

# THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SOCIALIST REALISM: PHOTOGRAPHER GUNDULA SCHULZE- ELDOWY AND THE EAST GERMAN STASI

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Twenty years after its demise the enduring image of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the collective mind of the West remains the swathe that the Berlin Wall cut across Germany's capital city and the tightly circumscribed and relentlessly monitored society that languished behind it.

So efficiently did East Germany's monolithic security apparatus the Ministry for State Security<sup>1</sup> and the country's hermetic political and social culture obscure the realities of life behind the "Wall" that it comes as a surprise to discover the richly bohemian culture that was able to develop in the forty years of the GDR's existence out of sight of, but in many ways responsive to, western popular culture. Most surprising perhaps is that, as hermetic as it was, the inner German border, while an efficient barrier to personal interaction, was entirely porous to the currency and exchange of ideas with almost the entire country able to enjoy unrestricted access to West German television broadcasts.<sup>2</sup>

This porosity was particularly potent in the realm of photography, and was primarily the result of the affinities a group of photographers centred at Leipzig's influential High School for Graphic and Book Arts,<sup>3</sup> had

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<sup>1</sup> The Ministerium für Staatssicherheit (or MfS).

<sup>2</sup> The only part of the former East Germany that experienced any difficulty at all in receiving Western television broadcasts was Dresden and Eastern Saxony as far as the Polish border. This area was known accordingly in East German slang as *Tal der Ahnungslosen* (valley of the clueless). For further information on the influence of West German television in the GDR see: Hans Jörg Stiehler and Michael Meyen, "Ich glotz TV" *Die Audiovisuellen Medien der Bundesrepublik als kulturelle Informationsquelle für die DDR* in *Klopfschreie Kunst und Kultur der 80er Jahre in Deutschland*, ed. Bernd Lindner and Rainer Eckert (Leipzig, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> The High School for Graphic and Book Arts (Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst or HGB, Leipzig) was East Germany's sole art school offering the

developed with the “documentary” photographic aesthetic pioneered by western practitioners such as Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank.<sup>4</sup>

In a tightly controlled society, which rejected photographers’ status as autonomous artists, photography surprisingly offered a uniquely plural, democratic and even critical visual language which was in substantial dialogue with, and responsive to developments in the West. This dialogue between East German photographers and their colleagues in the West and the unique photographic landscape that developed out of it owes an enormous debt of gratitude to the French Cultural Institute in East Berlin for providing an unexpected forum for the exchange of ideas and methodologies. The institute’s director, Dominique Paillarse, recognised the richness of the GDR’s photographic culture and arranged frequent visits to East Berlin by luminaries of the documentary tradition such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and Helmut Newton, many of whom maintained professional contacts with their East German colleagues that lasted many years.<sup>5</sup>

Through an examination of the Stasi’s *modus operandi*, and an interview with the artist, I intend to “map” the East German state’s increasingly inept and inexact attempts to constrain both the practice and the public profile of a young Berlin based photographer, Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, from the late 1970s through to the final collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. I will also demonstrate the difficulties the surveillance apparatus experienced in developing an understanding of the country’s bohemian creative communities and in determining what measures might encourage art and artists to exhibit a clearer fidelity to the reductive mandate of Socialist Realism.

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opportunity to study photography. It offered only four studentships a year and graduates, unlike their colleagues in photojournalism, were able to join the National Association of Artists (VBK-DDR) and pursue freelance careers.

<sup>4</sup> A documentary photographic style may be defined as a “fundamentally observational and realist mode employing un-manipulated negatives and without any declared intention to change the world.” Mark Sladen and Kate Bush, *In the Face of History, European Photographers in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 2006), 11.

<sup>5</sup> “We enjoyed the patronage of Dominique Paillarse, a ‘photography fanatic’ and director of the French Cultural Institute in East Berlin (the only western cultural institute in the entire eastern bloc). Through him we were regularly able to meet and exchange ideas with Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank and Josef Koudelka...” Arno Fischer (Gundula Schulze-Eldowy’s colleague and tutor at the HGB Leipzig). Interview with the author, Gransee, M. Brandenburg, January 13, 2007.

