpolitisches Wörterbuch* declared flatly of the very notion of the avant-garde, “die marxistische Ästhetik gebraucht ihn nicht” (12). The 1979 volume *Künstlerische Avantgarde: Annäherungen an ein unabgeschlossenes Kapitel*, edited by Karlheinz Barck, Dieter Schlenstedt, and Wolfgang Thierse, marked a sea change in this negative evaluation in the GDR. Müller-Timm’s essay draws out the significance of the volume’s reframing of the concept of the avant-garde, which involved both a strong claim of the left-avant-gardes as part of the socialist cultural heritage as well as a refutation of Bürger’s claim that the failure of the historical avant-gardes to dislodge the bourgeois institution of art marked the endpoint of properly avant-garde practice and its reduction to one style among others. Instead, by carefully distinguishing between avant-garde practice as one that understands itself politically from modernism, *Künstlerische Avantgarde* paves the way for an understanding of the avant-garde as “ein historisch sich notwendig wandelndes Projekt,” (12) echoing Walter Fähnders’s notion of the “Projekt-Avantgarde.” Nevertheless, as the quote above from Dahlke implies, modernism itself, with its emphasis on formal experimentation and autonomy had a kind of avant-garde edge *in* the GDR. Dahlke’s own contribution to the volume provides a fascinating backstory to *Künstlerische Avantgarde* and detailed discussions of the careers of its editors and provides an interesting portrait of intellectual life in the GDR. The volume emphasizes the unofficial art and literature in the late GDR as a continuation of the avant-garde project, such that the late GDR becomes a nodal cite in an avant-garde tradition, as it were, practice that, while now *all* historical, “bilden aber ein Netzwerk, das sehr unterschiedliche Erscheinungswesen zwischen Sprach- und Formexperimenten, transgressiven Impulsen und Kulturrevolutionären oder politischen Ansprüchen verbindet” (20). This framing is itself a kind of retroactive defense of the “scene,” as it was often called, against the criticisms of older GDR writers like Müller and Volker Braun, who accused unofficial GDR artists and writers of play-acting and epigonism, but also of the widespread dismissal as what Wolf Biermann called “ein blühender Schrebergarten der Stasi” (136), accusations that hang over many of the pieces in this volume.

The essays collected here can be categorized for the most part as either descriptions of events, practices, or scenes or discussions of individual authors. Thus, Matthew Hines’ essay on the notorious Lyrikabend, organized for the Academy of the Arts in Berlin by Stephan Hermlin on the night of December 11, 1964, which provided a platform for dozens of young poets while bringing down the wrath of the SED. Despite the negative reaction of the Party, for Hines the formal experimentation of the young poets affirmed, if critically, socialist construction, employing avant-garde techniques to address the political actuality of the GDR. With recourse to Walter Benjamin’s notion of allegory, wherein the citations of the historical avant-garde serve as utopian traces, Hines, argues, such that “...eben dass die Dichter:innen sich mit der Realpolitik ihrer Zeit beschäftigten, kennzeichnet ihre Mühen als engagiert und produktiv, weil sie einen utopischen Blick in eine verbesserte–jedoch weiterhin sozialistische–Zukunft warfen.” (64). Here, as is often the case, one must wonder how differently GDR socialism could have turned out if the regime had accepted the contributions of those eager to support it. The other two contributions on specific avant-garde practices already come from beyond the divide, as by the late 1970s and 1980s younger artists and writers increasingly operated on the margins or outside of the GDR’s official cultural organs. Anna Horakova delivers a comprehensive account of the

semi-underground mail art journal *Uni/vers(;*), run out of Halle by exiled Chilean poet and artist Guillermo Deisler from 1987-1995. Circulating largely between Eastern Europe and the global south, *Univ/vers (;*), Horakowa argues, continued the avant-garde project—inherently political, activist, and international, while at the same time employing heterogeneous materials and reproduction techniques in its critiques of the military industrial complex East and West and the nuclear threat of the Cold War. Carola Hähnel-Mensard examines several manifestos published in unofficial journals throughout the 80s. For Hähnel-Mensard, such journals, like *Uni/vers(;*), sutured the GDR into what Adolf Engler called “der große Kollektivprojekt der Moderne” (149). Manifestos by writers like Uwe Kolbe, Jan Faktor, and Bert Papenfuß-Gorek, precisely through their modernist emphasis on the autonomy of the aesthetic as a zone of play and subversion in the context of the increasingly bizarre and sclerotic public discourse of the late GDR, represented a “produktive Aneignung” of the historical avant-gardes. Such manifestos served not only as means of protest and appeal, but also self-reflections on unofficial art and literature as a kind of second public sphere.

