



WHAT STAND BETWEEN US

Photography as a Medium
for Chronicling

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Photography as a Medium for Chronicling

Main festival exhibition of
EMOP Berlin—European Month of Photography

EMOP Berlin c/o Akademie der Künste,
28 FEB—4 MAI 2025

Cover: Simon Lehner, *Father*, archive material 3D scan / rendering with incorporated archive images
(early stage), 2005–2018. From the series: *How far is a lightyear?*, 2005–2019, C-Print, 90 x 72 cm,
Courtesy: KOW Berlin, Copyright: Simon Lehner

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WHAT STANDS BETWEEN US

Photography as a Medium for Chronicling

by Maren Lübbke-Tidow

‘A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history’. (Walter Benjamin)

Would Walter Benjamin have still written this sentence from his fragmentary thesis *On the Concept of History* today? In a never-ending stream an entire generation of chroniclers is currently documenting its personal stories. More than ever before, in an age of AI-enhanced reproduction, we find ourselves surrounded by image and text, by comments, film clips, and photographs. Current events and personal states are recorded in equal measure. The ‘change-exhausted’ and crisis-ridden society (Steffen Mau) is divided and reacts emotionally.

There’s a growing need to counteract this and — in view of the fragility of democracies, environmental destruction, rising violence, exclusion, and social disintegration — to offer something constructive in response. But what can we really know, prove, or say with images, particularly photographic ones? And isn’t it precisely these images that deepen the divide, that are the very medium of ‘fake’ and polarize us — in short, that stand between us?

The exhibition sets out to interrupt this cycle of ongoing self-reassurance. Projects by approximately 20 artists offer personal perspectives for creating a resonant space for their respective subjects. The works listen and learn from others (Emmanuel Levinas) — not as megaphones that drown out everything else, but by reflecting on how, beyond mere simplification, one can tell it in a nuanced and, yes, gentle way. The exhibition highlights social realities and lends them a voice in what are for the most part (micro)narratives. Because telling a story is ‘something formally different from demanding something’, ‘telling something is more fragile than announcing something, different than suing to attain something’ (Carolin Emcke).

The fact that the concept of history plays a key role in regarding the present becomes clear in images in which the past flares up in the present, offering flashes of insight — upon which moments of resistance can emerge.

INSTALLATION VIEWS

what stands between us

Photography as a Medium for Chronicling



From left to right: Boris Mikhailov, Leon Kahane, Maya Schweizer



Installation Simon Lehner (detail)



Installation Helga Paris



From left to right: Susanne Keichel, Helga Paris, Simon Lehner, Cana Bilir-Meier, Einar Schleef (showcase)



Installation Raisan Hameed



From left to right: John Heartfield (showcase), Christine Würmell, Raisan Hameed, Walter Benjamin (showcase)



Installation Hannah Darabi and Benoît Grimbert (detail)



From left to right: Pınar Öğrenci, Hannah Darabi and Benoît Grimbert (showcases), Pınar Öğrenci



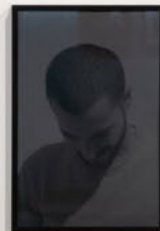
Installation Wenke Seemann



From left to right: Bérangère Fromont, Wenke Seemann, Hannah Darabi and Benoît Grimbert (showcases)



From left to right: Bérangère Fromont, Walter Benjamin (showcase)



Installation Bérangère Fromont (detail)



Installation Leon Kahane



Installation Yevgenia Belorusets



From left to right: Maya Schweizer, Beate Gütschow, Ilit Azoulay, Tobias Zielony



Installation Maya Schweizer



Installation Beate Gütschow (detail)



This wall honors groups striving for a better future and peace in Israel and Palestine. Diese Wand ist Gruppen gewidmet, die sich für eine friedliche Zukunft in Israel und Palästina einsetzen.

Installation Ilit Azoulay in collaboration with Maisoun Karaman (detail)



Installation Tobias Zielony



Installation Tobias Zielony (detail)

ARTISTS

Walter Benjamin

Ilit Azoulay

Yevgenia Belorusetz

Cana Bilir-Meier

Hannah Darabi & Benoît Grimbart

Fungi

Bérangère Fromont

Beate Gütschow

Raisan Hameed

John Heartfield

Leon Kahane

Susanne Keichel

Simon Lehner

Boris Mikhailov

Pinar Ögürcü

Helga Paris

Einar Schleef

Maya Schweizer

Wenke Seemann

Christine Würmli

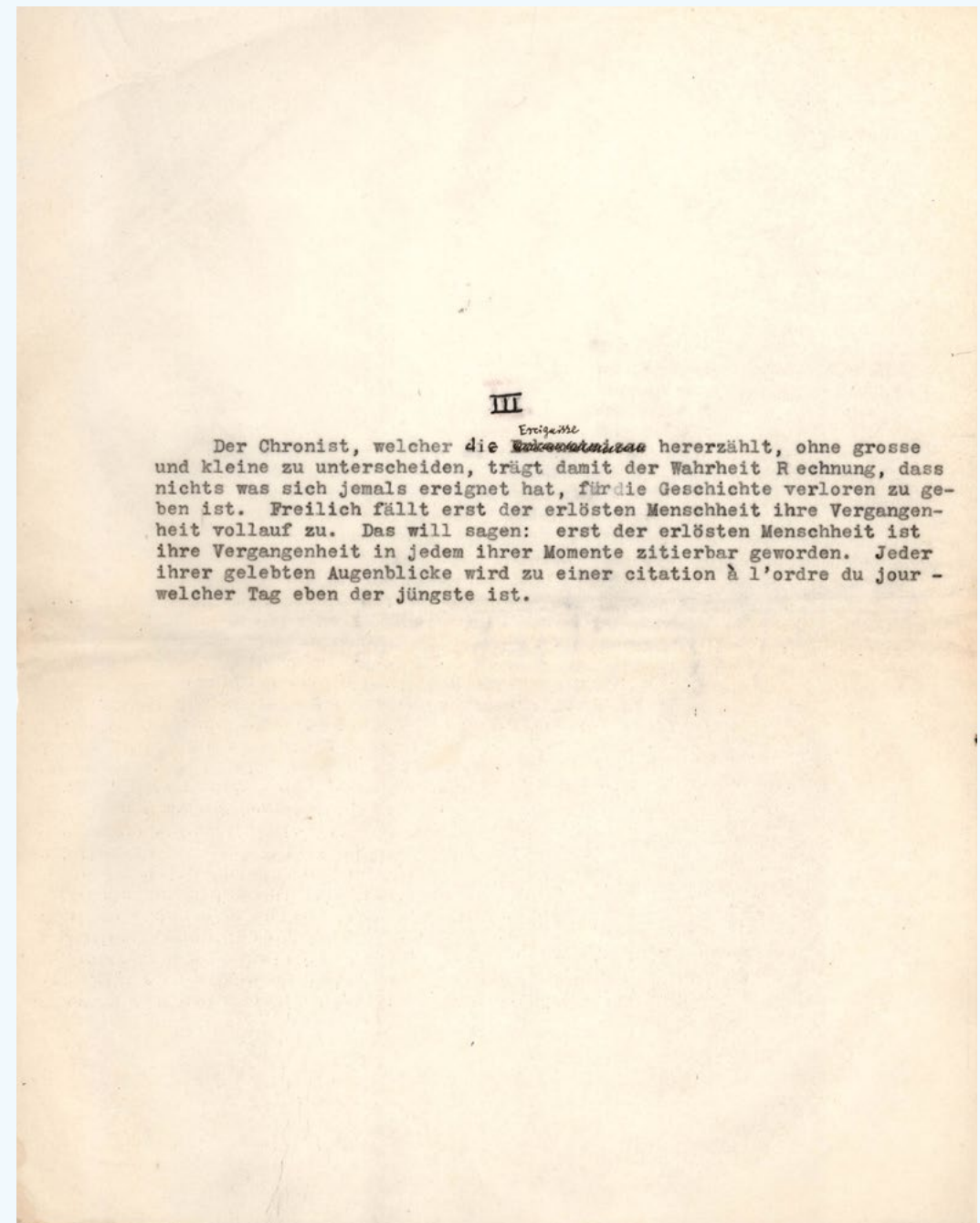
Tobias Zielony

On the Concept of History is one of Walter Benjamin's (born 1892 in Berlin; died 1940 in Portbou, Spain) most famous works; it is also the last one he completed in outline form. As he wrote to Gretel Adorno in April 1940: 'The war and the constellation that brought it about led me to take down a few thoughts which I can say that I have kept with me, indeed kept from myself, for nigh on twenty years'.