Working obsessively in the district of Berlin-Mitte from the late 1970s onward, Gundula Schulze-Eldowy's photographic series with themes such as *Nudes*, *Workers*, and two remarkable photographic essays *Tamerlan* and *Berlin. in Eine Hundenacht (Berlin. On a Dog's Night)*, were an unforgiving portrait of East Berlin's officially unacknowledged under-classes, bohemians and miscreants, the city's appalling environmental degradation and collapsing infrastructure.

One of the earliest and most noteworthy examples of Schulze-Eldowy's modus operandi, the series *Tamerlan* (1978-87), was a ten-year photographic diary mapping her relationship with Tamerlan, a dispossessed (and very nearly vagrant) old woman whom she had originally met in an East Berlin park. The images convey a proud and once clearly elegant, middle class woman living in uncontrolled squalor. The images were a damning indictment of a society, which understood itself to be classless and believed it offered its workers material security and a "cradle to grave welfare state."

First meeting in East Berlin's Kollwitz Platz in 1978, Schulze-Eldowy at first photographed the old woman cautiously and from a distance as she sat alone smoking on a park bench only to find herself invited to take close-ups and to listen to a confessional narrative which encompassed Tamerlan's early life in West Prussia, her marriage in the 1930s, the privations of the war (and the two abortions she endured), her husband's call up into the Army in 1939 (and his return deeply disturbed at the end of the war) and finally the birth of her son in 1948.

In poetic writings, which were exhibited alongside the photographs Schulze-Eldowy acknowledges in the face of these emotional outpourings how she quickly became part of the old woman's life and notes the deep wounds she carried, as a result of almost unimaginable horrors of the Second World War. Even in the late 1970s these continued to create huge dislocation in her life particularly as a result of the obsessive relationship she had with her only son. As Schulze-Eldowy has put it in her own writings:

In 1948, she gave birth to her son Achim. He was her doom. Tamerlan overloaded him with her pent-up love and spoilt him. She even worked night shifts at the post office in order to be with him during the day. This love became a travesty. The older he got the greater were his expectations.



Plate 2.1. Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, *Kollwitz Platz*, Berlin, 1979. From the series *Tamerlan*, 1979-1987. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the artist.

And she fulfilled them as far as she could. Later, when he was already grown up, he rarely went to work and lived on her income. This did not change when she became a pensioner. If she could not fulfil his wishes, he beat her. As time went on he sold her valuables and furniture and betrayed her shamelessly.<sup>6</sup>

Realising that her camera had been a “passport” to their early meetings, Schulze-Eldowy notes that her photography became an almost unnoticed facet of their relationship and she became a participant in the narrative of the final years of Tamerlan’s life, tracking the loss of her economic independence, the collapse of her health, and her eventual death with a breathtaking poetic intimacy.

*Tamerlan*, and many of Schulze-Eldowy’s other photographic series, underscore a desire to capture existential experience pictorially, representing an uncompromising barometer of society’s preoccupations and obsessions. Making no attempt to paper over the cracks in the socialist system, her

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<sup>6</sup> *Tamerlan*, unpublished writings by Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, 1978-1987. Translated by Cecile Malaspina.

work pulled sharply away from the idealised vision that the socialist state had of itself.

In a closed and secretive East Germany, the articulation of implicitly socially critical themes and in the 1980s, their regular appearance in public forums seems paradoxical, particularly because East German art historical doctrine cast photography in a permanent "supporting role" in the grand narrative of Marxist art history. While any kind of subjectivity or formalism was frowned upon, photography was in large measure disregarded by the organs of the state, allowing photographers to generate a level of creative freedom that was not available to artists in other media.

Unlike painters, sculptors and authors—who were amongst the most important standard bearers for East Germany's doctrinaire brand of Stalinism—photographers were left pretty much to their own devices, and not considered worth the investment that a high level of surveillance would require.

