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JOURNAL OF CROSS-CULTURAL IMAGE STUDIES |  
REVUE D'ÉTUDES INTERCULTURELLES DE L'IMAGE

Publication details, including open access policy  
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## New Research on East Germany

Editorial Team: Brent Ryan Bellamy, Daniel Laforest, Andriko Lozowy,  
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May 21, 2017

To cite this article:

Hetzer, Maria. "Negotiating Memories of Everyday Life during the Wende."

*Imaginations* 8:1 (2017): Web (date accessed) 8–33.

DOI: 10.17742/IMAGE.GDR.8-1.2

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.GDR.8-1.2>



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## NEGOTIATING MEMORIES OF EVERYDAY LIFE DURING THE WENDE

MARIA HETZER

*Abstract | The visual essay is based on research carried out between 2010 and 2015 under the title “Bodies of Crisis—Remembering the German Wende.” The project mainly consisted of oral-history research and a series of performance events presented in the UK and Germany. In 27 interviews, women from East Germany recollected their embodied quotidian experience amidst the political transition from a socialist to a capitalist state in 1989 and thereafter. Live performance opened up access points for a transcultural translation of this experience involving practitioners from diverse cultural and creative backgrounds. The performance work extended the culturally specific experience beyond the East German case by pointing toward global struggles for existence, acceptance, and emancipation.*

*Résumé | Cet essai visuel est le résultat du projet d'études «Bodies of Crisis – Remembering the German Wende» (Corps de la crise – Souvenir de la chute du Mur), réalisé à l'Université de Warwick de 2010 à 2015. Au moyen de 27 interviews, des femmes de l'Allemagne de l'Est se sont remémoré les expériences corporelles de leur vie quotidienne pendant l'époque troublée de 1989 et 1990. Ces interviews ont jeté la base d'un spectacle vivant impliquant des artistes variés, ouvrant un espace d'expression transculturel et artistique de ces expériences de temps de crise. La performance a montré l'universalité des expériences spécifiques de l'Allemagne de l'Est au regard des enjeux mondiaux que sont la survie, la reconnaissance et l'émancipation.*

The visual essay is based on collaborative research a group of performance-based researchers conducted between 2010 and 2015 under the title “Bodies of Crisis—Remembering the German Wende.” The project mainly consisted of oral-history research and a series of performance events presented in the UK and Germany. In 27 interviews, women from East Germany recollected their embodied quotidian experience amidst the political transition from a socialist to a capitalist state in 1989 and thereafter. Live performance opened up access points

for a transcultural translation of this experience involving practitioners from diverse cultural and creative backgrounds. The performance work extended the culturally specific experience beyond the East German case by pointing toward global struggles for existence, acceptance, and emancipation. The following sequence of images and clips invites readers to reflect on the embodied quotidian as a valuable approach to the study of the historical experience of 1989. Short commentaries consider how memories of somatic quotidian experience influence the experience of the body vis-à-vis wider social change.

Performance collaborators: Maiada Aboud, endurance art researcher (UK/Israel); Jessica Argyridou, video performance artist (Cyprus); David Bennett, dancer-researcher (UK); Michael Grass, heritage researcher and visual designer (UK/Germany); Linos Tzelos, musician (Greece). Further studio collaborators: Elia Zacharioudaki, actress (Greece); Osama Suleiman, media artist (Saudi Arabia/Jordan); Gordon Palagi, actor (USA).

Copyright lies with the project or photographers/agencies referenced in the image captions. Project photographers for *Bodies of Crisis*: Michael Grass (MG), Maria Rankin (MR), Ian O'Donoghue (IOD). My sincere thanks go to Seán Allan and Nicolas Whybrow, who supervised this research project, as well as Marc Silberman and two anonymous reviewers who made valuable comments on a draft of this essay. More information on the performance research can be found on the project's website <http://bodycrisis.org>.



[Click image for track one](#)



[Click image for track two](#)



[Click image for track three](#)

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Image 21: “Scene from performance work, *Tub*.” Copyright by Bodycrisis, Michael Grass, 2012.

### HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE EMBODIED QUOTIDIAN

*A reassessment of historical writing about 1989 reveals a general disregard for everyday and somatic practice. This is by no means a particular disposition of the discourse about the German Wende. Indeed, Henri Lefebvre reminds us that the body and more embodied practices tend to be forgotten in Western philosophical thinking and history (161). In cultural studies, critics have explored everyday practices as a resource for resisting modernity's tedious routines and repressive demands (de Certeau xiv; Highmore 3). Here, the everyday encapsulates a limited set of practices by excluding a wide range of the sensate, i.e., issues of the body such as nutritional habits and hygiene. (For nutritional habits and German-German cultural history, see Weinreb in this issue.) One of many aspects nurturing this disregard of the somatic quotidian in Wende history is the relatively limited amount of available visual documentation depicting daily life before the advent of the digital age. In our studio work, we explored the ephemerality of everyday practice and created potential historical documents of the everyday of 1989. The image on the right is based on eyewitness accounts relating the changing taste of apples ("appearing shiny and delicious, but not tasting like an apple at all") and other daily products.*



Tasting apples. ©Bodycrisis / MG (IMAGE 1) – Click Image to Continue



November 4, 1989, Berlin, Alexanderplatz © Andreas Kämper,  
Robert Havemann Gesellschaft (IMAGE 2) – Click Image to Continue

### HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE EMBODIED QUOTIDIAN

Twentieth-century German historiography has given the everyday prominence as a space of performing *Eigen-Sinn* in capturing individual agency vis-à-vis wider sociopolitical demands and state control (Lüdtke 13). In this context, the everyday functioned as a gatekeeper for the reassessment of GDR reality in light of the still dominant totalitarianism approach in historiography (Lindenberger 1). (On the need for a new approach to researching the everyday of the GDR, see Rubin and Ebbrecht-Hartmann in this issue.) In the context of writing and remembering 1989-90, however, the everyday has remained out of focus, as has the individual agent of change. Accordingly, historians have largely analyzed East Germans as a political mass (Grix 3). The image on the right shows one of the most significant demonstrations of East Germans for political reforms, taking place on Berlin Alexanderplatz on November 4, 1989. This image belongs to the canon of documents framing the reality of the *Wende*.

**HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE EMBODIED QUOTIDIAN**

*In some cases, historians have turned to examine the everyday of prominent agents for political change, for example, Bärbel Bohley as a leading representative of the GDR civil rights movement (Olivo ix). In short, we know little about how ordinary citizens organized and accomplished the everyday of 1989-90 when confronted with substantial socioeconomic and political change, nor do we know how it is remembered today. The period of the political Wende, 1989-90, disintegrates when employing an everyday approach. Many envision 1989 as the last year of the GDR and thus subsume its everyday under a more generally defined GDR normality that finally came to an end in November 1989. Correspondingly, East Germans woke up to the everyday of the now unified Berlin Republic in October 1990. Accounts following this narrative declared the temporary end of everyday life (Moran 216).*



Round Table talks, East Berlin, 1989 © dpa / BAKS  
(IMAGE 3) – Click Image to Continue





*Kommune 1, the most famous squat in Mainzer Straße, East Berlin  
1990 © Umbruch Bildarchiv (IMAGE 4) – Click Image to Continue*

### **HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE EMBODIED QUOTIDIAN**

*Frequently researchers approach the everyday of 1989-90 as a transitional, extraordinary, and somewhat anarchic period in which many East Germans made rules on the go and experimented in all areas of life (Links et al. 1; Holm and Kuhn 644). Hence, these accounts tend to document experimental practices and thriving subcultural communities, e.g., squatting and alternative living experiments, techno culture, and political projects. (On squatters and techno culture, see Smith, and on subcultural artists, see Eisman in this issue.) In summary, when we do find pictures of the everyday in 1989-90, they depict a temporary, exceptional period of sociocultural practices that render obsolete the realities hitherto known as ordinary.*

**HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE EMBODIED QUOTIDIAN**

*In the context of narratives that focus on 1989-90 as a period of state and sociocultural transition from an Eastern to a Western model, this exceptionality seems particularly obvious. Searching for traces of the everyday in this discourse, many examples establish GDR citizens as the historical Other. They feed German-German cultural stereotyping by concentrating on consumption, depicting extraordinary events such as shopping sprees to West Berlin and West Germany, targeting a demand for bananas, cheap electronics, second-hand cars, and other Western daily goods. This kind of focus still dominates the discussion about the nature of GDR citizens' needs and wishes for the future.*



Example of East German shop (Kaufhalle) answering to the desires of East Germans in 1990 © dpa / MZ.web (IMAGE 5) – Click Image to Continue



"Young East German woman eating." Copyright by  
Bodycrisis, private (IMAGE 6) – Click Image to Continue

### HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE EMBODIED QUOTIDIAN

*By contrast, the interviews I conducted for this research project emphasized the persistence of known quotidian practices. Interviewees maintained that mundane practices of the everyday remained the same, in line with Lefebvre's analysis that in times of change the everyday is last to change (131). This continuity of practices sanctioned feelings of reliability in a suddenly insecure political environment. It also enabled political participation on a daily basis, for example, by providing reliable childcare to workers so they could convene and rally for political action during the transitions of 1989-90. As a result, interviewees remembered integrating political participation into their daily routines and regimes, rather than substituting known everyday practices with new ones or changing their approach to daily life altogether. This everyday stability enabled societal change through active engagement with a political situation that was perceived as highly precarious, potentially changing the everyday forever.*

### HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE EMBODIED QUOTIDIAN

*On the level of the somatic, our group of performers undertook research in a studio setting that drew attention to the importance of conceptualizing a vital, energetic, accelerated political body. As such, the interviewees framed the everyday as characterized by all sorts of seemingly ordinary practices, a heightened level of energy that further supported restlessness, and a resistance to sleep, thus pushing the limits of the everyday. In our analysis of the interviews this corresponded with remembered practices of hesitation and excessive media consumption, consequently postponing obligations or fulfilling them halfheartedly.*

*Yet how do we translate this ambivalence of an everyday on the edge, an everyday we have come to understand as precarious but equally stabilized by repeated embodied practice? The live, performing body can generate insight into these parameters by allowing for a provisional and temporally limited identification of the self in others through somatic empathy, situatedness, and avowal of difference. As a result of our performance work, we devised hybrid cultural performance nodes that capture and intersect with the somatic experience from other cultural conflicts and scenarios. These nodes not only reflect back on the analysis of the specific historical experience of 1989-90, but also deflect attention from the extraordinary and unique aspects of the historical situation to focus on common, transcultural parameters for the explication of the relationship between somatic experience, the everyday, and social change.*

*The following video showcases our aesthetic engagement with the interviews on the precariousness of living through 1989 and grasping embodied quotidian experiences of 1989.*

[RETURN](#)

[TRACK 2](#)

[TRACK 3](#)



*The ambivalence of everyday practice in a state crisis. Scene from the performance, Apples © Bodycrisis / IOD (IMAGE 7) – Click Image to Start Video*