The *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, as they are also called, can be read as a kind of legacy, perhaps even as a political manifesto. Benjamin modestly described them as a 'bouquet of whispering grasses, gathered on reflective walks'. Another quote from the letter of 1940 mentioned above demonstrates that the theses are more than just casual notes: 'They make me suspect that the problem of remembering (and of forgetting), which appears in them on another level, will continue to occupy me for a long time'.

Four of a total of twenty theses were selected for the exhibition from this 'personal copy', as Benjamin called the typescript. It is one of six surviving versions. The theses themselves remained fragmentary, as evidenced by the handwritten corrections and additions of key concepts. It is worth noting that Benjamin changed the numbering of the individual theses, in some cases several times, which among other things conveys the quoting and montage method he perfected. On the trail of the past as 'an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized', the montage reflects a type of horizontal thinking, a process in constant motion that is anti-hierarchical and goes far beyond any distinctions between 'important' and 'unimportant'. Benjamin writes, for instance, of giving 'the rags, the refuse' their due: 'Thereby, to discover the crystal of the total event in the analysis of small individual moments'.

It may also be possible to find (micro) stories and experiences of the many 'others' in these small individual moments, to then, in their (re)montage, break down some of what stands between us — or else to emphasize it.



Untitled (*On the Concept of History* / personal copy, These III), 1940, typescript carbon copy with handwritten corrections, 27,5 x 21,6 cm, Akademie der Künste Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archive, Inv.-No.: 1643/3



Heart to Heart, 2023, sound installation, duration: 37:19 Min., Copyright: Kulturprojekte Berlin, Photo: dotgain.info

In her research-based artistic practice, Ilit Azoulay (born 1972 in Tel Aviv–Jaffa, lives in Berlin) regards the archive as a place of production where our relationship to the past materializes and which sensitizes us to the present and future. Her interventions in existing archives fragment and reconfigure visual materials to reveal something they previously lacked or suppressed. In the process, questions arise concerning historiography's mechanisms and forms of empathy.

For her sound piece *Heart to Heart*, Ilit Azoulay continued her collaboration with the Palestinian energy healer and light language practitioner Maisoun Karaman that began in 2022. Karaman moderates for Israeli–Palestinian women's and peace groups and works as a spiritual coach. In her sessions, she enters a trance-like state in order to resonate with acoustic impressions and, much like a medium, reproduce them in her body and with her speaking voice. This results in remarkable sounds, a symphony of coded waves that her listeners receive in encrypted form. According to Karaman, these codes contain seeds that, when planted in listeners' ears, open up hearts and help us expand our ability to listen to one another. Azoulay and Karaman see their collaborative project as a way to get in touch and as a form of healing. The sound work, which was created in November 2023, shortly after the October 7 attacks, came from an 'ongoing exchange — painful and complex, but also enriching — with Jewish, Palestinian, Arab, and Israeli voices' (June Drevet, *Codes from the Future*, 2024). The resulting 'transmissions' are connected by the belief in, or in the invocation of, a common future, despite the ongoing nightmarish war in the Middle East.

Ilit Azoulay added handouts to the sound installation to provide information on initiatives and groups that are committed to a better future in Israel and Palestine.

[Here](#) you find the complete list of all initiatives and organisations as well as links to their websites.

Curator's Note: An exhibition that aims to address contemporary conflicts cannot ignore the current war in the Middle East. We have deliberately decided not to show any photographic work that deals with this conflict within the framework of this exhibition. We were convinced by the approach of Israeli artist Ilit Azoulay, who seeks both the power of change and healing through a process with the Palestinian Maison Karaman, and presents concrete initiatives for a better future in Israel and Palestine.

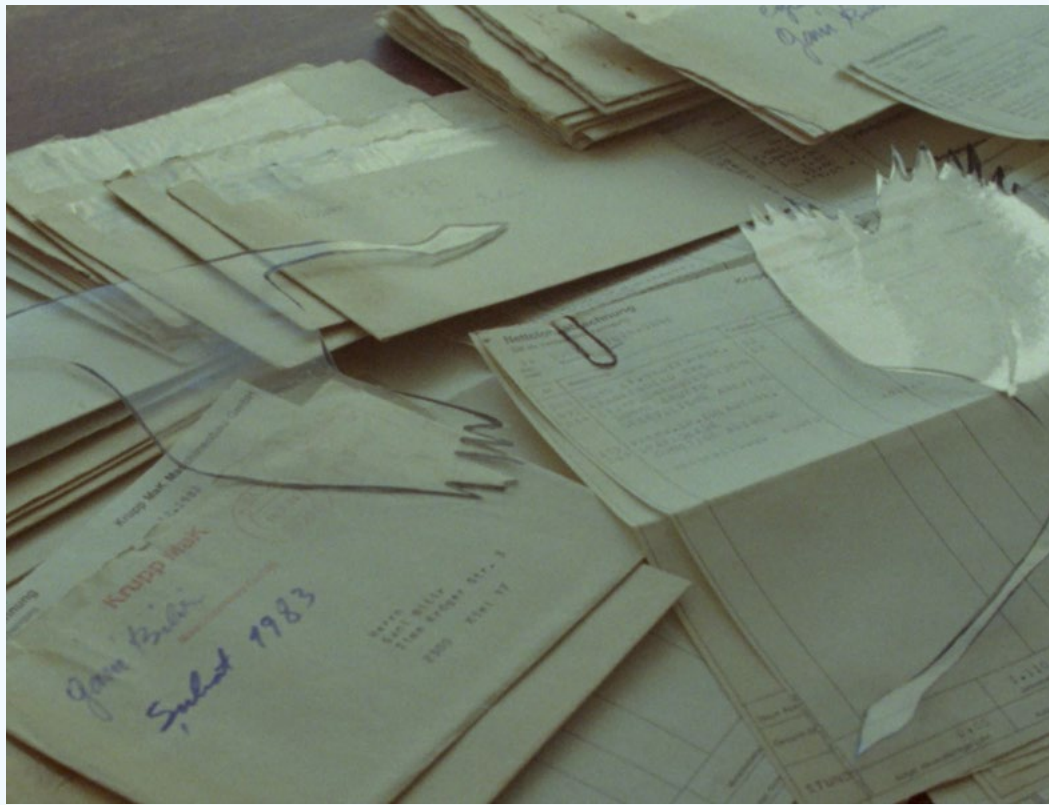


From the series *May 20 to June 20, 2024*, 2024, fine art print, 29 x 43,5 cm

Yevgenia Belorusets (born 1980 in Kyiv, lives in Berlin and Kyiv) is a writer and photographer. Her work is based on the stories of people who have been living with a latent occupation for many years and, since early 2022, with the harsh reality of a full-on Russian invasion of Ukraine. Belorusets records her observations in the form of essays and short stories, which she combines with her photographs or, as she says, brings into conflict with them.

‘My job is to talk about how to live with the reality of war based on a few private cases,’ writes Yevgenia Belorusets in one of her recent essays, in which she reflects on the mobilization law that came into effect in Ukraine in May 2024 and that drafts men without their consent and enforces harsh penalties when they resist. Among other things, Belorusets’s installation shows us the floor of the recently renamed ‘Ukrainian Heroes Square’ subway station in Kyiv, which is entirely devoid of heroism. Instead, the images exude a trapped atmosphere and the absence of freedom. Belorusets combines these images with portraits of men living in hiding to escape the draft, men who often have to get by without basic infrastructure such as electricity and water.