The change in attitude that was to encourage photographers to develop a more experimental visual language came in 1977 when East Germany ushered in a new cultural policy based upon the principles of broadness and diversity."

Poorly defined though as they were, these new principles committed the state directed mantra of Socialist Realism, in theory at least, to an engagement with the realities and contradictions of the attempt to forge a socialist society in Germany. Henceforth, there were to be "no more taboos" in the area of culture, and Socialist Realism was to take on a more fluid form described as *Kunst im Realen Sozialismus* (Art in Real Existing Socialism).<sup>7</sup> One aspect of this new directive was the expansion of networks of nominally independent, artist run-gallery spaces, where programming became increasingly experimental and where the contradictions that the socialist system imposed on individual experience were never far from the surface. Being extensively bureaucratic and attuned to rigidly codified cold war definitions of oppositional activity however, East Germany's surveillance culture was slow to develop an understanding of fine art photography and equally slow in determining how to move against it.

In the 1980s the willingness of these independent galleries to showcase Schulze-Eldow's confessional, diaristic and implicitly socially critical photographic portraiture and the enormous audience that developed for it,

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<sup>7</sup> *Kunst Im Real Existierende Sozialismus*—a development of the Stalinist doctrine of Socialist Realism which, in theory made allowances for the inequities and contradictions that the attempt to achieve socialism in Germany offered up, and which allowed artists some latitude in representing these in their work.

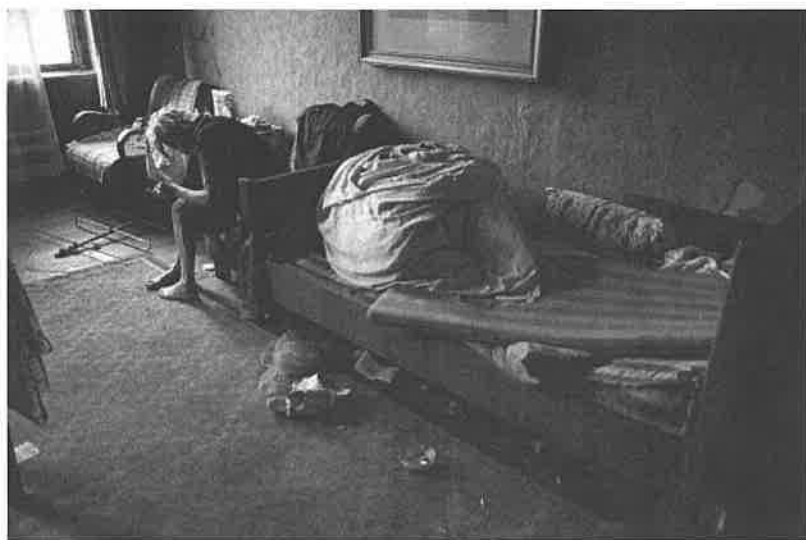


Plate 2.2. Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, *Berlin*, 1979. From the series *Tamerlan*, 1979-1987. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the artist.

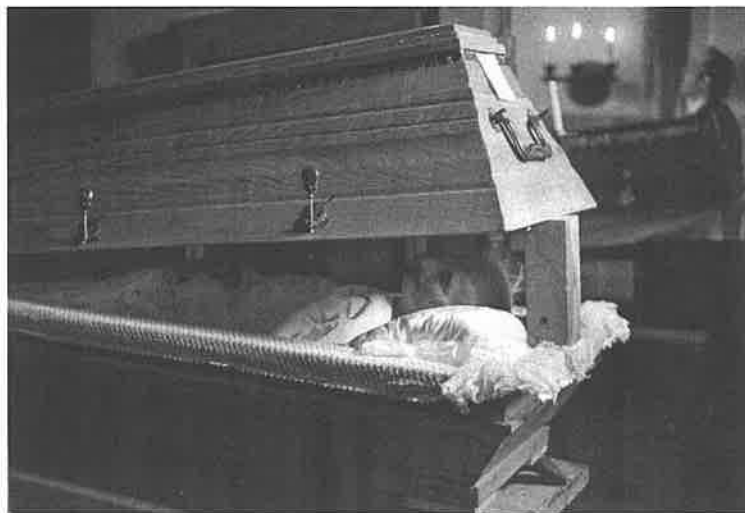


Plate 2.3. Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, *Berlin*, 1982. From the series *Berlin. On a Dogs Night*, 1979-1987. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the artist.