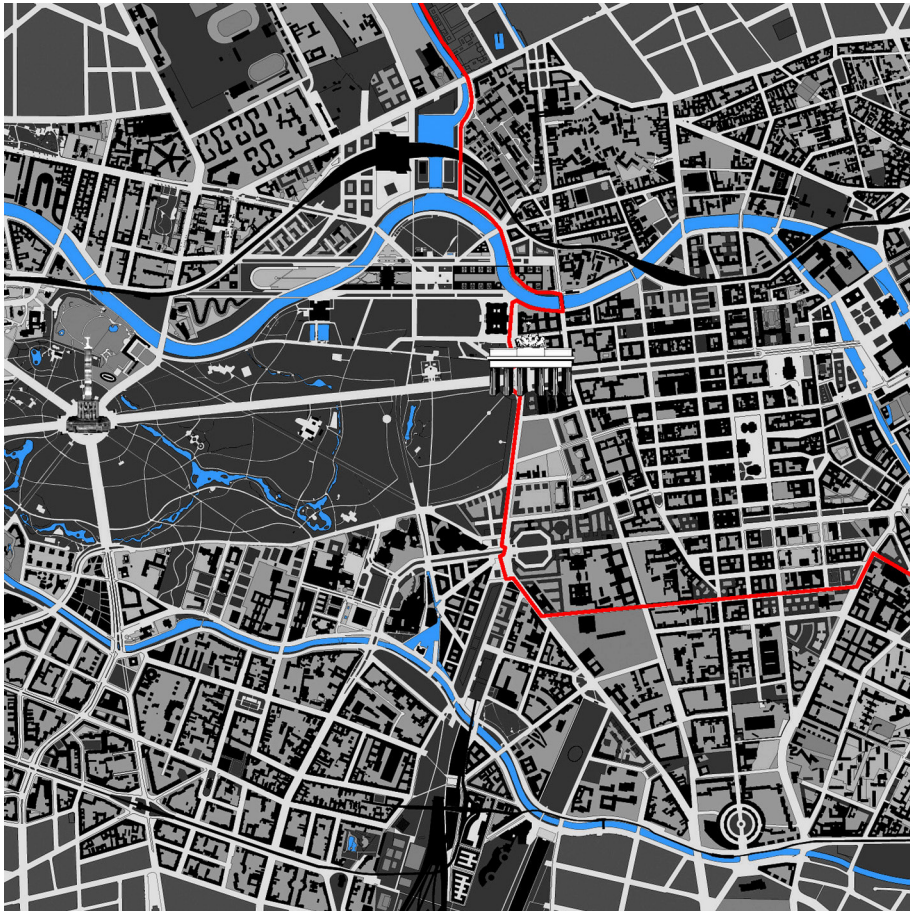


BEYOND THE EAST/WEST DIVIDE

Stereotyping was and still is one of the most pronounced features of German-German memory work of the *Wende* (see Weinreb on stereotypes of German-German obesity and Klocke on attitudes toward medical care). Discussions of what it means to be East or West German intensified with the advent of the German unification process. Since then, cultural and social stereotyping prolongs the systemic competition that was part and parcel of the Cold War. Stereotypes predominantly derived from and referred to everyday practice: the way Easterners walked and talked, carried and dressed themselves (see Eghigian 37). These tropes remain virulent today and have become the legacy of successive generations. For example, in 2010 the German Federal Court was called upon to decide on the ethnic identity of East Germans after a woman from the East accused a Western employer of ethnic discrimination when he handed back her job application with the negative comment “Minus: Ossi” (Ossi is a derogatory term for Easterner). However, the Court rejected this instance of prejudice. While the ruling can be read as a rejection of lived experience as such, the Federal Court was unable to identify it as an instance of cultural discrimination. On these grounds, goes the legal argument, East Germans would be constituted as an independent ethnic community. We might speculate about the intellectual and material consequences for a reevaluation of the *Wende* process in light of a postcolonial theoretical paradigm.

LEBENS LAUF	
Persönliche Daten	
Name geboren	in Berlin
Staatsangehörigkeit	deutsch
Familienstand	geschieden
Kind	
BERUF S ERFAHRUNG	
Seit 2004	Bei : GmbH
1997 – 2004	Buchhalterin bei der Firma GmbH + Co. KG <i>Schluszeugnis feiert</i>
1991 – 1997	Buchhalterin GmbH & Co.
1989 – 1990	Leitung der in als stellv. Geschäftsführerin
1988	Ausreise aus der ehemaligen DDR
1987 – 1988	Gärtnerei als Buchhalterin und Verkauf DDR <i>↳ Ausbildung / Weiterbildung ?!</i>
1984 – 1987	Wohnungswirtschaftler bei der kommunalen Wohnungsverwaltung in Berlin DDR
LEHRAUSBILDUNG	
1978 – 1980	Ausbildung zum Technischen Zeichner Zentralamt für Fernleitungen

