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DIY MULTILAYERED TEXTURES: INTERLOCKING IDEOLOGIES OF TEXTILE-BASED CRAFTING

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ABSTRACT

The term “craft” can encompass a wide range of meanings, including dissent, commodification, entrepreneurship, necessity and creativity, expression, depending on the historical context. My objective in the thesis is to look at women’s DIY practices in the GDR/East Germany and USSR/Belarus in post-war and post-socialist contexts.

Craft is a central subject in the research, its own agency and material and non-material object as a representative of one’s experiences and historical legacy. For this thesis, “craft” serves as an umbrella term that includes activities such as knitting, sewing, embroidery, upcycling, reuse, alterations, repair, and other handwork. So, to say, craft in East Germany and Belarus refers to practices made by hand. Yet focusing mainly on knitting practice and partly on sewing.

From a historical perspective, the context of East German and Belarusian women’s craft is unique. By situating the project on the intersection of socialist consumer culture, and fashion, the first part of the project is looking at how craft was historically integrated into socio-political dynamics that have constructed everyday practices, production and official and informal consumption, institutional context, and gendered norms. Methodologically, along with literature reconstruction, it incorporates the analysis of social media posts on yarn applying netnography, and comparative analysis of institutionalized arts and crafts lessons. The project discusses how within the socialist emancipation context these practices were empowering yet clearly gendered. Is socialist craft a form of activism, a mode of silent resistance even, or a practice that is emerging out of scarcity? Or, to put it differently, is it craft emerging out of necessity that expressed resistance to the socialist system?

Moreover, the work aims to unfold the cultural and generational shifts in crafting through interviews with local craft practitioners from East Germany and Belarus and patternmaking workshop. Understanding the practice-based applications emerging and developing after the fall of the socialist state might shed light on the trajectories of socialist craft. Looking at the notion of craft from an intergenerational perspective enriches the constellations of craft, formed out of necessity to something that is considered a ‘valuable’ as well as sustainable practice in contemporary culture. Worth questioning is how it deviates from East German and Belarusian contexts and whether these practices have entered modes of capitalistic production and consumption since they were first developed, and if so, how they have been coopted, transformed and changed since their inception in the Eastern Bloc.

Keywords: socialism craft, handicraft, women’s DIY, socialist consumer culture, craft empowerment, intergenerational craft.