

The Subject Who Knows: Photographers and the Photographed in the Late East Germany 

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Abstract and Keywords

This article complicates the history of East German photography through an examination of works by Gundula Schulze Eldowy and Karin Wieckhorst, two contemporaries who navigated the realms of official and unofficial culture in the late eighties. The images selected are specifically drawn from series that focus on less than ideal bodies. Schulze Eldowy's nude portraits are set in conversation with her images of labor. Wieckhorst's series frames the subject of disability. The text demonstrates that both the photographers and their subjects were aware of how their images contested East Germany's fairly prescribed and predictable official image culture. This article argues, finally, that these photographs represent not simply a disidentification of the East German public with official state culture but also an increasing eagerness to redefine it.

Keywords: East Germany, photography, portraiture, nude, disability, worker photography, socialist realism, unofficial culture

East Germany's official aesthetic project followed the conventions of Soviet socialist realism, in particular its call to elevate and educate the masses through a schematic and iterative form of culture. The communist Germany (the German Democratic Republic, GDR) thus engaged the visual as an ideological instrument. State culture was an educational as well as an instructional tool. Central to the GDR's aesthetic education was a prioritization of the subject of labor.

The idealization of the laboring body is perhaps most apparent in East Germany's photographic culture.¹ Even when state culture adopted photography as a form of fine art in the 1980s, the medium was still predominantly treated as a documentarian form to be leveraged as a weapon in the class struggle.² Because photography entered the GDR's artistic vernacular quite late, nearly all of the country's photographers had been educated in the state's ideological definitions of the medium, which favored images with clear, didactic content, particularly in the photo essay form.³ At the same time that photographers active in the 1980s began to break free from the confines of a prescriptive photo-

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graphic culture by adopting more spontaneous and less ideological practices than their predecessors, they nevertheless maintained a socialist-inspired aesthetic. In fact, many photographers in the late GDR continued to embrace the state's priority to represent the everyday person. However, their representations differed starkly from the state's gilded approach. From the rampant alcoholism that plagued East German society to the toil of labor on the body to the less than idealistic shape of both able-bodied and disabled citizens, these photographers showed what the state had carefully excised from its official visual culture.

This chapter offers a historical overview of photographic culture in the GDR to illustrate how the medium was used to reflect and buoy the communist vision of an emancipated proletarian society. It complicates this history by looking at the work of Gundula Schulze Eldowy⁴ and Karin Wieckhorst, two contemporaries who represented less than ideal bodies in their photo essays. I draw from multiple series by Schulze Eldowy, including her nude portraits and images of labor, to consider how the artist embraced a critical documentary style to capture everyday life in the GDR. I place Schulze Eldowy in conversation with Wieckhorst, paying special attention to her series on people with disabilities.

More than an examination of the inherent—and well-storied—contradictions between state culture and lived reality, this text argues that work by Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst must be interrogated as reciprocal engagements between the photographer and her subject. I define these images as reflections of agency, as opposed to victimization. My analysis borrows implicitly from Martha Rosler's critique of "victim photography," which she defines as photography that "has been much more comfortable in the company of moralism than wedded to a rhetoric or program of revolutionary politics."⁵ I invoke Rosler as a reminder of both the East German state's own instrumentalization of image culture (that is to say, its use of moralizing images to legitimate its ideology), as well as to counter the West's Cold War warrior narrative, which has come to define East Germans as victims, rather than agents, of history. In contrast, as citizens who had been subjected to a highly ideological and manipulative visual culture, the East Germans that Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst capture on camera are both aware of their subjectification and in control of it.

Everyday People



Figure 1 Berlin 1983 (1983).

© Gundula Schulze Eldowy

A small naked man named Lothar sits on a daybed covered by a dark plaid bedspread (see Figure 1). The head of the bed is slightly upturned. Lothar nods his face downward and gazes at the space where the feet of his photographer stand. A cabinet filled with trinkets shielded by smudged glass and topped by no fewer than nineteen liquor bottles is mounted behind him. Many small cutout images of naked women consume the wall beneath this fixture. At his bedside, hung horizontally and at eye level, is a three-quarter portrait of a clothed woman. This is Lothar's imaginary companion.

This is the second of two portraits Schulze Eldowy made of Lothar, who worked as a courier for the East Berlin public transportation service. Her first photograph, taken shortly after their first encounter in 1982, depicts Lothar in his professional uniform and a woolen *ushanka* with the ears tied up. From a description Schulze Eldowy includes with her diptych, we know that somewhere tucked within Lothar's loosely fitting jacket is a second bag, in which he carries a few personal effects—pictures of naked women but also postcards from all over the world—"the same clutter as in his bedroom."⁶

We know from Schulze Eldowy's description that Lothar is obsessed by the naked female form. We also know that he is a virgin, and that he has explicitly asked Schulze Eldowy to take his naked portrait. "Little one," he inquired in her studio one day, "would you also make a nude photo of me? I've never had one taken before."⁷ After trying a few shots in Schulze Eldowy's apartment, the two elected to move to Lothar's home. In the portrait, his small body blends into its environment—as if we are seeing a man at the end of his day, or perhaps its beginning.

Regina Reichert appears in the middle of a street in East Berlin. She casts both arms joyfully to the left and right of her wheelchair. Regina's body is small within the picture, which flanks her between a sidewalk to her left and a row of cars to her right. In the dis-

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tance, a lone woman walks toward the camera. Further behind her still, at the end of the road, the sky appears clear and bright; it is spring, maybe summer.