forced the East German state to radically reassess its attitude to photographers, photography and their function in the public domain.

The state agency entrusted in reunified Germany with the care of the Stasi files is the Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatsicherheitsdienstes der Ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik. In the copies of Schulze-Eldow's files made available to me, the real names of the informants are deleted leaving for scrutiny only the operational code name given to all the Stasi's "unofficial employees." Generating a meaningful linear narrative from the reports into Schulze-Eldow's behaviour and associations, compiled by different case officers and informers, is both challenging and confusing for researchers.

One of the clearest indications of the Stasi's attitude to Schulze-Eldow's photography however is the confusion and indecision of the agency itself in regard to the artist and her work. The notes clearly indicate that individual Stasi operatives had little or no experience of contemporary visual arts or, of the "ephemeral" or "viral" marketing strategies used by artists to promote their work. Neither apparently did they have any understanding of photography beyond the family snapshot. Individual operatives could only see nebulous, ill-defined threats to the purity of the socialist message in her numerous photographic cycles and lacked a code of practice, which might have allowed a better understanding of her *modus operandi*. In spite of their terrifying reputation the Stasi remained largely impotent and until almost the eve of the Berlin Wall's collapse were unable to develop a clear strategy to employ against her.

Whilst the Stasi invested substantial time and resources seeking "treasonable" intent in Schulze-Eldow's practice, behaviour and associations, their observation reports also evince a comprehensive failure to understand her rootedness in Berlin-Mitte—the level of trust that was extended to her by her subjects that allowed her to photograph the kind of "private intimacies" that would raise eyebrows in any political or social system. The case-notes also fail to recognise what was perhaps the only "politically" controversial element in her work—the way her photographs functioned as a conduit for opinions, which could be expressed visually rather than verbally.

In the same way that perhaps Wolfgang Tillmans or Nan Goldin have been able to bring the interpersonal dynamics of their immediate circles to the world's attention through their work, Schulze-Eldow's photographic engagement with the people around her yielded an unforgiving, yet often tender portrait of a shattered, dysfunctional, but bohemian community whose infrastructure, domestic economics and relationships were still substantially marked by the trauma of the Second World War. The

undisguised privations, which Berliners had to negotiate on a daily basis, were a clear, but unspoken, riposte to state propaganda.

As the artist herself has put it:

Berlin-Mitte was the heart of Germany—to some extent the heart of Europe. The Reich Chancellery was here—where Hitler died, and from where all the German wars of the early twentieth century were directed. This, intuitively, fascinated me about Berlin. I wanted to know what this ‘heart’ looked like in reality. I loved the way people talked about the war, how the walls spoke, and what people’s apartments looked like. The people (who had survived the final Soviet assault on Berlin) had been affected by unimaginable horrors. They had lost all their dreams and were simply unable to dream again. I called them the survivors. They lived alone and in the shadows, unnoticed until I came and found them.<sup>8</sup>



Plate 2.4. Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, *Fallen Sons*, Berlin, 1979. From the series *Berlin. On a Dog's Night*. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the artist.

<sup>8</sup> Gundula Schulze-Eldowy. Interview with the author, Berlin, December 2005.





Plate 2.5. Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, *Angelika*, Leipzig, 1983. From the series *Nudes*. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the artist.