An East German woman’s application to a Western employer marked down “Minus Ossi” © dpa / n24.de (IMAGE 8) – Click Image to Continue



Plan for the "New Berlin," 1997. Map of Berlin with demarcation of Wall ©  
Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung Berlin (IMAGE 9) – Click Image to Continue

## BEYOND THE EAST/WEST DIVIDE

*Interestingly, the women interviewed for the project did not focus on the way in which the all-encompassing rejection of work experience mirrored an overall rejection of the lived experience of GDR citizens that was evident in the Wende process. This rejection ranged from blue collar to academic work in the context of liquidating and converting institutions (Abwicklung), not to mention political bureaucracy. While a minority of women employees were made redundant as early as 1990, the symbolic rejection of quotidian practices that came with ridiculing and mocking their outward appearance and habits seemed to weigh much more at this particular point in their lives. It was within this context that the interviews conducted for the Bodies of Crisis project picked up on stereotyping in relation to how it informed everyday practice. Meta's account was the most pronounced in identifying a strategy of creative everyday resistance. She remembered engaging in camouflage tactics: "I hated the stereotyping, I really did... I moved to Berlin during that time... I got myself a map of Berlin and pretended to be a tourist, dressing like a stranger."*

**BEYOND THE EAST/WEST DIVIDE**

*Against this backdrop, East Berlin occupies a specific place in cultural memory and the practice of cultural stereotyping—where counterculture thrived in the 1980s GDR and where subcultures blossomed in the early 1990s, often nurtured by activists from West Berlin seeking to extend their urban playground in the East. (On West German activists in East Berlin, see Smith in this issue.)*

*East Berlin evolved as a comfort zone of social experimentation, while the new federal states in the East faced the consequences of rapid reorganization in all areas of life: mass unemployment and widespread industrialization, the breakdown of social and cultural services and institutions, rapid demographic declines caused by East-West and urban migration, shrinking cities and deserted rural areas—the post-socialist landscapes of change.*



*Projecting histories onto bodies © Bodycrisis / IOD  
(IMAGE 10) – Click Image to Continue*





Translating the comfort zone of stereotyping  
© Bodycrisis / MR (IMAGE 11) – Click Image to Continue

## BEYOND THE EAST/WEST DIVIDE

*Following Meta's account of her resistance to stereotyping, we traced the transformation of the Easterner into a tourist or stranger in our performance work. Among many attempts at identifying transcultural nodes of resemblance, an Arab-Israeli member of our group injected her own cultural associations of self-estrangement. In her analogy, Arab women in Israel are the Other of history, confronted with strong social and cultural stereotyping and consequently social discrimination in many aspects of daily life. This stereotyping is nurtured from a multitude of perspectives which preclude women's accounts of resistance from fitting neatly into normative ethnic narratives of subjugated victims (Aboud 1). As the stereotypes go: in Arab eyes, women are either submissive or deviant daughters within a patriarchal system; in Israeli eyes, they are looked upon as politically and culturally conservative and unmodern, if not a potential threat to society and state control. Women seem constrained to perform within this frame of social stereotyping.*

**BEYOND THE EAST/WEST DIVIDE**

*However, Arab-Israeli women can also assume such ascribed social roles and practices to their advantage in order to secure individual agency and room to maneuver in the everyday. Cultural camouflage also plays an important role here. For example, mimicking an Arab girl who does not understand Hebrew may provide protection in challenging public situations. In situations such as these, women utilize the stereotype to reclaim individual agency. Metaphorically speaking, they stretch the veil and turn it back into a piece of fabric they can mold into multiple shapes. The ambivalence of this twofold approach to cultural stereotyping can be usefully applied to the everyday of 1989-90.*



*Tentatively exploring cultural practices for room to maneuver  
© Bodycrisis / MR (IMAGE 12) – Click Image to Continue*