Regina celebrates a sunny day, as well as a newly gained independence. Wieckhorst has captured her at the end of a several-year process of moving from a small town in the GDR to its capital. She had photographed Regina for four years, producing a handful of images that document her life as a paraplegic advancing toward greater independence in East German society. The photographs cast Regina as a happy and uninhibited person. We see her nude and toweling off her stylish blonde hair in one image and getting a piggy-back ride from a roommate in another.

Regina is one of two disabled people Wieckhorst would follow between 1981 and 1985 for a series on disability initially commissioned by the East German government as part of its participation in a worldwide advocacy campaign. Both Regina and Siegmar Schulze, also paraplegic, participated actively in this project. They invited Wieckhorst into their private lives, helped her to select which images to include in the series, and contributed to texts that accompanied their images.

These two sets of images act as a hinge that opens to multiple interpretive models of East Germany's photographic culture. Gundula Schulze Eldowy's photographs of Lothar are both biographical and emblematic of their photographer's objective to capture everyday life through intimate exchange with her subjects. Wieckhorst's images of Regina are unique within the pantheon of East Germany's idealistic visual culture. Finally, both sets of images represent the collaborative, rather than illustrative, spirit of their authors. That exchange evinces a degree of agency that problematizes state hegemony—both real and mythologized.

Photographic Evidence

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it.

—Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

As W. P. Jefanow, the secretary of the Union of Soviet Artists, would explain in 1953, the thematic principle of socialist realism required artists to “represent reality in its revolutionary development, in its most progressive appearances.”⁸ Culture in state socialism was thus not only charged with representing but actually producing a communist future. East German state culture espoused a dogmatic view of photography's objectivity. Photography's relationship to reality—precisely its ability to “furnish evidence” as Susan Sontag notes—could be leveraged in support of socialist ideology.⁹ Press photography played a particularly important role in this regard. “Systematically staged,” as T.O. Im-misch writes, official photography of East Germany was meant to appear “as a natural and immediate representation of reality.”¹⁰ The use of photography as a technology of socialism was rooted in historical precedent. As Sarah James has demonstrated, theorists of

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photography looked to Weimar-era photo essays, including images from the *Arbeiterfotografie* (worker photography) movement, as a model for representing and critiquing social relations and inequalities. In particular, August Sander's 1929 photo essay *Face of Our Time* became standard material for students of photography in the GDR. James calls this work a visual "instruction atlas," explaining that "Sander's typologizing series and the sober, frontal style of his photography ... provided a central model for the photographic representation of social life through portraiture and, by proxy, a crucial means of photographically fashioning the socialist self."¹¹ *Face of Our Time* included figures like the communist revolutionaries Erich Mühsam and Paul Frölich who would become important icons to socialist and revolutionary culture in the GDR.¹² Such figures conformed neatly to socialist realism's penchant for visualizing and universalizing an ideal socialist character.

Photography's indexical relationship to reality, as Hermann Exner would write in the state-run photography journal *Fotografie* in 1961, distinguished it as a more psychological, technical, and economical medium than other creative forms.¹³ The photograph represented not only a more efficient and effective mode of representation than any other cultural form. Officials also considered it to be less vulnerable to manipulation than other media.¹⁴ Certainly, as Sontag demonstrates, the faith in photography's facticity is not unique to East Germany. "The camera record justifies," she writes, becoming "incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened."¹⁵ And, although she allows for some degree of skepticism ("the picture may distort"), "there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture."¹⁶ Maintaining photography's evidentiary status remained central to its utility in the GDR's public culture. Sontag calls this the camera's "aggression," a characterization that helps explain the almost bullish role that photography can play, particularly in a context where open debate and contestation were summarily absent, in fact prohibited, from public life.¹⁷ Of course, because official culture selected the images it saw fit to print, and trained its photographers in a specific documentary mode, the truth of East German photography must be filtered through the heavy hand of state socialist ideology. Socialism's success resounded because its images "proved" that success.

In fact, the GDR's official photography unrealistically affirmed state power to the bitter end. As John P. Jacob's research on *Fotografie* demonstrates, images of the toppled Berlin Wall or the massive civic protests that preceded this event in the fall of 1989 did not appear in the pages of the publication until the end of 1990. Observing that the magazine folded in March 1991—more than six months before German reunification—he writes that "in its failure to recognize this most spectacular event through the photography of everyday life, [*F*]otografie lost its opportunity to stay relevant to East Germans living and working in a fundamentally altered world."¹⁸ Certainly, this lack of relevance of the GDR's official photographic culture to the average citizen may be explained by a number of historical circumstances—not least of which was the sudden unrestricted access to Western culture, which would have significantly challenged the GDR's only professional photo publication. Be that as it may, recalcitrant cultural bureaucrats who refused to support photography that challenged the status quo had sown their own irrelevance long before these

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dramatic changes. In fact, even while the state notably relaxed its restrictions on art and culture, the public face of photography remained quite dogmatic.¹⁹ As Matthew Shaul writes, “even into the 1980s, cultural theorists ignored the increasingly significant photographic art being produced at the fringes of official culture by such artists as Gundula Schulze Eldowy ... and remained fixated on an agitational socialist photojournalism.”²⁰ For instance, although photographs by Schulze Eldowy appeared in a 1981 issue of *Fotografie*, the editors selected the artist’s landscape photographs instead of her signature nude portraiture. Speaking more generally of the disconnect between individual style and publication opportunities, Shaul observes “that official press photography, of course, conveyed images not of life as it was lived, but as it was supposed to become.”²¹ Here, Shaul identifies the continued importance of the dialectical methodology of socialist realism, specifically the way that the state instrumentalized art and visual culture.