Schulze-Eldowy remained largely “unnoticed” by the authorities while she trained as a photographer in the relatively protected atmosphere of the Leipzig Art School, only coming to the Stasi’s attention when she completed her studies and began to exhibit publicly in East Berlin. Unable to adequately pigeonhole her with the GDR’s shadowy and fragmented “political” opposition, the Stasi instead became obsessed with the numerous foreign contacts her increasing international notoriety was generating, assuming that these could only be conduits for the gathering of intelligence or destabilising the state. In January 1985, “Gustav,” an “unofficial employee” of the Stasi (and as was usually the case, a member of Schulze-Eldowy’s close personal circle, who had agreed to inform for the Stasi) was sent to enquire about *Nude Photography in the GDR*, an exhibition organised by Schulze-Eldowy at the House of Culture in Treptow, East Berlin from January to February 1985.

“Gustav’s” report highlights a collective feeling amongst employees with whom he had spoken at the gallery of having achieved something unexpected and unlikely by the mere fact that the exhibition had been allowed to go ahead. This was largely the result of the decision not to advertise the exhibition and to promote it by word of mouth only.



Plate 2.6. Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, *Petra*, Erfurt 1982. From the series *Nudes*. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the artist.

Crucially, also, the unusual decision not to produce an exhibition poster to advertise the show had clearly been extremely effective. The authorities were not alerted to the exhibition prior to its opening and it had proved very popular with local workers becoming the “secret tip” at the local barracks, receiving numerous visits from officers in uniform with overall visitor figures far outstripping the average for exhibitions at the House of Culture.

On January 22, 1985 a gallery talk that was attended by over a hundred visitors was held in Treptow, which “Gustav” reports, represented a comprehensive validation for Schulze-Eldowy and her practices. The only criticism being the suggestion that her photography was “too pretty” and did not go far enough in depicting the realities of life in East Germany. For “Gustav,” Schulze-Eldowy’s proclamations and the opinions expressed by members of the public during the gallery talk were an “emotionally laden, philosophically unclear stream of consciousness expressed by people who were not in a position to properly compartmentalise or validate the manifestations of social life they encountered in Schulze Eldowy’s work”

(or presumably echoes of their own experience they recognised in the photographs).<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, Schulze-Eldow herself echoes the events and some of the opinions expressed by “Gustav:”

When my nudes were exhibited in Treptow in 1985, I gave a gallery talk and so many people turned up that we had to hold the talk in the hall outside.<sup>10</sup>

In particular, pointing to the reaction to her nudes, she went on:

Of course the Stasi sent a representative to the meeting to observe and to heckle and he shouted, ‘It’s nobody’s business but my own what goes on in my bedroom. This peeping around is indecent behaviour.’ Then another man stood up and agreed adding, ‘Yes, that’s precisely the point, you’re ignoring people’s problems, you’re pushing everything into the private sphere and you don’t seem to be interested in what’s going on in the world outside.’<sup>11</sup>

Photographing in ordinary domestic situations, Schulze-Eldow created what remain some of the most unusual nudes in post-war European photographic history. Combining an almost entirely non-sexual nudity with incongruous motifs of domesticity she emphasises the idea of “inner emigration;” the desire to withdraw into the private sphere and to shelter from the excesses of state culture.

Although uncertain of the precise threat that Schulze-Eldow’s photographic series represented to the stability of socialist society and lacking a judicially watertight route to constrain her under East German law, the Stasi began nonetheless to employ a strategy intended to hinder the progress of her career and dissemination of her images and to spread disinformation about her and her work amongst East Berlin’s artistic community. Informers were tasked with spreading the opinion that her work was concerned only with negative, superficial impressions of socialist society, that it was theatrical and narcissistic and that it presented the contradictions of socialism without providing any proper socio-economic context. Reports from numerous informers suggest that her

<sup>9</sup> Report by an unofficial employee of the Stasi “Gustav”, Gundula Schulze-Eldow Stasi Files, Bundesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatsicherheitsdienstes der Ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik (BfUSeDDR), Berlin, January 17, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> Gundula Schulze-Eldow, interview with the author (Berlin, December, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

intimate associates began to question how she had managed to secure authorisation for the exhibition of her nudes at Treptow, or whether her work had anything to do with art at all.<sup>12</sup>