Belorusets took her pictures from a distance using an analogue camera fitted with an unusual lens. The camera had been in a repair shop for some time, and because the artist was unable to pick it up, ‘it was repaired for the duration of the entire war.’ The resulting photographs resemble wounded people. The images are out of focus, and it’s almost impossible to recognize anything — evidently, even after being repaired, the camera didn’t work properly — as if it were protesting its purpose of recording events.



Still from *Zwischenwelt / In-between World*, 2023, 16mm film (digitized), colour, sound, duration: 17:36 min.

The essayistic films, photographs, texts, drawings, and performances of Cana Bilir-Meier (born 1986 in Munich, lives in Munich) work with the constructs of migration, society, memory, and history. In combining public archival material with private documents and recollections, Cana Bilir-Meier creates a critical survey of prevailing social narratives that aims to expand and diversify perspectives, biographies, and living realities.

Many years after her grandfather Gani Bilir migrated from Turkey to Germany in 1962 as part of a labour recruitment agreement, Cana Bilir-Meier discovered his pay slips in the family archive. A testimony to his more than 20 years of employment in an engine factory in Kiel as a 'guest worker', the pay slips also offer evidence of the difficult conditions migrants worked under in Germany. Among the documents, the artist also found two of her grandfather's paper cut-outs of migratory birds and combined them with poems by Aulic Anamika, sculptures by Ahu Dural, and music by Julian Warner aka Fehler Kuti. Bilir-Meier often conceives her works as collaborative projects.

In a performative act in Munich's urban space, the film's three protagonists use these documents to erect a temporary monument for a society of the many. This monument stands for the countless oppositional and unappreciated stories and biographies of the 'in-between world', a phrase Anamika uses to refer to life in migration: 'Between two worlds and three languages, the wandering body searches for a capable spirit that can leave everything without guilt, pain, or roots'. Not least, *Zwischenwelt* (In-between World) also is an approach to the poet and philosopher Mahammad Iqbal, whose own Munich monument, erected in 1986, the film repeatedly depicts.



Still from *This Makes Me Want to Predict the Past*, 2019, Super-8 film (digitized), black-and-white, sound, duration: 16:05 min.

The Olympia Shopping Centre (OEZ) in Munich was the scene of an attack in 2016 in which nine people were murdered and many more injured. Initially declared to be non-political, thanks to the ongoing mediation work of the family members affected, the racist and right-wing terrorist context has been considered proven since October 2019. Cana Bilir-Meier's film portrays the Kurdish and Turkish girls Sosuna Yildiz, Aleyna Osmanoğlu and Berfin Ünsal killing time in and around the OEZ, riding escalators or trying on clothes and accessories. They re-enact scenes from the play *Düşler Ülkesi (Land of Dreams)*, historical photos of which can be seen in the video. Written by Erman Okay and realized with the participation of the artist's mother, Zühal Bilir-Meier, the play premiered in 1982 at Munich's Theater der Jugend and was dedicated to the everyday life and history of the 'guest' or migrant workers. As an anti-racist educational theatre project, it was intended to encourage young people to tell their stories from their own perspective. The audio track accompanying the video picks up on user comments beneath a YouTube video by the musician Childish Gambino, in which fans reinterpret a line from his song *Redbone*. The contradiction the line implies in wanting to predict the past refers to the experience of racism that connects the young people of the 1980s with today's youth.



From the Artist book *Neukölln 'Heroes'*, Bartleby & Co.: Brussels and Berlin, 2013. Material from Hannah Darabi and Benoît Grimbert as well as David Bowie, Franz Hessel, Christopher Isherwood, Siegfried Kracauer, Robert Soodnak, Edgar Ukmer, Billy Wilder, and Aldi-Nord.

Hannah Darabi (born 1982 in Tehran, lives in Paris) works with her own photographs, archival materials, and found footage from private and public archives. As an artist of Iranian origin, she creates links in her materials to reflect on the history of Iran, its political upheavals, and the effects these massive changes have had on the country's political culture. Other recurring themes in her work are the influence of the visual-cultural identity of the Iranian diaspora on its country of origin and vice versa.

Benoît Grimbert (born 1969 in Mantes-la-Jolie, lives in Paris) is interested in urban spaces as stages for overlapping historical processes and contemporary narratives. Using a photo documentary approach, he investigates landscapes and built environments. By combining his images with historical texts and pop-cultural artifacts, he charges them with meaning, causing them to oscillate between documentary and apparition.

Neukölln 'Heroes' can be conceived as a journey through time in which David Bowie would be the main driver. In the mid-seventies, fed up with the tumultuous life in Los Angeles, David Bowie found Berlin particularly attractive as a place where he could be anonymous. He was inspired by the books of Christopher Isherwood and especially *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, which describe the decadent Berlin of the 30s. In 1977, the album *Heroes* was released, which was recorded entirely in Berlin. One of the instrumental pieces on the B-side, *Neukölln*, conveys a strong sense of the hardship and sadness among residents in this now-popular area where, as Bowie later said, 'Turks are shackled in bad conditions.'

Thirty-five years later, Hannah Darabi and Benoît Grimbert photographed the district. A contemporary counterpoint to *Neukölln of Heroes*, these photographs evoke both the present time and time passing, or, by way of contrast, time that stands still. More than anything, this book confronts us with a 'cataract of times' that recalls Isherwood of the 30s through texts such as Siegfried Kracauer's *Die Angestellten* (The Salaried Masses), Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin* (Walking in Berlin), and film stills from *Menschen am Sonntag* (People on Sunday, Robert Siodmak).