Whereas the catalogue of ideal types and narratives of worker heroes may have made sense as part of the post-World War II recovery, these didactic representations became contested categories for many artists living in the late GDR. For photographers, the contestation was particularly pronounced as the opportunities to nuance official representations of lived reality remained almost entirely outside the scope of public culture. “This explains,” Bernd Lindner writes, “why many well-known East German photographers began their careers as picture journalists and often kept this function as a second string to their bow even when they achieved artistic recognition.”²² Here Lindner refers to the generation of artists who came before Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst, specifically, Evelyn Richter and Arno Fischer, who actually taught both photographers at the Leipzig Academy of Fine Arts. His observation also signals the importance of distinguishing not the official (or state) photographers from the unofficial or experimental ones, but, as Christoph Tannert has suggested, distinguishing the published from the unpublished *photographs*.²³ This designation invites a more nuanced understanding of photographic practices by artists whose work may be deemed experimental, but who sometimes appeared in state journals or exhibitions. The published/unpublished distinction also invites a discussion about the idiosyncratic nature of state support for artists. In this case, Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst are exemplary figures. Both trained at one of the GDR’s few art schools and were accepted, no less, into a line of study that by Sigrid Hofer’s account typically only invited four to six students per year.²⁴ Both artists were members of the state-run Union of Fine Artists (*Verband Bildender Künstler, VBK*), an absolute necessity for professionalization as an artist in the GDR. At the same time, Wieckhorst documented the exhibitions of one of the GDR’s most notorious independent art galleries, Leipzig’s EIGEN+ART. Under threat from the Stasi who once planned to imprison her, Schulze Eldowy hid her negatives in a bedframe or had them smuggled across the border to be printed in West Berlin. The ability for both artists to be at times supported and at other times vilified by the state demonstrates fluidity between categories that characterized experimental art, especially in the late GDR.²⁵ It also, as Candice Hamelin has argued, demonstrates the difficulty East German cultural and state officials faced in defining appropriate forms of photographic practice.²⁶

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The GDR experienced two strains of experimental photography in its final decade. The first, which played with subject more than form, includes the work of Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst. It is much more challenging to synthesize the second more media-oriented experimentations with photography as exemplified by artists such as Thomas Florschuetz, Micha Brendel, Kurt Buchwald, Jörg Knöfel, and Klaus Hähner-Springmühl. Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere, the attention these artists paid to the body in relation to the camera also embraces the implicit critique of state culture's unrealistic representations of the East German subject.²⁷ In contrast, the experimentation with subject matter exemplified by Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst renders a much more explicit critique. Historical precedent in part explains that clarity. Photographers like Evelyn Richter, Arno Fischer, and Roger Melis began working in a critical documentary form in the early 1950s. Their images, which deliberately contrasted the ideological vision of status quo photography while still maintaining a socialist ethic, referred to Weimar-era social critique, the straight photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson and his Magnum studio, as well as the American photographers Diane Arbus and Robert Frank.²⁸

Series that adopt a less schematic, didactic, and predictable approach to a conventional socialist subject best illustrate photographers' efforts to create an alternative socialist idiom for photography. Beginning in the 1950s, Richter began shooting images of women at work, typically as they engaged with some form of heavy industry. These portraits follow a traditional worker-portrait style popular in East German painting and photography but distort the heroism of the genre. For example, as James has observed, both *At the Lino-type Machine* and *At the Die Cutter* reveal the women "in all their exhaustion and frustration either deliberately dwarfed by the claustrophobic machinery or with their bodies prosthetically extended and encased by the cogs and wheels."²⁹ Richter pursued this project into the 1980s, but she was never permitted to publish the images. Comparison of her images to photos of work that appeared in publication in the late GDR highlights the uniqueness of Richter's camera eye as well as the extent to which official culture maintained idealistic images of labor without regard for new vocabularies such as hers. For example, an untitled image by Thomas Kläber, a photography student, which appeared in a 1986 issue of *Fotografie*, exemplifies the clear and didactic content preferred in official culture. In this case, Kläber's portrait of a man on the job at a natural gas plant is clearly posed and framed to convey a narrative of progress and job satisfaction. The pipe at the right of the frame directs the viewer to the backdrop of industry from which this man emerges. His face is clear, the robustness of his slightly chubby body (in fact, the ideal body type for a worker) highlighted by his contrapposto stance, which is clearly contrived.³⁰ In comparison, Richter's photographs of work would continue to obscure the faces of their ostensible subjects, thus drawing attention to the anonymity, the toil, the boredom, and so on that many experienced in work. The significance of her imagery, which influenced photographers for years to come, demonstrates their realism. Those who dared to defy convention did not have to search for marginalized or hidden subjects. In this sense, East Germany's less than ideal reality was hiding in plain sight.

State Shortcomings

Photography is privileged to help man view himself, expand and preserve his experiences, and exchange vital communication—a faithful instrument whose reach need not extend farther than that of the way of life it reflects.

