
REVIEWS

Karl Gernot Kuehn. *Caught: The Art of Photography in the German Democratic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. 304p.

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The author of this fascinating and highly informative study, Karl Gernot Kuehn, is an internationally known photographer and scholar who teaches history of photography at California State Northridge and UCLA. The topic of this richly illustrated book, photography in the GDR, is one artistic medium that most literary scholars of things German, even those who have worked extensively in GDR cultural history, know relatively little about. Kuehn's study will certainly remove any excuse for such a lacuna. The author is obviously intimately familiar not only with the extensive and unique range of GDR photography, but with many of the major photographers, their journals and exhibits, as well as the various photographic "schools" or "groups." Extremely impressive for this reviewer is Kuehn's knowledge of the conditions under which these photographers worked and created, that is, the political, cultural, and social context of artists in the GDR. Consequently, he is able to provide a necessary framework for understanding the photographers he discusses, their work, the conditions for that work, and its public reception and impact. Consequently, even those of us well-versed in GDR cultural and literary studies are introduced to the connections between the medium of photography and the artistic genres — literature, theater, film — about which we know much. Furthermore, Kuehn's discussion and reproductions of the photos he writes about give the reader a very rich sense of the developments in GDR photography from the end of World War II right up to and even beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, and the subsequent unification of the two Germanys less than a year later.

This most welcome study shows clear evidence of extensive and careful research. Kuehn utilized archives, libraries, exhibit catalogues, interviews, photo books and journals, studies of GDR culture and history, as well as literary works as sources and resources for his analyses. He frequently cites both the photographers themselves and the "official" critics to illuminate the political, cultural, and aesthetic or artistic tensions which affected both the trends in GDR photography as well as the personal and professional lives of these artists. Throughout, Kuehn's writing is

admirably and remarkably clear, lively, and jargon-free, thus inviting the uninitiated reader into and informing us even about some of the sophisticated aesthetic dimensions of photography. I suspect that even those more familiar with photography as an art form will not find his lucid writing about these matters anything but simplistic.

The book begins with an introductory chapter on the photographic history of both the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, and this sets the stage for understanding developments in the postwar Soviet Zone and, after October 1949, in the GDR. It also serves to provide a brief picture of the forerunners and influences, both individual and “school,” that were important to GDR photographers. Here he discusses the significance of the legacies of both the so-called “worker photographers” in the Weimar Republic as well as the artistic movement known as “Neue Sachlichkeit.”

The main chapters — fourteen in number — offer a generously illustrated analysis of the development of photography in this part of Germany from 1945 until very recently. Kuehn dedicates much of his study to discussing photos, photographers, and photography in East Germany in and as a reflection of the political, social, and cultural context. By doing so he emphasizes the significance, perhaps unclear to many Western viewers of these photos, of the political constraints, pressures, and impulses which GDR cultural policy and practice placed and exerted on the production of all forms of art, including photography. Just as literature in the GDR went through a variety of phases or periods in its development, all of which were in part dependent on and heavily influenced by the attitudes of the policy makers, censors, and state-operated publishing, educational, and cultural agencies, so too did photography move, not always in linear fashion, from anti-fascist to worker-oriented to socialist realism, with its narrow notion of “objectivity,” and, finally, to ever-increasing subjectivity and individual freedom for the photographers, both in terms of content and aesthetic styles.

Of special interest to this reviewer were Kuehn’s descriptions of the “official” photography establishment in the GDR and the importance of the *Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (HGB)*, where most of East Germany’s best photographers either taught or studied and of the role of “party” critics such as Berthold Beiler in moving GDR photography, especially in the first twenty-five years, in directions that corresponded in large part to those supported by official cultural policy in general. It is interesting to those of us familiar with GDR literature that GDR photography, for instance, was also subjected to the *Bitterfelder Weg* policies for a time, or that not only did Christa Wolf’s brilliant and highly influential novel *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1969) profoundly affect literary developments, cre-

ating “space” for more subjective and individualistic concerns in GDR literature, but it had the same effect on photography.

By reading Kuehn’s book, one gains an understanding of the relationships between photography and the other arts in the GDR (and elsewhere), and one gains familiarity with many of the photographers who, when taken individually, reflect an impressive array of photographic techniques, styles, and topics, and, when taken collectively, provide an extremely informative record of many aspects of life in the GDR. Many of the names of the major artists Kuehn discusses here clearly deserve to be better known among those of us involved in GDR studies: Günter Rössler, Erich Schutt, Evelzn Richter, Arno Fischer, Roger Melis, Helga Paris, Tina Bara, Eva Mahn, Ute Mahler, Werner Mahler, Gundula Schulze, Bernd Lasdin, Ralf-Rainer Wasse, Thomas Florschuetz, and Ulrich Lindner.

Within the constraints that encouraged, even forced GDR photography to develop very differently from its counterpart in the West, Kuehn is able to show how diverse, nonetheless, GDR photography actually was, and how the best of the artists took risks and pushed the photographic “envelope” to, and sometimes beyond, the limits that, akin to the Berlin Wall, were not totally capable of keeping GDR citizens in line (“party line,” that is). Although Kuehn’s focus is primarily on the development of GDR photography and its major artists, he doesn’t neglect the importance of photographers and photographic developments elsewhere, especially in the U.S. and Western Europe, and he frequently mentions the various kinships between individual GDR photographers and their Western counterparts.

Considering that this book is not a technical study of photography, but rather an ambitious discussion of GDR photography in a broad historical, political, and cultural context, Kuehn provides remarkably accurate information about the topic. One of the very few and minor exceptions to accuracy occurs on where he claims that the GDR was founded two months after the founding of the Federal Republic (27). In fact, the GDR was established five months after the FRG. All in all, this book is a very significant contribution to our knowledge of this important but little understood artistic medium in the GDR, providing in the process an accessible and remarkable new angle on GDR cultural history in general. ✱