

## “Storyable Images: Manfred Beier’s Private-to-Public Archive” by Meg R. Jackson

In just the last few years, there seems a new cultural phenomenon with specific ties to the rise of vernacular photography in the twentieth century: the extensive, private archive of a hobbyist photographer is found posthumously and assumes a public role, tickling popular imagination. Businessman Charles W. Cushman’s three decades of early color negatives and prints taken for personal hobby were bequeathed to a public collection upon his death. Nondescript nanny Vivian Maier dynamically documented four decades of life in Chicago and her travels, images that were uncovered in a storage later. To add to these bookmarks in vernacular photography is the impressive trove found by the sons of east German school teacher Manfred Beier, who in just shy of sixty years amassed over sixty-thousand exposures. While Beier was alive, images remained negatives concealed in his basement.

The sheer size of Beier’s photographic archive is enough to have any historian weak (metaphorically) at the knees. Fifty-thousand small format negatives, nine-thousand small format slides, thirty-five hundred medium format negatives, four-hundred standard 8 and Super 8 films, and thirty-eight notebooks meticulously document the mechanical and contextual details of each and every image (Figure 1). It is all the more remarkable within the historical moment of their making. Dating between 1944 and 2002, these visual documents span Nazi Germany, postwar reconstruction, the entirety of the German Democratic Republic’s (GDR) existence, and the first decade of national reunification.

And, a delicate mastery of composition, color, and content, the photographs are stunning. There is a social documentary mode to many of the scenes he framed. He takes us from domestic spaces, school classrooms and sanctioned travels around the Soviet Bloc to community celebrations, work places, and postwar reconstruction sites (Figure 2&3). His images are also appealing for their aesthetics: a strikingly intimate portrait of men shaving; a gracefully balanced image of his young students on a field trip; a shot of the school bus taken through the rearview mirror, reminiscent of the historical avant-garde (Figure 4&5). This entanglement of the documentary and the aesthetic is, in part, what makes his photographs so compelling as storyable objects. Straightforward, charming, and tempting. Tempting, because Germans still embody their contemporary histories and debate about what many believe to be an undercurrent of *Ostalgie*. Beier’s photographs offer grassroots visions of a culture not quite past.

A blend of the words “*Ost*” (“East”) and “*nostalgie*” (“nostalgia”), *Ostalgie* is the peculiar nostalgia for the GDR, and the notion bears contested meanings. In pan-German discourse since 1990, *Ostalgie* yields a fallacious—and, in some opinions, hazardous—account of the GDR and therefore is perceived as a barrier to a holistic union of the German people. From this perspective, the term evokes the common saying “*der Mauer im Kopf*” (“the wall in the mind”), referring to the Berlin Wall and a continued psychological disunity in the German nation. On the other hand, as reunification involved West Germany fundamentally ingesting East Germany and remodeling the latter from its political institutions down to its street names, many former GDR citizens felt for years to be subject to Westerners. *Ostalgie*, in this case, stands for a discontent with the present and a retrospective appreciation for aspects of the East German past. “Aspects” proves the operative word, as people are swift to dislocate *Ostalgie* from the GDR statehood and relocate it in terms of the GDR “peoplehood.” In other words, those citizens of former East Germany experience a displacement of self-identities as members of a reunified German people, rather than a longing for the renewal of a politically or economically communist system.

In order to narrate the condition of the private citizen in a way that both mollifies the need for historical accuracy and applies to contemporary issues with reunification, photographs from the communist era seem the optimal source. At once austere and ambiguous, photographs had a particularly unique character in the GDR as a mode of discreet self-expression and subtle subversion. Very rarely did State officials denounce or persecute anyone on the basis of noncompliant photography. Photographs in popular German society, according to critic Daniel Boese, also continue to enjoy a stereotype of “‘natural’ communicative abilities and...[a] powerful illusion of unmediated and ‘truthful’ representation.” As an archival tool in itself, the photograph is a means to ingest lived reality, to preside over knowledge and articulate

identity, and to elongate and transcribe what is inevitably an unrecoverable moment of the past while simultaneously influencing a perception of surrounding conditions.

The Beier collection demonstrates how photographs can be made to perform as chameleonic witnesses to a past, sometimes anyone's past. At Beier's death in 2002, his collection of images were freely guided into the public spotlight, first by his sons and then consigned in 2008 to the German Federal Archives in Koblenz. From art museums, fine art and photography galleries, cultural organizations and trade fairs to publishing house galleries, the Schloss Kampehl, and the spaces of the Consulate General of Germany — in succession, these displays shift the discourse concerning his collection from private, creative expressions to collective records representative of the everyman or everywoman in the GDR. Each marketing of Beier's photographs, too, specifically highlights their being unofficial, apolitical, the daily experience. Overlooked is the change in the archive's ownership to a political body, now responsible for framing the photographs publicly, as well as the now-highly politicized readings of these images, both in publication and in exhibition.

At risk when frame-making for a contemporary archive of historical photographs is depriving the images of their photographer. So preoccupied with narrating histories of the GDR peoples with what is inside the photographs, and of anatomizing the content for its visual ciphers of a contested past, we must not forget these are *someone's* memories, *someone's* histories. For example, left unexplored in writings about Beier is, here was a young German man who lost his brother unexpectedly to an accident in 1952, a brother who was responsible for nurturing a love for photography and the archival impulse in Beier (Figure 6). I will venture to argue his images are less objects of *Ostalgie* than they are embodied actions of personal meaning, of a private story.

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