—Rudolf Arnheim, “On the Nature of Photography”

In his path-breaking text from 1974, Rudolf Arnheim contests the purported objectivity of the photographic medium, but nevertheless stresses its significance as a bearer of truth. Arnheim draws attention to the subjects of documentary photography who watch their captor consciously by “displaying themselves for him cheerfully or ceremoniously, or by watching him with suspicious attention.”³¹ “This is a man under observation,” he continues, “concerned with his image, exposed to danger or to the prospect of great fortune by simply being looked at.”³² Arnheim—a German-Jewish World War II-era émigré—writes from a landscape of American visual culture, where documentary photography’s vulnerability to politicization and instrumentalization had grown increasingly evident in the wake of the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement. Although photography had historically been used as an instrument of power, as John Tagg has observed, and Michel Foucault has foregrounded, at the time Arnheim wrote his text the subjects of the camera were becoming increasingly aware of their instrumentalization.³³ (Of course, less than a decade later Martha Rosler would publish her critique of how photographs could lead the well-intentioned liberal to pity and victimize inequality rather than confront it.³⁴) On the other hand, the awareness of photography’s political potential also lends a degree of agency and intentionality on the part of the photographer’s subject. This is Arnheim’s thesis. Photography is an instrument that may also help “man view himself” in his best light—literally filtered through the lens of his preference.³⁵ While Arnheim’s text directly theorizes American visual culture, it also helps to explain a visual literacy emerging in the Eastern Bloc’s photographic culture in the same era. More precisely, the agency Arnheim observes in the sitter is also observable in the subjects of experimental photography of the late GDR.

The work of photographers like Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst offers demonstrable evidence of a culture of self-aware sitters: “man and woman after they have eaten from the tree of knowledge.”³⁶ Lothar, photographed by Schulze Eldowy, in effect, literalizes Arnheim’s Adam and Eve metaphor in his desire to be depicted nude. He is not ashamed of his body; he wishes to show it off. That desire confronts what I term the GDR’s taboo of the ordinary—drawing attention to a fundamental irony of East German visual culture.³⁷ The “mindless, blissful smile that is the constant factor throughout the visual imagery of the GDR”—what Stefan Wolle calls “the smiling face of dictatorship”—had revealed itself to be unrealistic, transparent.³⁸ And that transparency revealed a fundamental irony in East Germany’s national culture, which depended on, but could not maintain, a predictable and prescriptive unity. Lothar’s awareness of Schulze Eldowy’s status as a photographer suggests that he sought an audience for his naked visage. It may be argued that Lothar’s desires were perverse, even predatory. Nevertheless, the possibility that

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Schulze Eldowy could place him on full display, and thus reveal his sexual misbehavior, clearly did not subdue him. In fact, Schulze Eldowy established herself a few years after meeting Lothar with the success of a solo exhibition at the *Galerie Weißer Elefant* (White Elephant Gallery) in East Berlin. An exhibition at the gallery, an official space administered by the Union of Fine Artists, featured the artist's nude photographs, including those drawn from the thesis project she had successfully defended in 1984. The series includes an array of body types—from Lothar's shrunken mass to a young woman posing contraposto with an elegant cigarette holder to a trans person with genitals as carefully tucked as eyes are painted and wig is coifed. In all cases, Schulze Eldowy's nudes appear in their own homes and pose uniquely: seated, standing, at repose, always surrounded by, with, or in front of domestic objects such as radios, plants, and fur pelts. These are subjects who know, that is to say, who are in the know. Exposure suggests a self-awareness, even a self-confidence, which in other contexts might be less political. In the GDR, however, the images that Schulze Eldowy gathered represented lives not simply absent, but excised from official life. As Josie McLellan has observed, "Under socialism, the responsibility of the photographer was to contribute to social progress, not to highlight its shortcomings."³⁹ Of course, this begs the question of a shortcoming. Schulze Eldowy saw her subjects as derelict and forgotten: "How could so many people live in the most degrading circumstances?"⁴⁰ This question motivated her to venture into the private enclaves of her East Berlin neighbors, the dirty bowels of factory buildings, and the dying landscape of hospital wards. Schulze Eldowy sought to underscore the divide between the country's stated support for its citizens and their lived reality. And yet her images and the texts that narrate them reveal a human tenacity that calls degradation a circumstance and not a diagnosis. In these photos, shortcomings define the state and not its subjects.

More to the point, Schulze Eldowy's photographs of imperfect bodies, like Wieckhorst's images of the disabled, demonstrate a range of representation that contested status quo photographic culture. The rebellion may not be defined simply by the content of the images. Since 1958, as Karl Gernot Kuehn notes, East Germany's *Kulturbund* (Cultural Association), which administered the guidelines for organized culture and clubs,⁴¹ had made it "acceptable to depict the disadvantaged."⁴² That acceptance must be contextualized within a state culture, which produced images that underscored the centrality of the state. The difference between images by Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst and those produced by and for official culture defines their political claim. Theirs is not "victim photography" that reaffirmed the necessity of the state. These are portraits of citizens with self-ascribed dignity made manifest by the evidence of the photograph. These are ordinary East Germans, as they saw themselves, and as they saw each other.

Photographs of "Real Existing Socialism"

Scholars have carefully considered the power of editorial boards and functionaries who worked within associations like the VBK or the *Kulturbund*, including the impacts their decision making had on East German culture. Texts by people such as Esther von Richthofen, Matthew Shaul, and John P. Jacob demonstrate that a lack of consistency or

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responsiveness to the actual interests of East Germans severely diminished the authority of state culture.⁴³ What remains to be explored is the impact an inconsistent cultural authority had on the East German public. More pointedly, I propose that an increase in citizen-led culture—through amateur cultural clubs, for example—accompanied by a diminishing presence of the socialist hero iconography in mass culture, contributed to a more self-aware and, in turn, agentic public.