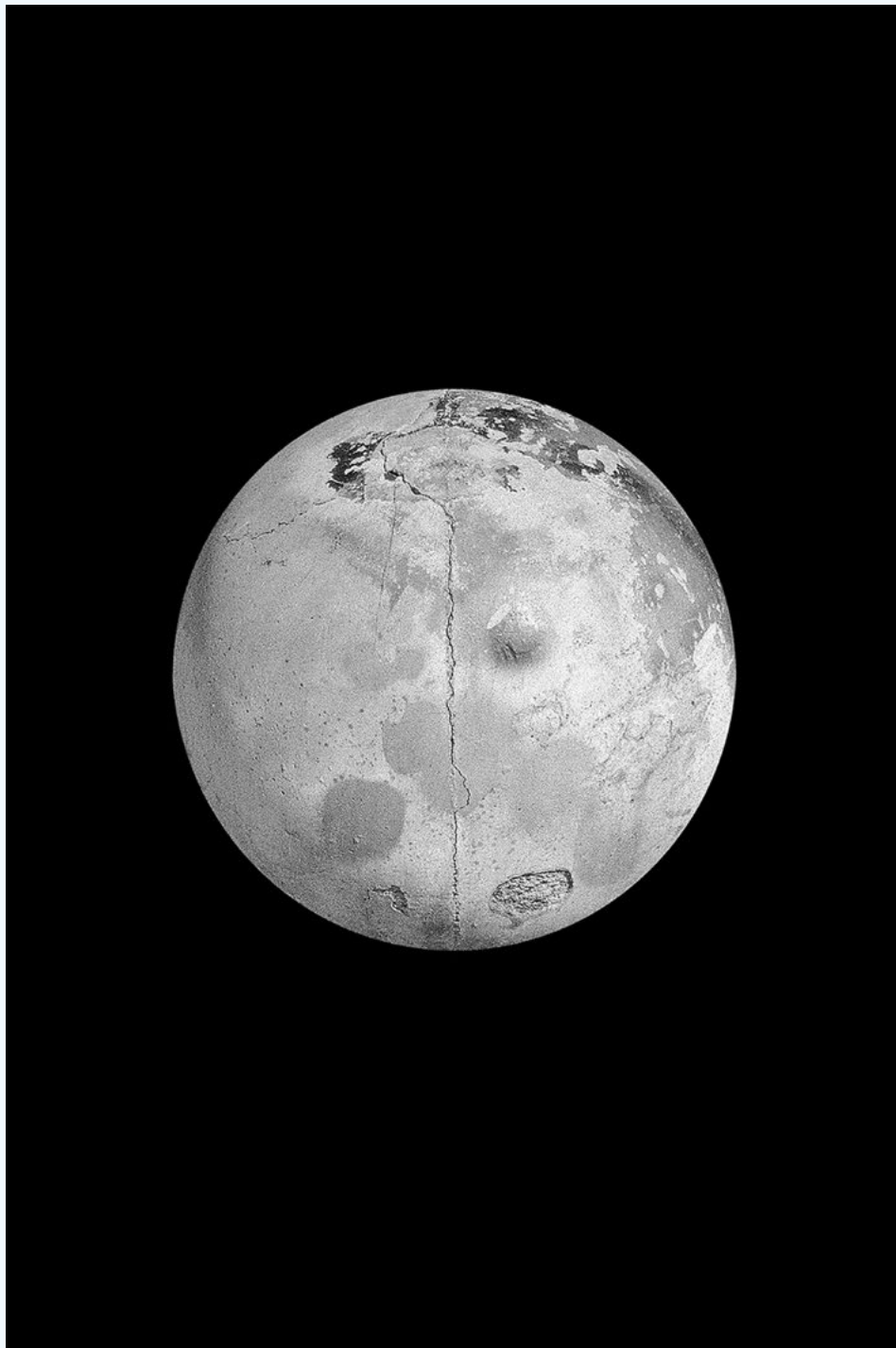


The work of Phuong Tran Minh aka Fungi, (born 1988 in Hanoi, lives in Hanau) oscillates between visual and performance art. She works with photography and poetry slam and stages performances that incorporate her knowledge of martial arts. Fungi's art addresses background and identity; the American deployment of Agent Orange in the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese diaspora in Germany also play key roles.

Anger, despair, rage, and a feeling for the poetry of language are tangible in Fungi's earliest writings. Phuong Tran Minh aka Fungi grew up as the daughter of Vietnamese contract workers in Saxony-Anhalt; her poems address the experience of exclusion as well as hatred, racism, and violence — but also her parents' silence and belief that the future's promise can only be fulfilled through suffering and keeping quiet about injustice. It was this inability to offer a 'home' for one another and their feelings of uprootedness and homelessness that led to a separation between the generations.

What remains is 'a delta of longing on my chest' that, after many years, takes the artist back to the places where she grew up with her family. In *My Far East*, she and her mother set out in search of remaining traces. Her photographic road movie is driven by the urge to learn what happened in these places and how the mother and daughter might relate to them today — and to assure themselves that these places actually exist and form the very real basis of their shared history. The images call for a closer look: in spite of the brilliant blue sky, they resemble faded views of deserted cities or places whose facades repel our gaze. The fact that there's an uneasiness in these images and that they 'must' be full of clues pertaining to personal history is hinted at, perhaps, by the undergrowth creeping out from the corners or by the torn-up streets — but also by Fungi's texts, which add vivid sensory information to the (visual) spaces representing her home, where she nonetheless remains a stranger.

From the series *Mein ferner Osten* (My Far East), 2021 – ongoing, inkjet print, 75 x 50 cm



In her films, photographs, and artist books, Bérangère Fromont (born 1975 in Martigues, lives in Paris) moves between document and staging. She explores the boundaries of the personal and intimate in its transition to the collective and often interweaves literary references into her material. Resistance and defiance are central concepts in her work.

In 1933, in his essay *Experience and Poverty*, Walter Benjamin writes '[...] in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, frail human body'. With this text fragment in mind, Bérangère Fromont visited Athens in 2017 to find a city of contrasts: a historical heritage manifested architecturally everywhere and in collision with a crisis-ridden present.

'Its dazzling mythological heritage coexists with its dark and dramatic political and economic situation. The sun shines brightly, bearing down on the streets. [...] The idea of resistance assumes its full meaning here. Bodies rising up tirelessly together against the chaos of history. In permanent revolution.' (Bérangère Fromont) The artist works with architectural details and combines ruins of the past with the dilapidated objects of present-day speculation. She juxtaposes portraits of a young man named Odysseas with photographs of geometric bodies that, upon closer inspection, turn out to be sticks and stones. Complemented by worked-over archival images of uprisings and police operations, the photographs form a series that creates a heterogeneous image of the city and its political imprinting. Disparate times seem to merge into one another; at the same time, they offer a palimpsest of the present: 'The immensity of a moment, expanded and spread out, in different dimensions of space and time.' (Bérangère Fromont)



Still from *C'est pas beau pour une fille*, 2017, Video, Farbe, Ton, Dauer: 03:24 Min., Courtesy Galerie Baqueville, Paris

„C'est pas beau pour une fille“, m'a dit ma mère

C'est pas beau pour une fille
 C'est pas beau une fille qui fait la tête
 C'est pas beau une fille qui fronce les yeux
 Une fille ça doit sourire
 C'est pas beau les cheveux courts pour une fille
 Une fille ça doit mettre des robes
 Une fille ne jure pas devant les matchs de foot
 Une fille ça doit être féminine
 T'étais tellement jolie quand tu étais petite
 Une fille ça n'élève pas la voix
 Une fille c'est plus sensible
 Qu'est-ce que j'ai fait pour avoir une fille comme ça
 T'es quand même pas une sale gouine
 C'est pas beau pour une fille

'That's not nice for a girl', my mother said

It's not nice for a girl
 It's not nice for a girl to sulk
 It's not nice for a girl to frown
 A girl has to smile
 It's not nice for a girl to have short hair
 A girl should wear dresses
 A girl shouldn't swear watching soccer games
 A girl has to be feminine
 You were so pretty when you were little
 A girl doesn't raise her voice
 A girl is more sensitive
 What did I do to have a daughter like this?
 But you're not a dirty lesbian
 That's not nice for a girl



Excerpts from the photographic diary *Widerstand, Flut, Brand, Widerstand* (Resistance, Flood, Fire, Resistance), Chapter 7 *Ahrtal*, Chapter 13 *Ahrtal*, Chapter 17 *Falkenberg-Elster*, 2021 – ongoing, poster print, 91 x 172 cm

In her photographic work, Beate Gütschow (born 1970 in Mainz, lives in Berlin and Cologne) examines how cultural imprinting influences our vision and perception. Up into the 2010s, she approached her themes, for the most part landscapes and modern urban spaces, in digital montages. Since becoming part of the climate justice movement, she has increasingly adopted a photo documentary approach as a form of political activism.