Other essays in the volume treat the authors Elke Erbe and Wolfgang Hilbig, both involved in the Prenzlauer-Berg scene, the former as a sort of facilitator and mentor, the other more as a liminal critic, and two older, more established writers, whose work opened new spaces and themes for GDR literature, Erich Arendt and Christa Wolf. Both Lukas Nils Regeler and Valentina Di Rosa discuss the work and influence of Erb, who, together with Sascha Anderson, edited the first volume of unofficial poetry from the GDR to appear in the west, *Berührung ist nur eine Randerscheinung* (1985). Regeler’s essay traces a complicated genealogy between Erb and Soviet poet, Marina Tsvetaeva, whose work she translated into German, who was also a major influence on Prenzlauer Berg poet Raja Lubinetzki, all of whom were influenced in turn by Else Lasker-Schuler. This poetic “Wechselspiel” then becomes an example of a strategy of self-positioning, reception and indeed community building that Regeler associates with the avant-garde. Di Rosi, on the other hand, reads the *Berührung* anthology as an example of poetic strategies that pushed beyond the Cold War division of East and West, pointing out the affinities of the Prenzlauer Berg poets to Viennese traditions of language experiments in poetry. Johanna Käsmann looks at Wolfgang Hilbig’s *Ich* (1993), a novel that uses the formal complexity of unofficial literature to critique the increasing inconsequentiality and loss of influence of literature itself in late socialism. Released during the Literaturstreit and amidst Stasi revelations concerning Anderson and others, *Ich* was “genau im Trend” in its skillful interweaving of the language games of the scene and the bureaucratic paranoia of the Stasi’s own “Schreibweise,” with its piling up of genitives, such that these two modes of writing meet in a horizon of reciprocal nonsense. Given the preponderant concentration on unofficial literature, the essays on Arendt and Wolf feel a bit like outliers, but both are interesting and make important points about the international and contemporary character of GDR literature. Heinz-Peter Preußler outlines the “left conservative” Zivilisationskritik of Arendt, which played a major part in GDR literature of the 70s and 80s, influencing Wolf and Müller among others. Henrike Höllein Krause offers a fascinating account of the relationship between Wolf and Charlotte Wolff, sexologist and hand-reader, under the sign of Virginia Woolf, herself a great influence on Wolf, exploring the shared interest of these figures in sexual androgyny as a figure for social equality even as it casts the constellation of these Wolf(f)s as an example of the readings and encounters underlying the inherently modernist intertextuality of Christa Wolf’s *oeuvre*. Finally, the volume contains a panoramic account of the unofficial scene in the GDR, encompassing literature, art and music, by

critic and curator Christoph Tannert, which originally appeared in 1988 in the journal *Niemandland*. This is a fascinating piece of late-GDR *Zeitgeschichte*, exploring the openings and blockages of the cultural landscape of the GDR on the eve of its liquidation.

If, for the editors of *Künstlerische Avantgarde* in 1979, the historical avant-garde was rooted in the cultural and social upheavals of the period of transition from capitalism to socialism, revolutions long or punctual, the late avant-gardes that Müller-Timm and Regeler's volume addresses are located in the counterrevolution, the transition from socialism to capitalism. This is very much the historical terrain upon which Heiner Müller adeptly operated in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Jens Pohlmann's *The Creation of an Avant-Garde Brand* reads Heiner Müller's interviews in this period as a work of self-branding carried out in order to preserve a space for Marxian political critique in the commodified public sphere of the Federal Republic. Müller is thus read here not only as a public figure in his own right, but as a case study for the continued validity of avant-garde practice itself and "the possibility of expressing an artistic critique of capitalism under the circumstances of network capitalism and brand culture" (139-140). The chapter explores the contradictions of the "artistic critique of capitalism" itself, as laid out in Luke Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Here, Pohlmann argues that the transformation of ideologies, market strategies and management techniques that shape the contemporary public sphere create an ineluctable dilemma for politically engaged art, suspended between critique and marketing. Rather than subscribing to the dismissals of "neo-avant-gardes" by figures like Bürger or Daniel Bell as a form of branding, Pohlmann wants to hold open the possibility for avant-garde engagement *with* branding culture, of its *Umfunktionieren*, to use the Brechtian term. This is a place where Brechtian strategies of engaging with the public sphere, as well as those of Alexander Kluge and his notion of "counter-production" could have been developed further, as Müller was deeply connected to both figures. For Pohlmann, Müller's solution to the disabling of direct critique in the 1990s was a turn to irony and self-criticism, staged through an increasing iconic self-fashioned persona. "This 'public performance,' the *Gesamtkunstwerk* Heiner Müller," Pohlmann argues, "is therefore not only the most important piece of Müller's late work but was also the most advanced formulation of the avant-garde question at the time, which in many regards remains valid today" (2).

The book's middle chapters explore, respectively, the highpoint of Müller's avant-garde practice as a playwright in the GDR through a close reading of his 1984 stage text *Bildbeschreibung* and his establishment as a provocateur in the public sphere of the Federal Republic following his controversial acceptance speech for the Büchnerpreis. Pohlmann's reading of *Bildbeschreibung* draws out central themes of Müller's developed aesthetics in its methods of slowing perception and experiences, its focus on violence as a historical principle, it's Benjaminian pre-occupation with theatre as medium for the redemption of the dead, and Müller's "Mensch-Technik-Kapitalismus complex." Müller's Büchnerpreis speech, on the other hand, challenged the West German establishment in its evocation of the Red Army Faction and the legacy of violence, racism, that nourished the prosperity of the FRG. Pohlmann asks whether this criticism was already contained and coopted by the scene of the Büchnerpreis itself and Müller's collaboration with the very cultural elites he was targeting. Here, as he had in the GDR, Müller seemed to acknowledge a certain amount of cooptation as the price to be paid for a prominent public platform. This is the Faustian bargain that Müller continued to perform until his death, using this platform to defend the remnants of East German cultural institutions like the Berliner Ensemble and the Academy of the Arts, but also using interviews with figures like Frank Raddatz

and Alexander Kluge to open-up wider historical and intellectual perspectives in post-unification Germany. For all the talk of “the failure of intellectuals” in the 1990s, Müller and others were quite prescient in pointing out that the loss of the socialist horizon would give Germany and Europe little basis for collective identity other than naked material interest, which could easily be channeled into ethnic nationalism and authoritarian populism. Far from representing Müller’s waning creative powers after unification, Pohlmann’s study insists, Müller’s turn to the interview marked a self-conscious art of self-staging through which Müller sought to smuggle leftist critique into the public discourse of the Federal Republic. Like *DDR-Literatur und die Avantgarden*, this book provides an important reminder of the continued relevance of avant-garde inspired practices of oppositional and international art and world-making.

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