In an intercepted letter to the prominent Swiss-American photographer Robert Frank, whom she had met at the French Cultural Institute, she writes:

I have the feeling that some people would gladly lynch me or burn me as a witch in the marketplace [because] I want to convince them that everything they have believed in until now is wrong.<sup>13</sup>

Another development in Schulze-Eldow's career, and one which helped her to achieve a level of international notoriety was the recognition in some quarters of the East German political establishment that she might provide a positive representation of East Germany's socialist culture. As her notoriety spread she was offered a solo exhibition in Zurich and, unexpectedly granted a temporary passport by the ministry of foreign affairs allowing her to visit Switzerland.<sup>14</sup> Her exposure in Switzerland led to further offers of exhibitions in Italy and the opportunity to participate in the prestigious photography festival at Arles, France (although she was unable to extend her temporary passport and was not able to go).<sup>15</sup> This presented the Stasi with the unexpected problem of having to constrain Schulze-Eldow's burgeoning notoriety on the stage of international fine art photography.

Schulze-Eldow's files contain frequent and dismissive references to the artist as a "careerist charlatan" who was interested only in her own advancement. There was however recognition that her position as a East German photographer was part of her artistic persona which provided her with a unique platform from which to promote herself in the international art world and that she was thus unlikely to seek a permanent exit visa.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Report by an unofficial employee of the Stasi informer "Peter Rodinel" (BfuSeDDR), Berlin, March 7, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> Gundula Schulze-Eldow, interview with the author, Berlin, December, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> The passport and exit visa was intended to be used for a single return trip to Zürich in January 1985, but because it was not otherwise endorsed Schulze-Eldow used it for fifteen separate trips to West Germany and West Berlin until its expiry.

<sup>15</sup> Stasi operational report (BfuSeDDR), Berlin, June 14, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Stasi operational report (BfuSeDDR), Berlin, August 16, 1989.



Plate 2.7. Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, *Andreas the Soot King*, 1980s. From the series *Work*. Gelatine Silver Print. Courtesy of the artist.

Perhaps referencing the struggle between the “modernisers” and more conservative elements in East Germany’s political fabric, Stasi officers were unable to view Schulze-Eldowy’s national and international exposure as anything other than a threat to East Germany’s internal stability, and became increasingly obsessed with the idea that she was in the pay of the CIA.<sup>17</sup> Conversations were held at senior level to try and ascertain what the (non-existent) intelligence gathering rationale was that underpinned the French cultural attaché’s intensive lobbying on Schulze-Eldowy’s behalf for an extension to her passport to allow her to attend the Arles Photography Festival.

By August 1989, the Stasi’s files manifested a clear determination to move decisively against her with plans for a search of her apartment and detailed questions asked about who visited her, whether she entertained visitors overnight, whether she had a long term partner, whether there were empty apartments in her block and which other tenants of the block she had the closest relationships with. The report indicated that this process was to end in severe sanctions such as arrest and imprisonment as a result of “the negative attitudes towards the political circumstances in

<sup>17</sup> Stasi, operational report (BfuSeDDR), Berlin, January 9, 1989.

East Germany which she brings to expression in her work."<sup>18</sup> Ironically, because of the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the massive popular uprising, which saw the peaceful overthrow of the dictatorial regime, the Stasi's plans to move formally against Schulze-Eldow were never acted upon.

The long and extraordinary delay between Schulze-Eldow's appearance on the Stasi's radar and their decision to formally move against her raises enormous questions about the practical limits on the power and use of surveillance. Equally compelling are questions around photography's ability to create its own truth and to express ideas visually rather than verbally. No less relevant was the regime's desire to reduce human behaviour and culture to tight, inflexible definitions.