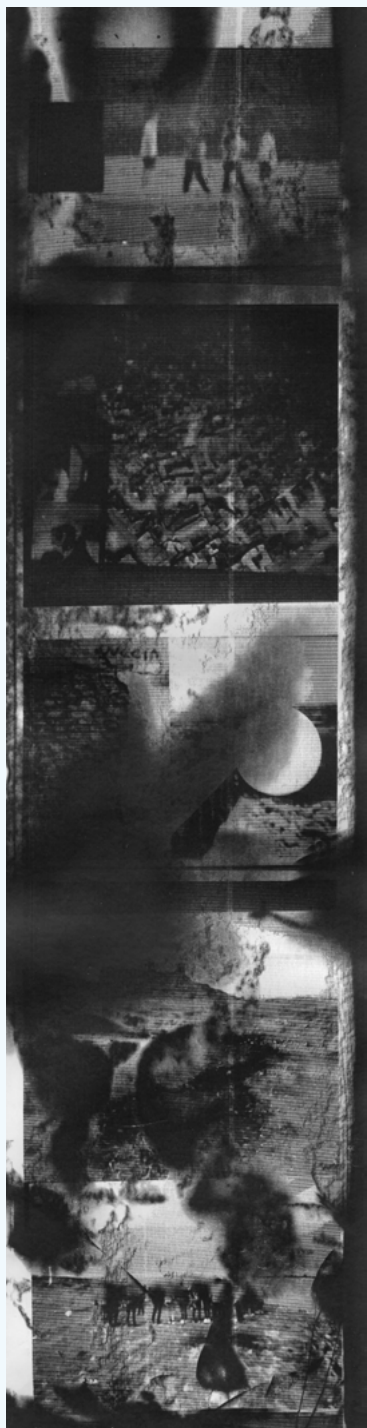
In her long-term photographic projects, Beate Gütschow observes places and landscapes where the effects of climate change can be seen and experienced directly: her subjects include the flood in the Ahr Valley in the summer of 2021 and the forest fires in Treuenbrietzen, Brandenburg, in 2022. Contrary to the usual way disasters are portrayed across the media, Beate Gütschow's ongoing photographic diary offers quiet, intricately detailed images in which the consequences for people, ecosystems, and the infrastructure gradually but inevitably emerge. Her works are accompanied by texts that explain the circumstances surrounding the events, bolster the images with facts, and reflect Gütschow's personal experiences and role as documentarian — aspects she merges in these photographic series, perhaps as a way to address facts that call our entire social organization into question. In *Was wahr ist. Über Gewalt und Klima* (What Is True. On Violence and Climate, 2024), Carolin Emcke writes: 'Telling the truth always entails a normative aspect, a reference or recourse to a humanity that has always been valid, even if it is contested and denied every day'. Beate Gütschow has answered the urgent call to action and is involved in the climate justice movement; through photography and writing, and with a steady hand, she documents things that might still seem unthinkable, but have already become true.



In his work, Raisan Hameed (born 1991 in Mosul, lives in Leipzig) questions the evidentiary character of visual documents. In an approach that is at once conceptual and experimental, his photographs alter original and/or source material. Hameed conceives his photographic groups and multimedia installations as both political commentary and a project of remembrance devoted to the themes of war, flight, and exile.

All of Raisan Hameed's artistic works are inscribed with memory politics. They speak of war in his hometown of Mosul in Iraq and the devastating loss it brought, as well as his own personal experience of flight. In his photographic works in particular, Hameed sets out to visually bear witness to something that is barely visible today.

Zer-Störung finds its departure point in family photos that were damaged in one of the wars in Iraq. The pictures fell off the wall, the glass shards scratched their surfaces, and then entire layers peeled off. What remains are fragments and details that only offer isolated points of reference for identifying specific people and events. Raisan Hameed's photographic approach, however, is to preserve these scenes in order to remember them. In an apparent attempt to erect a monument to the past and the irretrievably lost, he enlarges what can still be seen to monumental proportions — as if he could, in this way, show 'even more' and testify to the veracity of what once happened.



Raisan Hameed's work *Zer-Störung* is suspended in an ambivalence between the present and the fleeting. *Embers of Narratives*, in which heat was used to deform thermal photo paper, follows a similar vein. The artist had exposed the paper with Google Street Views depicting locations that Hameed once visited in his childhood and youth, such as his school, university, etc., and that were destroyed in past wars. Not only do these places no longer exist in Mosul today — Raisan Hameed, who lives in exile, would not, in any case, be able to travel there. The artist's performative approach generates a sense of immediacy, presumably to activate his memories and experiences and 'capture' an image, while the photographs themselves conjure an atmosphere of constant emergency and traumatic occurrences. At the same time, the more Hameed tries to capture these experiences in pictures, the blurrier they become. Scanned and printed on long banners, the softness of the fabric contrasts with the injuries to the image's original material. They remain — quite deliberately — artifacts in flux of a memory that is impossible to grasp.

From the series *Embers of Narratives*, 2024, pigment print on textile banner, 500 x 90 cm



Alle Fäuste zu einer geballt [...] (All fists clenched into one [...]), photographic montage for the front page of the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (AIZ), special issue: Antifaschistische Aktionseinheit, vol. XIII, no. 40, October 4, 1934. Silver gelatin print, laminated, 40 x 30 cm, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Art Collection, Inv.-No.: JH 1910

John Heartfield (born 1891 in Schmargendorf, died 1968 in Berlin) was a German painter, graphic artist, and stage designer. His first political photomontages and book covers emerged during the Weimar Republic in the midst of Berlin's Dada movement. Heartfield created the photographic montage *Alle Fäuste zu einer geballt* (All fists clenched into one) as a cover for the socialist weekly magazine *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* (AIZ), which was published in Berlin from 1921 to 1933 and in exile in Prague from 1933 to 1938. The cover shows an arm raised with a clenched fist, with crowds of people added in a vertical composition, gesturing similarly as a sign of militant resistance. The illusionistic photomontage suggests a unity of the masses. On closer inspection, however, we see that Heartfield combined various photographs of crowds that can be found inside the issue of the magazine. By cutting them out and collaging them, Heartfield created an image of the forces that needed to be unified for the resistance. In describing his anti-fascist visual strategies, Vera Chiquet writes that 'his fictions conjure previously unknown imaginative spaces that were not yet thought or part of the collective visual memory, but so creatively and symbolically succinct that they made an imprint'.⁽¹⁾ At the time Hitler seized power, with the illustrated magazine the quintessential medium of the day, the imperative was to defeat emerging fascism by its own means: 'Heartfield illustrates the manipulative practices [...]. His photomontages do not preach to consumers, but rather make them smarter and offer them a resistant way to view images.'⁽²⁾

⁽¹⁾ Vera Chiquet, *Fake-Fotos. John Heartfields Fotomontagen in populären Illustrierten*, Bielefeld 2018, pp. 76–85.

⁽²⁾ *Ibid* p. 224.



Still from *Pitchipoï*, 2019, 2-channel video, colour, sound, duration: 18:43 min., courtesy Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin

Leon Kahane (born 1985 in Berlin, lives in Berlin and Tel Aviv) works with a variety of media and installation, and frequently uses photography and film. At the heart of his artistic explorations are historical, political, and economic upheavals and what they mean for the people caught up in them, people whose fates demand witness. Kahane's own (family) history also offers an opportunity to search for evidence tied to memory politics.

How can something that became true be told in images when the site of the event reveals nearly nothing about what happened? When Leon Kahane decided to work with the story of his grandmother, Doris Kahane, and the period of her internment in the Nazi transit camp Drancy near Paris from May 1944 until her liberation on August 18, 1944, he visited the Cité de la Muette residential complex in Drancy, France, which was built as a modernist showpiece and confiscated by the German Wehrmacht in 1940 to be recommissioned as a camp. Between 1940 and 1944, over 63,000 of the 65,000 internees were deported from here to Auschwitz. Everyday life today, however, offers almost no hint of the historical significance of the place. Kahane interweaves day-to-day events in the Cité de la Muette with the voice of Lucien Tinader, a contemporary witness who leads viewers on a tour of the residential complex, describing the architectural features during the period it was used as a camp and the reality of inmate life. He wants to bear witness to what he has seen, and that also means talking about what cannot be seen. In this respect, the title of the work, *Pitchipoï*, takes on a dual meaning. 'Pitchipoï' was the name used in the camp for the place that awaited Jewish prisoners after their deportation. Absent of any knowledge regarding where they were being taken, the inmates invented a term for the unimaginable. Kahane's formal approach to the question of whether or not Nazi atrocities can be represented follows a similar principle: the film shows things not readily visible, while offering a glimpse of the truth that lies behind the visible.

Leon Kahane combines Lucien Tinaders' words in the English translation with photographs of street signs in Drancy named after local resistance fighters. Below the names, it is noted how each person met their end. Lucien Tinader also recounts some of their fates in the film.



