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ENGLISH VERSION

NEXT GEN
EAST x

Open Space
Chemnitz

15.11. –
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SCHICHT
WECHSEL

About Next Gen East

We are all part of a grand narrative. A narrative of new beginnings and uncertainty, of staying and leaving, and everything in between. At the same time, we are part of many smaller narratives that often remain hidden. The East German Generation Z (1997–2012) grew up in a region marked by decades of socio-political upheaval. And depending on where you look, you will find light or shadow in these ruptures. And every rupture has a personal story.

We, the initiative k_einheit, have set out to understand how the upheavals after 1989 continue to have an impact today. Together with the artist Luise von Cossart, we approach these stories and share our perspectives and experiences of how generation after generation has been shaped by the past—but above all, we introduce the story(ies) we want to tell in the future.

During the last two years, we have gotten into conversation with people of different generations, brought together voices from Germany, Poland, and Czechia, and experienced how memories overlap, fragments connect and new perspectives emerge layer by layer. Above all, we have found common ground.

This exhibition is an invitation to encounter history(ies) and share your own stories. Be part of the narrative that shapes our future!

The East in transition

We often focus on the differences between East and West Germany. In doing so, we overlook how societies in countries such as Poland and Czechia have also changed since the end of socialism.

A look across borders shows that socialism was not the same everywhere. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the socialist system, a phase of profound transformation began for East Germany, Poland, and Czechia. Within a few years, political structures, economic systems, and social values underwent fundamental changes.

In East Germany, reunification in 1990 meant the end of the GDR and the transition to a market economy and democratic system – accompanied by major economic structural change, job losses and new freedoms. Poland and Czechia underwent their own changes: after 1989, both countries reformed themselves into parliamentary democracies and market economies.

Despite common starting points, the experiences were different. While in Poland the change had already been prepared in the 1980s by the Solidarność movement, the transition in the GDR was abrupt. In Czechia, the “Velvet Revolution” of 1989 peacefully brought an end to communist rule.

These changes affected not only institutions, but also everyday life: property ownership, education systems, media landscapes, and social security were reorganized. The path to democracy brought new opportunities—but also uncertainties, questions of identity, and a sense of loss.

To this day, the consequences of this transformation continue to shape societies in East Germany, Poland, and Czechia. They are reflected in family stories, regional identities, and political attitudes.

Three countries, many voices – Germany, Poland, and Czechia in dialogue

While in eastern Germany, even among young people, a sense of nostalgia for the socialist past can be observed, and phrases such as “Everything was better back then” are often heard in reference to the GDR, the narratives in Poland and Czechia are quite different. The states fulfilled their welfare promises in very different ways: In the People's Republic of Poland in the 1980s, people spent around two and a half hours a day procuring basic groceries. In the GDR, at least this was largely guaranteed.

Expectations of the new system also differed. In Poland, the prevailing belief – shared even by large parts of the party – was that neoliberal capitalism would improve the lives of citizens. This conviction was also shared by many in the Federal Republic of Germany when the GDR was incorporated into this system. In Poland however, an influx of foreign capital was counteracted by measures such as allowing residents to purchase their apartments for a fraction of the market value, whereas home ownership in today's eastern Germany remains very low by European standards.

In Czechia, many people were able to buy small businesses, often previously their own, at citizen-only auctions and work independently in the gastronomy, retail, or craft sectors. In Poland, too, many took advantage of the liberalization of the economy in the 1990s to become self-employed.

In East Germany, this trend primarily affected former contract workers.

Today's dialogues between Poland, Czechia, and Germany oscillate between the potential for peaceful cooperation in a united Europe and the horrors of the 20th century. It is not only Nazi crimes that remain fresh in Polish and Czech memory. The traumatic suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968 by the Soviet Union was also supported by the participation of soldiers from the GDR and Poland. Since 2004, when Poland and the Czech Republic joined the European Union, new constellations have emerged that raise questions about equality and the role of Central and Eastern European states in the bloc.

All these events, differences, similarities, and different narratives of the older generations influence how Generation Z in the three countries thinks and feels, how it views the socialist era, its own situation, and the future.

The path to the exhibition

More than three decades after the end of socialism, the upheavals of 1989 are still palpable. They have shaped biographies, family histories, and entire societies. But many perspectives on these upheavals are missing, and, as a result, the picture that emerges is often one-sided.

With the project “Generational Stories: Overcoming Borders, Shaping Identity(ies)”, we want to fill these voids. We want to understand how the profound transformations after 1989 continue to have an impact in East Germany, Poland, and Czechia today—and what they mean for young people who did not experience this time themselves.