Although East German culture continued to valorize work using the same conservative schematics of socialist realism, the divide between its idealistic representation and lived reality increased irreparably over time. Naming the late GDR a “workerly society,” Wolfgang Engler diagnoses this rift between state representation and lived reality as a crisis of power and subjectification.⁴⁴ He identifies the continued dependence that East German officials had on a national identification with the proletariat even as they increasingly failed to serve this public:

Rarely has a political system held its public on such a short leash, the responsibilities of its most important class more harshly reduced, its idealism more harshly tested as this one ... And seldom has leadership in modern times incapacitated the working class for so long and to such an extent, while at the same time depending on it.⁴⁵

While Engler’s suggestion that the working class had little political agency is certainly true in terms of the GDR’s hierarchical governance, East Germany’s “workerly” society was nevertheless clearly aware that the state it depended upon often neglected to fulfill its promises. Thus, even as visual—and especially photographic—culture continued to address a proletarian subject, the identification of the average East German with these images became increasingly tenuous. This bears out in photography as well as film and fine arts, which challenged the ideas of state socialism on a very public scale. For example, the East German cinema’s move to everyday themes in the late 1960s demonstrates that state culture actually supported a distancing from state politics and worker heroes.⁴⁶ Painting, the most lauded of fine arts, likewise saw a shift toward everyday and even implicitly state-critical themes in part as a result of the party leader Erich Honecker’s 1971 proclamation for a “broader and more diverse” artistic culture.⁴⁷

Amateur culture clubs likewise helped to cultivate greater creative autonomy and critical awareness around image production in East German society. Hobby photographers had ample opportunities to exhibit their work in regional exhibitions as well as in a publication dedicated to nonprofessional photography, *Fotokino Magazin*. Sizable grants and other financial incentives also promoted hobby photography. Around the same time as citizens gained more autonomy in their free time—indeed, no doubt in response to this freedom—the Ministry of State Security (Stasi) increased its reliance on citizen spies.⁴⁸ Moreover, Esther von Richthofen argues that the expansion of amateur cultural clubs permitted the state to have increased control over people’s leisure time through “organized cultural life.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless, an unanticipated consequence of hobby circles was the emergence of more critical modes of artistic production. This has already been demon-

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strated within experimental film, which partially originated in local film clubs.⁵⁰ It stands to reason that as people gained more access to producing and discussing culture on their own terms, they also became more aware of the stakes and vulnerabilities inherent in image production. Ironically, the attention to equipping average citizens with the tools to produce culture fulfills socialist realism's materialist premise—namely that providing cultural actors with the means of production would inspire a more critical culture.⁵¹

Amateur cultural groups flourished as an outgrowth of the so-called *Bitterfelder Weg* (Bitterfeld Way). The state program began in 1959 and aimed to put cultural actors in closer contact with the proletarian subjects of their work. East German artists and writers received grants and contracts to place themselves in the actual work environments of “real existing socialism.” In these environs, artists were to teach the working class about high art and culture through classes, discussions, and participation in the production of artworks. Likewise, workers were to teach the artists what it meant to be a worker. Then Socialist Unity Party (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland*, SED) leader Walter Ulbricht envisioned that these exchanges would lead to more heroic images of the worker, while also increasing the interest of the average person in culture. The irony of Bitterfeld is that it worked too well as a tool for educating artists on the harsh realities of the labor they were meant to valorize. Artists became more attuned to the experience of the subjects of (and audience for) their work. They translated the reality of untidy or inconsistent economic policy or cultural and class inequality onto the pages, canvases, and film of the era, which began to not only shed the layers of socialist realism's dogma but also to critique the state.⁵²

Although the government shuttered the Bitterfeld program in 1965 just six years after it began, artists still could rely upon governmental contracts or allowances to enter worksites. This support explains in part the decades-long scope of Richter's portraits of women at work, which she began as part of the Bitterfeld program and pursued independently into the 1980s. Schulze Eldowy likewise received indirect support from the VBK to produce a series of worker-portraits. When she went to a rubber factory in the small Thuringien town of Bad Blankenburg to begin her “Work” series, Schulze Eldowy presented the foreman with an official reference letter from the Union of Fine Artists, to which she had recently gained membership. Of course, she went to the factory on her own volition; her interest in photographing the men at work was one way to address her fascination with everyday people and their lives. Nevertheless, the letter from the professional artists' union gave her access to the worksite that would have surely been otherwise restricted. That legitimation actually made her at first suspicious to the men she photographed. Reflecting contemporaneously, she would write:

Artists aren't thought highly of because they fall to their knees for the state. Journalists, photographers, and writers usually praise and sweet talk the socialist paradise. I don't see any paradise. At the beginning, I had to run the gauntlet with the workers. They avoided the camera, presumed that I was a state artist.⁵³

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Schulze Eldoway ultimately earned the trust of her subjects through multiple visits to the factory, including ventures into its dirty bowels and caverns of industry.⁵⁴



Figure 2 *Bad Blankenburg 1985* (1985).