From the series *Soziale Gerechtigkeit (Herkunft, Schule, Arbeit)* (Social Justice [Origin, School, Work]), 2021 – ongoing, c-print, 60 x 40 cm

In her work, Susanne Keichel (born 1981 in Dresden, lives in Dresden) addresses, usually over extended periods of time, social grievances and their effects on the lives of those caught up in them. Her artistic method consists in an ‘indirect form of documentation’, i.e., an associative way of arranging images whereby things that are not told or shown also become part of the story.

Susanne Keichel has been dedicating herself to her *Soziale Gerechtigkeit (Herkunft, Schule Arbeit)* (Social Justice [Origin, School, Work]) project since 2021. This was preceded by several years working with students in the vocational track at a Dresden high school. In the process, she observed the degree to which the German educational system perpetuates social inequality to this day. In addition to the photographs, *Schule* (School) also consists of the interview film *Fragmente Sozialer Realitäten* (Fragments of Social Realities), in which Susanne Keichel gives her students space to talk about their experiences at school, describe their living conditions, and express their desire for change — and what they would do if they had a superpower. The photographs of the chapter that follows, *Arbeit* (Work), are also based on intensive research and a familiarity with local conditions; they address the connection between social background and educational and professional opportunities. Instead of weaving together her three chapters to form a seamless reconstruction of individual fates and events or a complete documentation, Susanne Keichel works with fragments and omissions — and with the knowledge that micro-stories can also tell us something about social reality.



Still from *Echo Chambers (Performance I)*, 2024, Video Animation, looped, colour, with sound, duration: 25:00 min.

Simon Lehner (born 1996 in Wels, Austria, lives in Vienna) moves visually between photography, digital production forms such as 3D video works and virtual simulations, and kinetic sculpture. He begins with visual material, chiefly photo albums and video cassettes, that document the family life of his childhood, with increasing importance given to the media content that has shaped the visual memory of his generation.

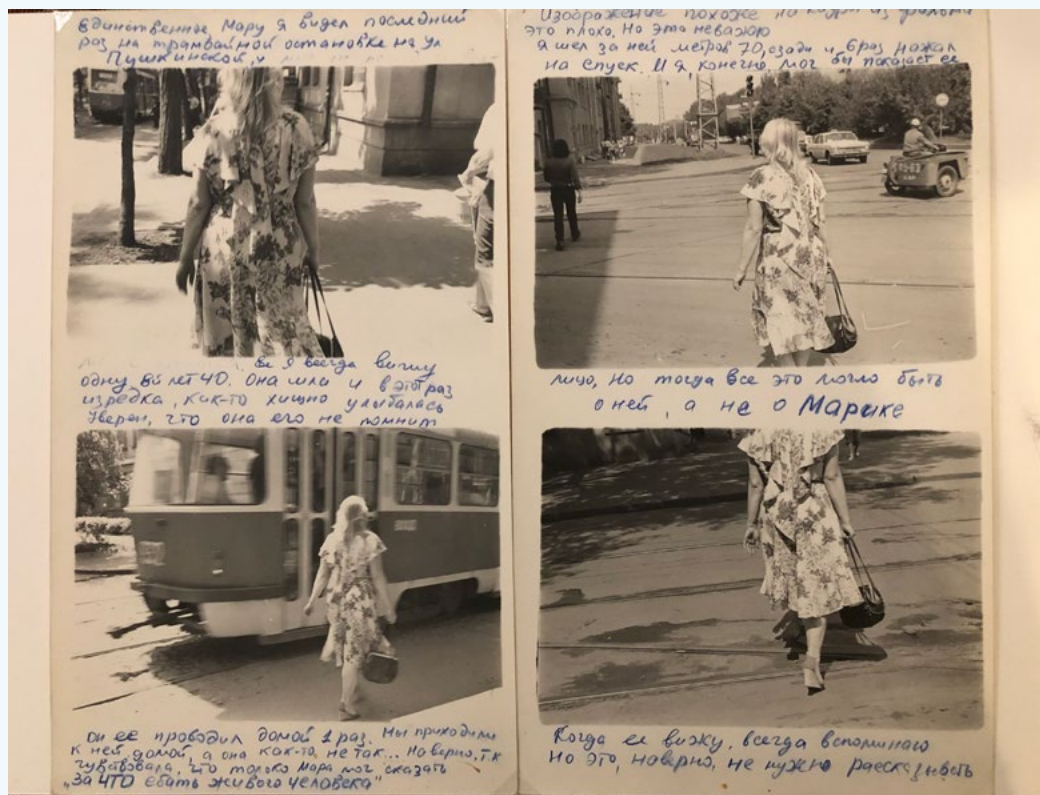
Simon Lehner's projects address questions of identity politics that are closely linked to his personal experiences in the family system. His starting point is his own archive of family photographs, which he subjects to 3D rendering in order to explore specific family constellations in depth through digital reconstructions and modifications. In 'activating' the images in this way, he uncovers layers (of memory) that visualize the father's absence, domestic and emotional violence, childhood trauma, and the dangers to mental health this posed. 'We follow the viewpoint of a boy who resembles me as a child and is busy balancing two contradictory sides while stuck in the firing line of a bad love story': this is how Simon Lehner describes one of his earliest series, excerpts of which are shown here in combination with more recent works. These newer works, described by Lehner as 'lens-based animations', critically examine constructions of masculinity in an increasingly digital everyday environment. His series overlap thematically and have developed technically from the photographic image on the wall to lens-based, moving sculptures. In the form of 3D figures — whether as Simon Lehner's alter ego or as other figures imbued with an atmosphere of violence — they acquire material form and enter the space.



Boris Mikhailov (born 1938 in Kharkiv, lives in Berlin and Kharkiv), who became known to a wider public in the late 1990s, is one of the most important photographers of our time. His work is dedicated to the circumstances and point of view of individuals living within political systems: in the Soviet Union, in post-communist Eastern Europe, and in today's Ukraine. In addition to the socio-political context, his stories also contain personal reflections on human vulnerability, desire, aging, and death, which he views with humour and a sense of mischief.

Case History shows the effects of the political and economic upheaval ten years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and captures the new social order and people's reality in photographs. Against the desolate backdrop of the industrial city of Kharkiv, Mikhailov's larger-than-life images document disenfranchisement and devastating poverty among a community of children, women, men, and the elderly who were pushed to society's fringe by the new economic system. Mikhailov remembers how he perceived post-communist Kharkiv: 'The city had acquired an almost modern European centre. Much had been restored. Life became more beautiful and active, outwardly (with a lot of foreign advertisements) — simply a shiny wrapper. But I was shocked by the big number of homeless (before they had not been there). The rich and the homeless — the new classes of a new society — this was, as we had been taught, one of the features of capitalism.' Mikhailov does not, however, simply press the shutter release on his camera; instead, his photographs, which oscillate between document and staging, reference Christian iconography in a religious narrative framework. In this way, he creates portraits of people that are symptomatic of the new conditions and social injustice they produce, without negating their individuality and fates.

Requiem, from the series *Case History*, 1997–1998, chromogenic colour print, 196 x 127 cm, Akademie der Künste, Berlin, Art Collection, Inv.-No.: Photo 1109.7



From the series *Die Verantwortung der Landschaft* (The Responsibility of the Landscape), 1980, silver gelatin prints, with writing, coloured, 30 x 40 cm, courtesy Boris Mikhailov

The old small photograph gathers the grey archive prints around it. I made these during the transition from the main series of the '60s and '70s to the basic works with texts. That was my transition to conceptual photography, to that documentary style that removed everything that was unnecessary, everything that was worn out. It was also my first serious turn to text.

The familiar was already photographed, the Soviet as well. And these seemingly insignificant images — labelled with occasional notes, scribbles, with reflections on the photographic moment, remarks about simple, unimportant moments of monotonous everyday life, simply places of memory — they all failed to make it into the main series. They weren't shown to other people very often and were sort of forgotten. But with their imperfection, their trembling imprecision, and infinite dullness, they help me to remember and convey the feeling of a bygone time at the turn of the 70's-80's. That's why they are dear to me and seem important.