Our generation, Generation Z, grew up in a world shaped by these changes: by new opportunities, but also by ruptures, uncertainties, and questions of belonging. We are interested in how memory is passed on and altered across generations.

The aim of “Generational Stories” is to enable a joint reflection on memory, identity, and the future. Between September and December 2024, we brought different generations in Chemnitz, Zwickau, and Thalheim into dialogue as part of the project’s first phase “InterGenEast”. These dialogues addressed questions of staying or leaving, activism, and the experiences of former contract workers and people with migration backgrounds. During the second phase, “InterEuropeEast” from November 2024 to May 2025, we broadened our scope and, in workshops with young people from Poland, Czechia, and Germany, talked about memories, identity, and the aftermath of transformation.

The exhibition “Next Gen East x Schichtwechsel”, developed with artist Luise von Cossart, brings all these reflections together. It presents a search for origins, stories, and memories. We believe that those who understand the past can shape the future. And those who listen to others realize that Europe does not end at national borders, but emerges in the stories we share with one another.

k_einheit

The initiative k_einheit was founded in 2022 by Vanessa Beyer and Lisa Trebs. What began as a film project with micro funding from the European Capital of Culture Chemnitz 2025 is now a growing network of young people from East and West Germany who are concerned with memory, identity, and the future.

k_einheit gives young people a voice and brings their perspectives into the discourse. In doing so, it highlights the diversity of East German realities. The aim is a shared dialogue—across generations and supposed internal German borders.

Through film discussions, workshops, exhibitions, and discussion formats, conversations about the past and present are initiated—and questions about how to shape the future together are asked.

In 2025 k_einheit was awarded the Young Talent Karl-Wilhelm-Fricke Prize by the Federal Foundation for the Reappraisal of the SED Dictatorship for its commitment to remembrance culture and democratic participation.

About Schichtwechsel (shift change)

Schichtwechsel speaks of discoveries and questions; of history and constancy. It is a search – for places, for memories, for origins. The starting point for the project is the site of the former Reichsbahn (railway) repair workshop (RAW) in Halle (Saale), a complex of workshops and outbuildings that has been slowly falling into disrepair since it was abandoned in the 1990s. Over the past 25 years, the site formerly named after Ernst Thälmann has been reclaimed by nature: plants grow through cracked walls, roofs collapse, materials decompose. It is on the verge of total decay and will soon be demolished.

During the pandemic, the artist stumbled upon this area by chance. In a time of uncertainty, the empty halls became a place of retreat, safe exploration, and a temporary studio. Among the traces of work, the remnants of paint, dust, and documents, she discovered not only artistic terrain, but also a personal connection: both her father and her grandfather once worked in a RAW. Thus, Schichtwechsel becomes an investigation of family and collective history, a search for identity and East German origins. The starting point is always the material—what has been found, what has been left behind, the fragmentary.

The artist moves through the rooms like an archivist or archaeologist: laboriously collecting, sifting, organizing. The objects, the imprints of the past, become witnesses to connected lives, an echo of a working world that is in danger of disappearing from collective memory.

Chance also plays a central role. It becomes the principle of searching and designing, the impulse that brings material and perception into relation with each other.

Not all of the artistic works in the Schichtwechsel project derive directly from the RAW site. Materials and associations leave the concrete space and enter the metaphorical.

After the archive and other parts of the site burned down, followed by additional restrictions on access to the site, the project changes. Urgency and loss increasingly characterize the ongoing work—the physical experience of decay and the awareness of finitude determine a new tempo. The works that emerge move between the desperate attempt to hold on, the transformation of material into something new, and the view of the present. The material becomes a metaphor for memory, the work itself a gesture against forgetting.

Schichtwechsel raises questions about origin, perception, strangeness, and familiarity: Where are we positioned? Where do we locate ourselves?

How do we remember, and what do we leave to oblivion?

What remains, what becomes shadow, memory, and spoken word?

What remains woven into our memories?

Luise von Cossart

Luise Tabea von Cossart, born in Berlin in 1997, lives and works in Halle (Saale). From 2015 to 2019, she completed an apprenticeship as a goldsmith and a bachelor's degree in product design. Since 2020, she has been studying at the BURG Giebichenstein University of Art and Design

Halle in the Image/Space/Object/Glass program under Prof. Sophia Hultén and Prof. Natalie Häusler. In addition, she spent a guest year in the painting class under Prof. Tilo Baumgärtel. A stay abroad took her to the Pilchuck Glass School in the US, made possible by a scholarship from the Alexander Tutsek Foundation. In addition to her artistic practice, she works as a curatorial assistant at the BURG Gallery. Her works have been shown in group exhibitions in Berlin, Halle (Saale), Chemnitz, Munich, Brussels, Istanbul, and Stanwood (US), among other places. In terms of content, von Cossart deals with themes of the post-reunification generation as well as questions of memory and forgetting.