© Gundula Schulze Eldoway

The rubber factory photographs picture workers buried in their work. Sometimes, in similar fashion to Richter's series of women, the laborers look entombed by the factory. They toil behind machinery or bend their bodies over its interminable metal. The human body appears vulnerable and at risk of breaking in these candid black-and-white photos. In other images Schulze Eldoway's subjects look at the camera. Several wear masks or dark glasses, feeble protections alongside the mass of steel they operate and steam they inhale. Portraits that capture expressions of exhaustion at moments of rest are some of her most affecting. In one untitled image, a man and woman in coveralls, white caps, and jackets appear seated together (see Figure 2). Fatigue is legible on both of their faces. The man leans his back against a window frame behind him, his body collapsing onto his left side. He smokes and looks distantly into the camera. His companion, who appears younger owing to her long curly blonde locks, cups her face in her hands. Her elbows seem as if they may slip off their perch on her left and right knees. She stares at the floor in front of her. This image of work is conspicuously void of work. On a break, the man and woman are in between duties. They are not rejuvenated by their labors, but exhausted by them.

Schulze Eldoway's photographs of work may represent the dehumanizing quality of hard labor, but this is not their signature message. By highlighting the unheroic reality of work, she underscores the illusion of any image of work that occludes, distracts, or erases this reality. Yet, even as they return the human body to labor, these photographs do not dwell on a message of victimization. These are not passive subjects, but men who willingly appeared for Schulze Eldoway's camera. They are not heroes, as the state would wish them to be, but they are also not its victims. The photographs are then small acts of self-determination—moments when workers are allowed to just be people on the job, rather than the builders of utopia.

Socialist Antiheroes

While such images of labor demythologize work by showing it for what it is—messy, exhausting, dirty, dull—Schulze Eldowy's uncomplicated nudes and Wieckhorst's quotidian images of disability offer a more direct claim to self-determination in the face of official photographic practice. Josie McLellan has argued that the emergence of a new generation of artists in the 1980s, particularly those working with nude photography, evinces a shift in the public attitude toward state idealism, particularly its cult of the youthful, healthy, and vigorous body. She observes that when artists took "as their subjects men, children, the old, the overweight and the physically disabled, not only did their photographs point out the hypocrisy of mainstream nude photography, but they also drew attention to the regime's social and economic failures."⁵⁵ Regina Reichert and Siegmar Schulze rarely appear nude or even partially undressed. Nevertheless, their portraits draw explicit attention to their bodies in ways that mirror the work at play in Schulze Eldowy's unidealized nudes.

Wieckhorst includes four images in a sequence on Siegmar Schulze published in the West German arts magazine *Niemandland* (*No Man's Land*).⁵⁶ The first depicts him in his living room with his wife. She holds his bare chest and appears to whisper or nuzzle into his ear as he grips a coffee mug in his right hand. Signs of a disability are markedly absent in the image, which documents a tender and familiar moment between lovers. In the second photograph, Schulze lies in bed reaching his head over a basin as a nurse washes his hair. The flaccid drape of his body contrasts the rigid band that he tightly grasps with his left hand to secure his position. A wheelchair to the left of this scene also figures prominently in the final two images. In these, Siegmar appears in the midst of transport. First, a woman—likely his wife—wheels him backward between a path of furniture through a living room and into a brightly lit kitchen. Next, two men hoist him in his chair down a stairwell. For the first time, Siegmar looks at Wieckhorst's camera. His gaze is poignant, framed by a bevy of intent onlookers observing his body: the man behind him who guides his chair, the man in front of him who bears it down the stairs, and two small children who stand across from each other at the top of the wide stairwell and grip the bannister. Wieckhorst includes a text written by Siegmar with these four photographs. In it, he glosses the previous two decades, from the freak swimming accident that left him a paraplegic in June 1964 to his many moves into and out of nursing homes, to his marriage, and the recent purchase and renovation of a home he is readying for his imminent occupation.

The series belies nothing of its East German context. This, like the photo essay of Regina, documents a man's life told from his perspective. Its subject is, of course, disability. These photographs in fact humanize the subject of disability in part by granting it an audience. Specifically, people can gaze at images of disabled bodies without feeling ashamed and, in that opening, begin to see a range of emotion beyond pity. By permitting people to look at them, Siegmar and Regina claim control over their own image. In so doing, they define themselves as agents, not victims. This right to be seen likewise grants what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls "the right to look"—a political claim that recalibrates the power of vision by

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redefining both what is worthy of being seen and who is worthy of doing the seeing.⁵⁷

Onlookers participate in the creation of a more dynamic visual culture by looking at Siegmars and Regina. Their experience with disability is specific, but nevertheless metaphorical—a reminder of the heterogeneity that lay beneath the surface of typical representations of everyday life in East Germany.