Nonspectacular, thus insignificant moments of our lives, which there were plenty of — that was average life, everyday Soviet life. I found ways for myself to further work with photography, using texts, creating books with inscriptions, and colouring photos ... For me the world dissolved even more into individual parts, which even the occasional photograph pointed to. 'It may seem that there is nothing here, but it is not recommended to take pictures here,' as noted in one of the photographs. All these photographs seemed to be united by this 'NOT RECOMMENDED': It is not recommended to photograph here (!), and this is not recommended for photographing (!), and to photograph like this is not recommended (!)... connected by an understanding that these are all places where photographing was not only officially NOT recommended, but where also I forbade myself to do so.

Or: I took the picture and the curtain in the window behind me closed. Or maybe I just imagined it. However, I remember the feeling of anxiety that I often had when I was taking photos.

But the most important thing in this series is the memory of my eternal friend Mara, who passed away long before his forties, not accepting the bleakness of the life ahead of him. I remained with the memory, I became a photographer.



From the series *Glück Auf in Deutschland*, 2024, fine art c-print, 35 x 24 cm, collage made of archive material from the digital Photo Archive of the Ruhr Museum Essen

At the centre of the artistic work of Pınar Öğrenci (born 1973 in Van, lives in Berlin), who often works with archival materials, are migration and the ways it's represented. Her multimedia approach to historical and contemporary material and her focus on personal biographies set the terms for a critical examination of the circumstances and decisions surrounding migration policies.

In the archives of the Ruhr Museum Essen, in search of visual evidence of the living conditions of the so-called guest workers, Pınar Öğrenci immersed herself in the history of coal mining. The meagre amount of material she was able to find called for more in-depth research to track down images and narratives beyond the well-known tropes of the proud miner. In the photomontages of *Glück Auf in Deutschland*, she portrays people who played a decisive role in German Reconstruction after World War II — for decades and under precarious conditions — but who continue to be seen as migrants and experience exclusion to this day, in the second and third generation. Öğrenci handles the incriminating material playfully, using scissors to create montages that augment the coal mining images with everyday photographs. Her stories include the women and families who toiled at home, for example, and were not part of the myth of the much-lauded mining traditions.



The Man Who Doesn't Burn is a reproduction of a historical photograph documenting a heat test. An aluminium suit is being tested for its thermal resistance, and the man wearing it for his ability to survive the 'industrial complex'. The man is literally on fire. Pınar Öğrenci regards this photograph as a symbol for a body politics that a part of the population is still exposed to today: people with a migratory background, people from the working class who are grappling with risky working conditions and often have no recourse to resist — as well as people threatened by racist attacks such as those committed by the NSU and in Hanau.

The Man Who Doesn't Burn, 2024, wallpaper, 278,5 x 276 cm, made of archive material from the digital Photo Archive of the Ruhr Museum Essen

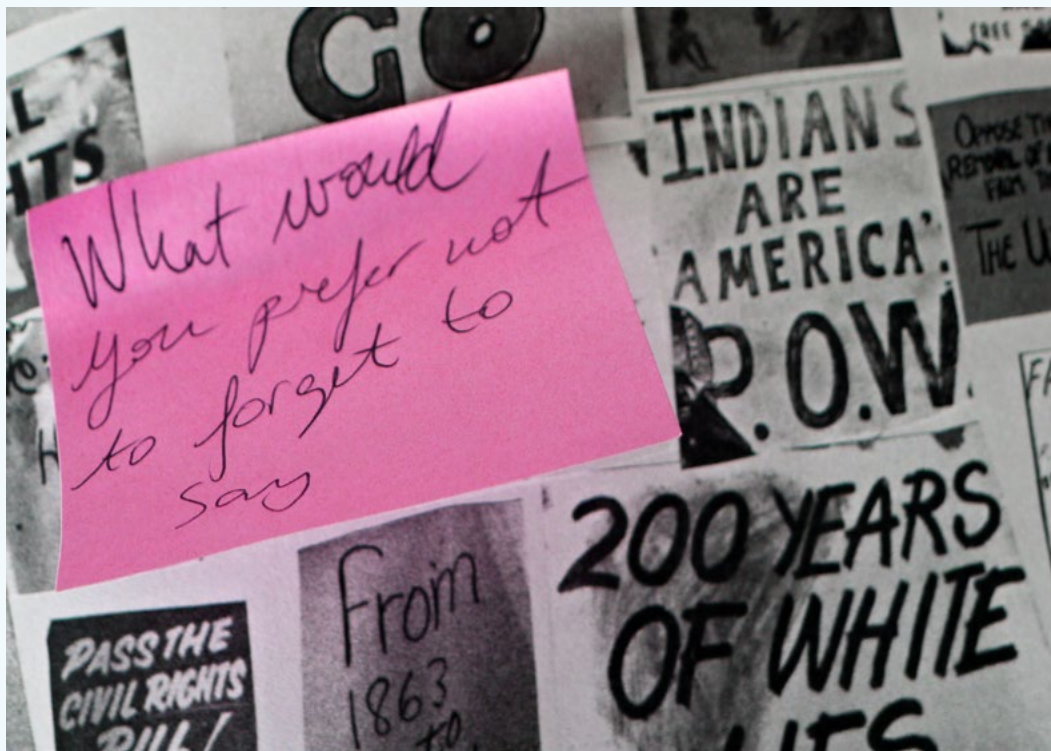


Untitled, from the series *Frauen im Bekleidungswerk Treff-Modelle, Berlin*, 1984 (Women in the Treff-Modelle Clothing Factory, Berlin, 1984), 2004, silver gelatin print on baryta paper, 28,3 x 19,3 cm, courtesy Estate Helga Paris

As an autodidact, Helga Paris (born 1938 in Gollnow/Goleniów, died 2024 in Berlin) began photographing the people around her in the Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg in the early 1970s and later in Halle, Leipzig, Transylvania, Moscow, Volgograd, Rome, and New York. She compiled her documentary images into series such as *Müllfahrer*, *Berliner Kneipen*, *Berliner Jugendliche* (Garbage Collectors, Berlin Pubs, Berlin Youths) and *Häuser und Gesichter* (Houses and Faces). The result is an extensive œuvre in nuanced shades of grey that speaks to people's stories and the atmosphere of their time.

It's 'always about how it feels to be "in history", how its respective circumstances are inscribed in the most private things. The special poetic proximity of Helga Paris's imagery is also due to the fact that she refrains from ideologizing — her gaze is always imbued with a deep sense of solidarity' (Inka Schube).

This also applies to the pictures of the series *Frauen im Bekleidungswerk Treff-Modelle, Berlin* (Women in the Treff-Modelle Clothing Factory in Berlin). Over a period of several weeks in 1984, Helga Paris visited the women at their workplace and photographed them during breaks or other moments when they briefly stopped what they were doing. Before she began working as a photographer, the artist had studied at the Engineering School for Clothing with a major in fashion design; she also worked in the Treff-Modelle clothing factory for a time. Because of her familiarity with the working conditions there, her portraits evince a high degree of social integrity; many were taken before people began to pose for the camera. Heidi Specker has remarked about Helga Paris: 'It was all about photographing the faces in a quiet moment. It's interesting, because this "in a quiet moment" doesn't necessarily mean at a distance from the rattling sewing machines. Helga Paris meant "being at home in oneself". This is what lends the images their incredible intensity. "Being at home in oneself" means being yourself, autonomous, independent of others. And of the photographer. Helga Paris told me about the incredible solidarity among the women and the sense of community within the brigade.'