Work description

Luise von Cossart: Im Labyrynt (in the labyrinth) (video performance, loop; 2023)

In the vastness of the former RAW site, a single protagonist moves through a labyrinth made of scattered plaster. The paths, loops, and dead ends stretch across the entire floor of the hall—a sprawling cartography of searching. With persistent steps, she follows the lines, turns around, and reorients herself. The crunching of glass, the rustling of yellowed documents, and the sound of accelerating trains form the acoustic backdrop to this tentative exploration. As the first work in the Schichtwechsel project, this piece marks the beginning of an artistic exploration of space, orientation, and change. It arose from the experience of transition—a new city, a new place, a time of social upheaval. This is where the search begins.

Luise von Cossart: Was tun mit verblühten Blumen? (What to do with wilted flowers?) (paper, 46 x 68 cm; 2023)

The six-part series of works, consisting of GDR pattern sheets, shows an increasingly faded floral pattern. The pattern becomes an echo, a memory of a memory. This gradual dissolution refers to the process of social and individual aging—to the disappearance of familiarity and the simultaneous emergence of strangeness. A change in society that is noticeable not only on a political, but also on a personal level. The series examines the tension between material surface and collective memory. The work reflects the challenges of remembering and understanding one's own history.

Luise von Cossart: Zeitkapseln oder Spuren verlorener Räume II (Time Capsules or Traces of Lost Spaces II) (glass, charcoal; 2023)

The work *Zeitkapseln* consists of three blown glass containers with several chambers, each enclosing a few pieces of coal – remnants of burned buildings on the RAW site in Halle (Saale). The capsules function as a storage object, a memento, and a snapshot between material destruction and symbolic continuity. Von Cossart preserves the last traces of her search on site. In defiance of transience.

Luise von Cossart: Spuren verlorener Räume (Traces of Lost Spaces) (paint and charcoal on canvas; 2024, 110x170cm)

In reduced colors ranging from deep black to white, a fragmentary view of the spaces of the former RAW site in Halle unfolds.

A window with lace curtains, old neon tubes, architectural fragments—traces of a disappearing aesthetic and, at the same time, carriers of memory. A state of distortion in which space is bent and altered by the weight of time. Central to this is the materiality of the work: the artist works with burnt coal that she collected after a fire on the site. The work deals with questions of the persistence and constancy of the material and the possibility of preserving memory through artistic practice.

Luise von Cossart: Renovierung von verlorenen Orten (Renovation of Lost Places) (video performance with Annina Sarantis, projection; length 27:24 (loop); 2022)

In a hall of the former forge stands a colorfully spray-painted machine—a relic of past work and memory. In the video work, this object is transformed into an abstract white state of being by two people. As the process progresses, the machine increasingly transforms into a point of contrast to its fragile surroundings; the act of painting over remains ambivalent: it is both a gesture of preservation and of overwriting; it bridges the temporal gap between past and present and allows the history of the place to reappear as a physical trace.

Luise von Cossart: Phaeton, der Strahlende (Phaeton, the Radiant) (hanging sculpture (4 parts); glass, metal; 2025)

Throughout the room, four glass sculptures hang from the ceiling. Each form consists of a hollow glass sphere over which one or more metal rings were pulled during the creation process.

These metal parts are found objects from the RAW site in Halle—remnants of technical equipment whose original functions are unclear to the artist. It is precisely this uncertainty that forms the starting point of the work: it opens up a space for hypothesis, for imaginative conclusions about a past that one was never part of, but to which one is nevertheless exposed – in the quiet, abandoned rooms, in the untold stories of the place.

Luise von Cossart: Inventurdifferenz (Inventory Discrepancy) (selection of quotes; lead typesetting on GDR paper and RAW documents; 2023 edition)

The work brings together a selection of quotations taken from the remaining documents in the archives of the former RAW in Halle (Saale). Presented in removable hanging files, they become material witnesses to past orders. **Inventurdifferenz** is an attempt to make this loss visible – as the actual state which contrasts with the absent target of the past. The quotations were selected according to their emotional intensity and their “felt truth” – according to those sentences that raise questions, cause irritation, or carry a conviction that truth is contained within them. This selection condenses the subjective dimension of the research: a search for truthfulness in the fragmentary, a groping through memory and narrative. **Inventurdifferenz** thus reflects not only a historical state, but also the act of collecting, interpreting, and doubting itself. It marks the space between fact and feeling, document and fiction—and thus becomes a central commentary within the *Schichtwechsel* project, which addresses the question of reconstructing the past.