Karl Gernot Kuehn describes Siegmars as a socialist antihero: “He is essentially unproductive and thus incapable of embodying the virtues of socialism.”⁵⁸ In his estimation, Wieckhorst’s portraits testify “to an indifferent destiny—a completely unfamiliar worldview in the GDR.”⁵⁹ Kuehn’s analysis is consistent with how the Soviet Union determined the rights of the disabled to social services and other benefits, which, according to anthropologist Sarah D. Phillips, reflected a privileging of “work capacity as the primary criterion for citizenship.”⁶⁰ It is thus unsurprising that the disabled faced profound physical and social marginalization, including limitations on education and career advancement couched as protections that ultimately reinforced their erasure from public life and effectively denied them “a common humanity.”⁶¹ Although Phillips’s cases are drawn from Russia and Ukraine, it is safe to assume that a comparable pathologizing of disability existed in the GDR. Clearly, Wieckhorst’s impulse to present images that celebrate rather than pity disability responded to this tendency. Moreover, it is not Siegmars’s disability, but his interest in putting that disability on display, which reveals the “indifference” to the GDR ableist worldview that Kuehn observes. Similarly, Schulze Eldowy’s workers, as well as her nudes, reveal a sense of self-worth that contradicts the heroic proletarian worldview associated with the GDR. This raises an important question of the dominance of that worldview, that is to say its familiarity or relevance. The viewpoint that Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst, as well as Richter and others before them, present on film, with the cooperation of their sitters, is arguably more familiar than that promoted in East Germany’s official visual culture. These are subjects who have eaten from the tree of knowledge. They have harnessed the power of photographic evidence to redefine reality. In short, the subjects of Schulze Eldowy and Wieckhorst’s photography are not outsiders, but insiders. They are subjects who know and subjects who are in the know. Their imperfections are thus not only hegemonic but dominant—expressions of the shared experience of East German state socialism. To misrecognize their agency is to reaffirm the authority their portraits contest.

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Notes:

(1.) The foundations of the ideological use of photography in images of labor in the GDR have its origins in the pre-World War II genre of *Arbeiterfotografie* (worker photography). For more on this movement, see Jorge Ribalta, ed., *The Worker Photography Movement (1926–1939)* (Madrid: TF Editores & Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2011).

(2.) Significantly, photography would not be professionalized as a fine art form until the early 1980s. For example, the Union of Fine Artists first established a photography working group in 1981, which led to the admission of photographers into this organization, which represented fine arts professionals. Photography first appeared in the national art exhibition in Dresden in its ninth iteration, which took place in 1982/83.

(3.) Sarah James identifies these legacies but nevertheless defines the East German party's use of the Weimar-era photo essay as a "straight-jacketed conception." *Common Ground: German Photographic Cultures across the Iron Curtain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 121.

(4.) In East Germany, Schulze Eldowy went simply by "Schulze."

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- (5.) Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography) (1981), http://web.pdx.edu/~vcc/Seminar/Rosler_photo.pdf, 1.
- (6.) Gundula Schulze Eldowy, "Lothar," *Am fortgewehten Ort. Berliner Geschichten* (Leipzig, Germany: Lehmann Verlag, 2011), 21.
- (7.) Ibid., 20.
- (8.) W. P. Jefanow cited in John P. Jacob, *Recollecting a Culture: Photography and the Evolution of a Socialist Aesthetic in East Germany* (Boston: Photographic Resource Center at Boston University, 1998), 6.
- (9.) Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2005), 3.
- (10.) T. O. Immisch, "Appearance and Being: GDR Photography of the 1970s and 1980s," in *Do Not Refreeze. Photography Behind the Berlin Wall*, eds. Nicola Freeman and Matthew Shaul (Manchester, UK: Cornerhouse, 2007), 24.
- (11.) James, *Common Ground*, 200.
- (12.) In *Antlitz der Zeit*, Sander used these men to visualize the social schematics of "Revolutionaries" and "Communist Leader," respectively.
- (13.) Hermann Exner cited in Sigrid Hofer, "Experimentelle Fotografie in der DDR. Edmund Kestings Porträtaufnahmen," *Marburger Jahrbuch für Kunstwissenschaft* 34 (2007): 313.
- (14.) See Friedrich Harneck, "Concerning the Question of Socialist Realism in Photography," *Die Fotografie* no. 8 (1960), reprinted in Jacob, *Recollecting a Culture*, 98–99. For example, Harneck writes that "The photographer is indeed able to paint directly with his eyes," and that "it is remarkable that the representational character of photography makes its misuse for formalist experiments more difficult" (98).
- (15.) Sontag, *On Photography*, 3.
- (16.) Ibid.
- (17.) Ibid., 4.
- (18.) Jacob, *Recollecting a Culture*, 9.
- (19.) In my dissertation, "Infiltration and Excess: Experimental Art and the East German State, 1980–1989" (2017), I argue that the state's direct and indirect support of artists (via educational and exhibition opportunities, for example) actually facilitated greater experimentation in the GDR's final decade.
- (20.) Matthew Shaul, "Once Thawed—Do Not Refreeze," *Do Not Refreeze*, 13.
- (21.) Ibid.

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(22.) Bernd Lindner, "Pictorial Contradictions: Press Photography in the GDR," in *The Shuttered Society: Art Photography in the GDR 1949–1989*, eds. Jana Duda, Gabriele Muschter, and Uwe Warnke (Bielefeld, Germany: Kerber Verlag, 2012), 321.

(23.) Christoph Tannert, personal interview, May 11, 2015.

(24.) Hofer, "Experimentelle Fotografie in der DDR," 315.

(25.) This is a central argument of my dissertation. See Sara Blaylock, "Infiltration and Excess: Experimental Art and the East German State 1980–1989, doctoral thesis, University of California—Santa Cruz.

(26.) Candice M. Hamelin, "The Diversification of East Germany's Visual Culture," in *The Ethics of Seeing: Photography and Twentieth-Century German History*, eds. Jennifer Evans, Paul Betts, and Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 228.