Scene from the performance, *The map*  
 © Bodycrisis / IOD (IMAGE 13) – Click Image to Start Video

### BEYOND THE EAST/WEST DIVIDE

*As such, the continuity of everyday practices provided a comfort zone, helping to preserve a sense of self in the light of intense devaluation of the former life and everyday practices in dominant public discourses. Moreover, we might imagine this comfort zone as an oxygen tent that can conserve everyday practice and that counteracts the suffocating quality of capitalist consumerism and overall change. Prolonged everyday practices thus served as a source of social identification and belonging, but also as cultural capital to secure scarce financial resources. To give but one example, it limited potential excessive buying and experimentation, throwing out all household items in exchange for new Western goods (Bude et al. 31). Everyday practices also formed a cocoon against the bitter reality of social discrimination based on cultural stereotyping, for example, by fostering a disregard for public discourse on GDR politics of the body (e.g., disregard for makeup, mainstream naturism, and sex practices) or deliberately ignoring advertisements that promote specific ideals of beauty.*

*Lastly, Meta's account reveals how reticence to assimilate culturally on the level of the everyday and particular practices could be used as a means for self-identification beyond the felt provincialism of German-German stereotyping. Here, everyday practices served as a buffer zone, confronting and undermining expectations and stereotypes of what East Germans are and how they prefer to identify themselves.*

**TRACK 1**

**RETURN**

**TRACK 3**

EXPLORING SOCIALIST POLITICS OF THE BODY

*Jahrhundertschritt*

*Gleichschritt und eigener Weg, Hitlergruß und Proletarierfaust,  
Militarismus und Widerstand, Diktatur und Freiheit  
– ein Rückblick auf das 20. Jahrhundert. (Mattheuer 1)*

*[Step of a century*

*Marching and individual pace, Hitler sign and proletarian fist,  
Militarism and opposition, dictatorship and freedom –  
Looking back on the twentieth century.]*

*What is left of the liberated woman in German discourses of 1989 relating to embodied quotidian experience? Discussions of socialist politics of the body regarding the everyday remain infrequent and often limited to exploring nudist practices as an exotic but widespread phenomenon in the GDR. Nudist practices often signal a point of reference for cultural differences between East and West and symbolize generally a different image of women in GDR society—the liberated woman.*



*Jahrhundertschritt by Wolfgang Mattheuer © Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (IMAGE 14) – Click Image to Continue*



### EXPLORING SOCIALIST POLITICS OF THE BODY

*Naturism may have emerged as a powerful trope of cultural distinction because it was such a pronounced and visible feature of GDR beach culture. As West Germans began to frequent East German beaches and declared nude bathing inappropriate, many East Germans felt annoyed and deprived of a habitual, quotidian practice. Gradually the Eastern nude beaches turned into “textile zones” (i.e., swim suits required) for Western tourists where naturism was prohibited by local authorities. Naturism is also strongly connected to the image of the liberated woman, a trope that was cultivated as a reality in the GDR by authorities and citizens alike and that found its symbolic expression in visualizations of the confident female nude: natural, that is, nonchalantly unshaven and naked. Thus, we can regard the image of the nude bather as a seemingly strong document of performing mainstream East German politics of the body.*

East German bathing © Eulenspiegel Verlag  
(IMAGE 15) – Click Image to Continue

**EXPLORING SOCIALIST POLITICS OF THE BODY**

*However, while some maintain that naturism is a movement grounded in turn-of-the-century German culture, others show its evolution among independent movements across the globe (BritNat 1). Be that as it may, by the 1940s it had become a cross-cultural phenomenon. In images of an early conference of British naturists, we can discern female presenters and participants.*



*Participants of the 1941 conference of British Naturists' Associations  
© IMAGO / Welt.de (IMAGE 16) – Click Image to Continue*



GDR stamp illustrating allegiance to a global fight against racism incorporating a drawing by John Heartfield © 123RF (IMAGE 17) – Click Image to Continue