Luise von Cossart: Das Nest der Arachne
(The Nest of Arachne) (sculpture; glass,
lace curtains (from the RAW site), string;
2025)

Das Nest der Arachne is created on site in dialogue between the artist and the visitors. The starting point for the work is the workshop space and lace curtains from the former RAW site, which are woven into fragile nest structures. During the exhibition, these nests are filled with small glass capsules—containers prepared by the artist and filled by the participants with personal memories, thoughts, questions, or associations. The result is a growing structure of individual and communal elements, a densifying topography of shared experience. The work spans the entire Schichtwechsel project: it takes up the habitus of recording and retrospection, but at the same time turns its gaze to the present. The collective act of filling and connecting gives rise to a new approach to remembrance—not an archival one, but a living, breathing memory.

k_einheit: Graphic Recordings (Stephanie Brittnacher, 2024; Mimi Hoang, 2024)

During the intergenerational dialogues of the “Generational Stories” project in 2024, Stephanie Brittnacher and Mimi Hoang translated conversations, moods, and thoughts into a visual language. Their graphic recordings capture what was shared in the moment. They highlight topics that are relevant across generations and were discussed: the realities of life for people with a history of migration and former contract workers, activism, and perspectives on life in Chemnitz and the surrounding area. This creates visual traces of memory:

volatile words become collective images in which dialogue and community continue to have an impact.

k_einheit: Collages (2024 - 2025)

The collages are an expression of individual reflection. Created in workshops with young people (born 1997 - 2012) in Germany, Czechia, and Poland, they combine impressions from conversations, personal stories, and ideas about the future. The participants dealt creatively with questions of identity(ies) and visions of the future and reflected glimpses of conversations. Each collage is a response, an echo of experiences. In their diversity, the collages show how memories and visions of the future intertwine. They make it clear that identity is not static, but malleable, multi-layered, and inclusive.

k_einheit: Zwischentöne (nuances) (audio recordings, 2024)

The audio recordings amplify the voices of the project’s participants. Approached after the events, they talked about impressions, experiences, or thoughts that did not always find their way into the conversation. Some answered specific questions, others spoke freely about their personal impressions and experiences.

These voices are more than documentation—they are mementos. They show how differently people interpret history and the present, and capture moments that would otherwise be lost in passing.

Glossary

“The East”

A multi-layered term that encompasses different experiences: from East Germany to neighboring countries such as Poland and Czechia. “The East” is not uniform but shaped by different histories and identities.

Culture of remembrance

How societies deal with their past: What is remembered, what is forgotten, and how do these narratives shape our present? The culture of remembrance is never concluded but changes with each generation.

Generation Z

Refers to those born between approximately 1997 and 2012. They did not witness the fall of the Berlin Wall but are growing up in a world shaped by the transformations after 1989.

Identity(ies)

Identity can be understood as the answer to the question of who you are. It is always a matter of negotiating between the subjective “inside” and the social “outside,” i.e., an individual’s social positioning. The need to construct an identity points to the basic human need for recognition and belonging. Everyone has multiple affiliations: regional, national, cultural, familial. By placing “identity(ies)” in brackets, we emphasize this diversity—and that identity is not fixed, but changeable and multi-layered.

Intergenerational dialogue

Conversation between people of different age groups. This is where the personal experiences of older generations meet the questions and perspectives of younger people – an exchange that creates shared

understanding and shapes visions of the future.

Collective memory

The shared memories of a group, society, or generation. It is created through stories, conversations, media, or even places where history becomes visible. Collective memory changes over time – depending on which voices are heard and which experiences are passed on.

Narratives

Narratives are stories through which people interpret and pass on experiences. They shape how we understand the past, present, and future – both individually and collectively. Different narratives can coexist or contradict each other.

Eastern Europe / East Central Europe

East Central Europe refers to specific countries in Europe such as Poland, Czechia, and Hungary, which have their own experiences with socialism and transformation. The term emphasizes the historical, cultural, and political characteristics of the regions east of the Elbe and Saale rivers. East Europe is a broader geographical term for the region stretching to the Urals, and it is a collective political term for the eastern states of Europe such as Ukraine and Moldova.

Socialism / Post-socialism

Socialism refers to the political and economic system that existed until 1989 in the GDR, Poland, Czechia, and other Eastern Bloc countries. Post-socialism refers to the period that followed—the upheavals, opportunities, and ruptures that continue to leave their mark today.

Transformation

Term for the comprehensive social, political, and economic change after the collapse of socialism in East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. This process continues to have an impact on everyday life, identity, and memory to this day.

Acknowledgments

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And above all, we thank you, the visitors: it is through your questions, interaction, and interest that the exhibition lives on—layer by layer.

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