(27.) Sara Blaylock, "Aufstand des Materials. Körperbilder im Prenzlauer Berg der 1980er Jahre" (A Material Revolt: Body Portraits in the Prenzlauer Berg of the 1980s) in *Gegenstimmen: Kunst in der DDR 1976–1989 (Voices of Dissent: Art in the GDR)*, ed. Christoph Tannert (Berlin: Deutsche Gesellschaft & Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2016), 394–401.

(28.) The *Centre Culturel Français*, which opened in East Berlin in 1984, introduced a new range of especially French photographers from the early to mid-twentieth century. The American curator and erstwhile mail artist and photographer John P. Jacob likewise helped to connect Schulze with Robert Frank by smuggling copies of her prints over the Berlin border in 1985. John P. Jacob, personal interview, February 5, 2016.

(29.) James, *Common Ground*, 109.

(30.) See Wolfgang Engler's discussion of Kartin Rohnstock's research on the phenomenon of the "beer belly" as a sign of masculinity: *Die Ostdeutschen* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), 200.

(31.) Rudolf Arnheim, "On the Nature of Photography," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (September 1974): 155.

(32.) Ibid.

(33.) See, for example, John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

(34.) Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts," 1–10.

(35.) Arnheim, "On the Nature of Photography," 160.

(36.) Ibid., 155.

(37.) I first introduced this concept in my dissertation, "Infiltration and Excess," 64–67.

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- (38.) Stefan Wolle, "The Smiling Face of Dictatorship: On the Political Iconography of the GDR." In *German Photography 1870–1970*, eds. Klaus Honnef, Rolf Sachsse, and Karin Thomas (Cologne, Germany: Dumont, 1997), 127.
- (39.) Josie McLellan, "Visual Dangers and Delights: Nude Photography in East Germany," *Past & Present* 205 (November 2009): 169.
- (40.) Gundula Schulze Eldowy, "In the Autumn Leaves of Oblivion," *Berlin in einer Hundennacht (Berlin on a Dog's Night)* (Leipzig, Germany: Lehmanns Verlag, 2011), 24.
- (41.) Along with the Union of Fine Artists, which was responsible for the creation and dissemination of fine art, members of the *Kulturbund* were the arbiters—and the purse strings—of state culture.
- (42.) Karl Gernot Kuehn, *Caught: The Art of Photography in the German Democratic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 156.
- (43.) See Esther von Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses: Control, Compromise, and Participation in the GDR* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009); Nicola Freeman and Matthew Shaul, *Do Not Refreeze: Photography behind the Berlin Wall* (2007); John P. Jacob, *Recollecting a Culture: Photography and the Evolution of a Socialist Aesthetic in East Germany* (1998).
- (44.) Engler, *Die Ostdeutschen*, 194.
- (45.) Ibid.
- (46.) See, for example, Joshua Feinstein, *The Triumph of the Ordinary. Depictions of Daily Life in the East German Cinema 1949–1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
- (47.) See, for example, Martin Dumas, "Der 'reale Sozialismus'—Vielfalt der Kunst als Programm," *Malerei der DDR. Funktionen der bildenden Kunst im Realen Sozialismus* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, Germany: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), 246–320.
- (48.) Jens Gieseke has demonstrated that the Stasi's introduction of greater interpersonal forms of observation (i.e., "Zersetzung") from the mid-1970s onward reflected a new strategy for the state to control the East German public, while it still maintained a ruse of civil liberties. Jens Gieseke, *The History of the Stasi. East Germany's Secret Police, 1945–1990* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 147.
- (49.) Von Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses*, 176.
- (50.) Claus Löser, *Strategien der Verweigerung: Untersuchungen zum politisch-ästhetischen Gestus unangepasster filmischer Artikulation in der Spätphase der DDR* (Berlin: DEFA-Stiftung, 2011); Seth Howes, *Moving Images on the Margins: Experimental Film in Late Socialist East Germany* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2019).

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(51.) For more on this, see Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer (1934)," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 768–782.

(52.) In film, for example, the works of this period inaugurated the so-called East German New Wave cinema. On this see, for example, Joshua Feinstein, "Straddling the Wall: Socialist Realism Meets the Nouvelle Vague in *Der geteilte Himmel*," *The Triumph of the Ordinary*, 110–136.

(53.) Gundula Schulze Eldowy, "Die Plaudereien des Scharfschützen," *Am fortgewehten Ort. Berliner Geschichten* (Leipzig, Germany: Lehmann, 2011), 192–193.

(54.) According to Schulze Eldowy, the foreman allowed her access to all parts of the factory with the exception of the location where prisoners labored. Schulze Eldowy, "Die Plaudereien des Scharfschützen," 198.

(55.) McLellan, "Visual Dangers and Delights," 163.

(56.) This publication, subtitled *Zeitschrift zwischen den Kulturen*, featured artists from both Germanys. Importantly, its editor and cofounder, Eckhart Gillen, would break ground on the research and exhibition of art from East Germany both before and after the two Germanys reunified in 1990. His most significant achievement for the study of the art and culture of the GDR has thus far been the 2009 exhibition *Art of Two Germanys. Cold War Cultures*, which he cocurated with Stephanie Barron from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

(57.) Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look. A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

(58.) Kuehn, *Caught*, 159.

(59.) Ibid.

(60.) Sarah D. Phillips, "'There Are No Invalids in the USSR!': A Missing Soviet Chapter in the New Disability History," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2009), <http://dsq.sds.org/article/view/936/1111>.

(61.) Ibid.

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