### EXPLORING SOCIALIST POLITICS OF THE BODY

*The history of naturism in the GDR is complex, and by no means were the petty-bourgeois fathers of the new socialist German state initially inclined to accept it as a mainstream cultural practice (McLellan 143). Only gradually did it become a mass movement that gained political momentum and emerged as a defining symbolic feature of a society that strove for the liberation of people from all sorts of oppression around the globe.*

**EXPLORING SOCIALIST POLITICS OF THE BODY**

*By the end of the socialist state, however, mainstream nudism first and foremost stood for the emancipated GDR woman, freed from the patriarchal politics of the gaze.*

*The fist as a symbol for global feminist struggle*  
© history.org.uk (IMAGE 18) – Click Image to Continue







The Olympic team of the FRG, June 1972 © ullstein bild /  
Tagesspiegel.de (IMAGE 19) – Click Image to Continue

### EXPLORING SOCIALIST POLITICS OF THE BODY

Correspondingly, West German public discourse since the 1970s has seen a strong correlation between feminism and culturally specific politics of the body related to shaving, rather than a permissive attitude toward displays of nudity. This correlation led to a cultural stereotype that still identifies women as lesbians and feminists on grounds that they employ a more “natural” approach to daily body practices, i.e., no body shaving. The cliché says: feminists are hairy and stink (Eisman 628). Needless to say, we have strong evidence to the contrary, for example, images of a female team from West Germany in the 1972 Olympic Games display unshaven armpits. The life circumstances of Ingrid Meckler-Becker, one of the women portrayed in the photo, suggest a non-correlation between unshaven armpits and feminism: she was a conservative party member, married with children, and a schoolteacher. This cultural stereotype based on daily hygiene has gained new momentum to include East Germans in the post-Wall Berlin Republic. It exemplifies the union of fashion-based everyday practices and time-specific politics of the body at work.

**EXPLORING SOCIALIST POLITICS OF THE BODY**

*As part of the Bodies of Crisis project, we realized performance research on the relationship between cultural stereotypes rooted in public discourse that links everyday practice to political struggle. The creation of living statues targeted the visualization of the fashion-based, temporal, and cross-cultural elements of symbolism and aimed to account for their situatedness in localized political narratives and cultural discourses. The image shown here depicts the design of a performance response to the research question: how can we ascribe politics of the body their space in situated—that is, local and culturally specific—historiography without unnecessarily exoticizing it?*

*Scene from performance work, Fist © Bodycrisis /  
MG (IMAGE 20) – Click Image to Continue*





Scene from performance work, Tub © Bodycrisis / MG (IMAGE 21)

### EXPLORING SOCIALIST POLITICS OF THE BODY

*This important question also provided the background for most audience reactions to the project. We performed Bodies of Crisis for festival and academic audiences in London and Coventry (UK) as well as Bremen (Germany) with 30 to 80 people attending at any one time. In different organized feedback formats as well as informal conversations, spectators reacted to aspects of the performance they deemed well-suited (or not) to creating a transcultural understanding of historical experience. German audience members tended to refer to the relationship between memory work and nostalgia, a good reminder of enduring discursive parameters. Some were pleased by the emphasis on quotidian experience, even though it might not lend itself easily to political ideologization. Others were concerned that the performance offered no commentary framing the particular historical experience of GDR women in a socialist dictatorship, since this provided the main material. These viewers wanted to draw out the dangers of nurturing a possibly nostalgic view on the past, in contrast to UK spectators who could identify with images, quotidian behavior, and the depicted conflicts. The latter felt encouraged to become engaged in a transcultural conversation of crisis experience. Yet, since the performance work had been the collective creation of performers from multiple cultural backgrounds, it ceased “belonging” to a single cultural meta-narrative. As such, talking about nostalgia, for example, a main driver for memory discourses of German and anglophone publics, proved meaningless to Arab spectators, who were instead eager to discuss the necessity to re-perform the specific politics of the body on stage, displaying unshaven female nudes.*

**TRACK 1**

**TRACK 2**

**RETURN**