From the series *Which Story Would You Prefer Not to Recall / An welche Geschichte würdest Du dich lieber nicht erinnern*, 2009 – ongoing, c-print, 42 x 59 cm

In her photographs and experimental films, Maya Schweizer (born 1976 in Paris, lives in Berlin) addresses questions of history, identity, and memory. Urban space as a political terrain for individual and collective action forms a frequent departure point for stories that temporally overlap. Schweizer uses montage to combine documentary material and images she has produced and found herself with sampled sounds and texts to reveal social realities and disrupt established narratives.

Images from newspapers and magazines, historical photographs, and portraits provide the raw material for Maya Schweizer's ongoing project *Which Story Would You Prefer Not to Recall*. Having been re-photographed, their original context is difficult to discern. And because the images are cropped, it's hard to identify or locate them: either because they were photographed in sections, or because the notes on attached Post-Its cover them up in large part. These different levels — the original scene, its use in the media, and its literal overwriting through the artist's notes — lead to a state in which a collective uncertainty begins to resonate. Everything seems vague. And yet: it is precisely the questions and messages dominating the images, jotted down as if in passing, that bring viewers into a kind of restless mode — as if there were still something they urgently needed to do, acquire, or understand. Schweizer's visual strategy offers a hint at the latency inhabiting the photographic image, the fact that a memory flashing up in the present is always possible — and that we will never be done coming to terms with our history or attempting to understand it.



Still from *Manou, La Seyne sur Mer*, 2011, video, colour, without sound, duration: 9:30 min.

The film *Manou, La Seyne sur Mer* is about Maya Schweizer's encounters with her grandmother shortly after she moved into a retirement home. Wanting to learn more about the changes in her everyday life, the artist asks her about her new situation. The grandmother's spoken words are reproduced as text in the film. Typed onto a sheet of paper, Schweizer filmed them with all their interruptions, repetitions, and clarifications. We can neither see the grandmother nor hear her voice. The camera follows her responses word by word, line by line, repetition after repetition. Perhaps the artist chose this strategy to protect her vulnerable protagonist, yet perhaps it was also to force the viewer to 'listen' carefully and not ignore the woman's occasional struggle with words. Again and again, the film shows the grandmother's personal objects, making her palpable in a way that exudes beauty and integrity. The result is an intimate document in which Maya Schweizer works aggressively to find a language to tell a story that allows for searching, omissions, and gaps. Yet Maya Schweizer's methodology also speaks to mechanisms of memory and forgetting on a higher level — and to the return of history.



Still from *Plattenbaugeschichten. Eine assoziative Recherche* (Prefabricated Building Stories. An Associative Research), 2022, video, sound, duration: 33:21 min., from the series *Archivdialoge #1 – Bauplan Zukunft* (Archival Dialogues #1 – Blueprint for the Future), 2020–2022

Wenke Seemann (born 1978 in Rostock, lives in Berlin) is a social scientist, artist, and occasional performer and author. With her image-based work, she moves methodically between documentary and conceptual photography. Her pieces often begin with her background and social education and look at social structures — during the years East Germany existed as a state, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and in the present day. Her examination of archival material in particular leads her to process the mechanisms of collective experience and memory and their socio-political transformation in a critically reflective way.

How do the experiences of her own youth — the ‘baseball bat years’ (an epithet for the time following the GDR’s collapse, when racism and violence flared up) — connect with the (supposedly) positive images of the massive changes that set in after the fall of the Berlin Wall? The departure point for Seemann’s work is a detailed photographic documentation from her father’s archive recording the construction of the so-called prefabricated housing estates in the GDR. This resulted in the multi-part work *Archivdialoge #1 – Bauplan Zukunft* (Archival Dialogues #1 – Blueprint for the Future), in which she weaves the material into video works, photomontages, collages, drawings, and texts, examining both the architectural structures of the prefab housing estates and the collective rituals and everyday life among their residents. In *what stands between us*, two works from the series are brought together to form an installation: the video *Plattenbaugeschichten. Eine assoziative Recherche* (Prefabricated Building Stories. An Associative Research) and *Archivpanorama Lütten Klein* (Archival Panorama Lütten Klein). In these two works, Seemann questions prevailing narratives of pan-German memory, contrasting the media image of the prefabricated housing estate as a social hotspot with the promises of modernity that arrived right next door in the form of newly built residential areas. Seemann asks how we remember the progressive developments of this period and how the residents’ images of themselves and others were formed from collective narratives and connected to their own experiences of this time of upheaval. In this way, she collages different materials and media and assembles the fragments she finds to create a picture of a time in which utopia and reality collide.



From the series *Signature Style (Thälmann)*, 2004 – ongoing, c-print, 30 x 40 cm

Christine Würmell (born 1972 in Frankfurt, lives in Berlin) documents the transformation of urban space in the post-reunification period in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. In particular, her photographic work investigates graffiti's occupation of public monuments and outdoor seating. Often augmented by historical material, her work forms a research-based whole gathered together in a conceptual process.

Signature Style (Thälmann) is an ongoing series of photographs of the Ernst Thälmann memorial in Berlin that Würmell has been working on since 2004. The square is a popular meeting place for skateboarders and people who just want to hang out. The memorial itself has become a 'canvas' for continuously evolving graffiti by anonymous writers consisting of almost exclusively socio-political commentary, especially in recent years. Since 2022, one main topic has been the battle for the right to interpret the Russian war in Ukraine, and beginning in late 2023, another has been the multiple crises and the war in the Middle East. Other popular subjects are climate politics and slogans in support of diversity, etc.

Signature Style (Thälmann) is a micro-narrative about the monument as a meeting point for various social groups. But it's more than that: the photographs of Thälmann's bust covered in a changing layer of graffiti are documents that offer information about socio-political issues and conflicts and reflect their respective social circumstances. Due to the artist's decision to hang the images in a grid as opposed to showing them in a linear narrative form, the documentary fragments and the diversity of their statements evade hierarchical order — and hence cannot be interpreted as any 'one' truth or solution to a conflict. In this way, Würmell points to history's heterogeneity and discontinuities.



From the series *Das was euch am Leben hält, ist, was bei uns zu Asche zerfiel* (That Which Fuels Your Lives, Crumbles to Ashes in Ours), 1997–2005, c-print, 15 x 10 cm, courtesy Galerie KOW, Berlin

In his photography and film work, Tobias Zielony (born 1973 in Wuppertal, lives in Berlin) portrays young people living on the fringes of social affluence and acceptance. His work frequently focuses on post-industrial spaces that have slipped through the promises made by modern progress — cultural microcosms that offer scant opportunity to the people living there. Zielony's approach to documentary entails moments of fictionalization with a specific aesthetic that emphasizes the cohesion in precarious communities.

This also applies to Tobias Zielony's earliest work, which he began in 1997 in the years following German Reunification and which he compiled into a coherent series of 35 images in 2017. It ends with a photo from 2005 of two young people, one of whom is holding a mobile phone with a camera — thus marking the end of an era just before an awareness that one might be photographed at any time became commonplace. Indiscriminately, Zielony arranges images taken in Leipzig, Chemnitz, Halle, Berlin, Neustadt/Orla, Frankfurt/Oder, Cologne, Kassel, Essen, and Wuppertal, i.e., in both East and West Germany. In the process of editing these images after the fact, Zielony is not, as one might assume, attempting to highlight or confirm demarcation fantasies between East and West. He achieves, in fact, the exact opposite and portrays his protagonists' openness and innocence. Zielony's overarching interest is aimed at the inequality that rose up after 1989, a result of the new neoliberalist economic order and the direct and indirect effects it exerted on young people's lives, about whom Boaz Levin wrote the following: 'These teens were thus born into this liminal state of seismic shock, of plummeting social services, changing work relations, increased insecurity and gender inequality, but also newly found abundance, civil liberties such as freedom of assembly, organisation, and elections, and accesses to the global market, to trends and life-style. An ambivalent mix of democracy and capitalism which has since become paradigmatic'. (Boaz Levin, Tobias Zielony, *ALLES*, 2019)

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