Rather than overt subversion, Schulze-Eldow's empathetic and confessional photography was the by-product of the remarkable purity of documentary photographic practice as it had developed in East Germany, combined with responsiveness to international influence, which was an anathema to many of the country's deeply conservative hierarchy. As the 1980s wore on there was an increasing lack of definition about what kind of state East Germany wanted to be, and how it wanted artists to reflect a society that was economically considerably better off than other Eastern Bloc societies, yet steadfastly refused the kind of democratic freedoms that citizens throughout the rest of eastern Europe were beginning to enjoy for the first time since the end of World War II. As the Honecker regime aged it became increasingly obvious that the country had neither the resources nor the understanding of contemporary visual art necessary to coerce artists or the public into defining themselves according to the regimented principles of official socialist culture. Confirming this, Schulze-Eldow has suggested that:

I have been asked whether subversion was a deliberate part of my visual language and I've always said no. But, because it was impossible in the GDR to be an artist and to be against the party, confrontation was initiated as soon as one took up a stance that in any way didn't conform to the way that the state saw itself. As the demise of the GDR approached, the authorities simply no longer had the strength to constrain me. However, the Stasi's efforts to control me were never clear and always contradictory. When I first showed at *Galerie Sophienstrasse 8* (in the mid 1980s) three Party members appeared. Instead of taking the show down they said,

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<sup>18</sup> "Proposal to carry through a conspiratorial search of living quarters," a discussion of the practicalities of, and rationale for, searching Schulze-Eldow's flat in Berlin.

'Your pictures are very powerful, especially the *Tamerlan* series. We've received an order from the party leadership to "tone down" the show, but now we've seen it, we don't know what to do.' So we went through the show together and took down one nude, one dead person and one fat person. They couldn't read the iconography, the really subversive pictures stayed on the wall, and people generally understood this.<sup>19</sup>

This led me to question whether Schulze-Eldowy felt that she had developed a visual language that was illegible to the authorities but entirely legible to the public at large, to which she answered:

Yes, you could put it that way. The authorities were very easily steered by verbal interpretations. These three party members literally asked me 'what is this picture about?' and I told them. They could only accept a very narrow and literal reading [of the themes and ideas in my photography]. It was very much more complicated for poets and playwrights.<sup>20</sup>

Because Schulze-Eldowy's work can be considered to be observational and photography was not regarded as a real art form, it did not fit into the Stasi's definitions of "subversion." Simultaneously the totalitarian state seemed unable to cope with or develop an effective strategy to counter the genuine international interest in her work or for the tenor of public debate that took place around it.

Younger East German photographers like Schulze-Eldowy realised that the authorities were looking for precise written definitions on which to hang their objections to particular ideas or themes. Like many of her colleagues she eschewed the habit of attaching titles to the work beyond a place and date and worked up narratives in layers giving the authorities no precise definition to react against.

The Stasi failed to break Schulze-Eldowy's career. They were, however, extremely effective in restricting her national and international profile and with almost no bibliography around her work, this photographer's remarkable contribution to post-war photographic history is only now being seriously considered twenty years after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, after very nearly fading into obscurity.

That Schulze-Eldowy's uncompromising observations of the East German day-to-day reality both came into being and survived the Stasi's attentions is both testament to her creative spirit and the inability of the dictatorship to pigeonhole her activity.

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<sup>19</sup> Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, interview with the author, Berlin, December 15, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

In spite of the fact that its tentacles extended into the most intimate spheres of its citizens' lives, East Germany and its security apparatus was cumbersome, exhausted and unresponsive by the late 1980s and the Stasi was unable to formulate an efficient response to the creative energy they considered so dangerous. In spite of its disciplinarian reputation, it was unable to hold back the popular agitation for freedom of expression of which Schulze-Eldow's photography was symptomatic—neither did the Stasi have any understanding of the international character of the contemporary visual arts. It was resoundingly unsuccessful in ending Schulze-Eldow's career—stopping her working—and yet East Germany's all knowing all seeing surveillance apparatus remains for many observers the yardstick against which all surveillance states are measured.