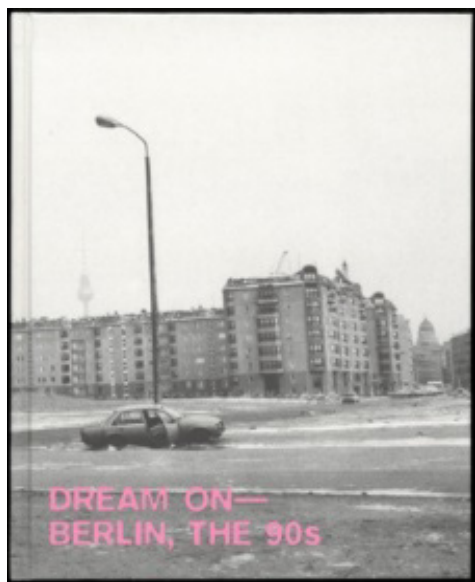


BOOK REVIEW:

***Dream On – Berlin, the '90s* edited by Boaz Levin for the C/O Berlin Foundation in collaboration with Annette Hauschild and Kathrin Kohle, Agentur OSTKREUZ, Spector Books, 2024, 343 p.**



Accompanying an exhibition, featured at the C/O Berlin from 14 September 2024 to 22 January 2025, this catalogue traces the radical transformation of Berlin in the 1990s, in the newly unified Germany, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In a sense, the catalogue and the exhibition that it tends to complement serves as a guide to the city engaged in discussing itself, questioning and rethinking its identity.

The exhibition shows the work of the Photo Agency OSTKREUZ, founded by a group of East German photographers who set out to document the changes in the city during that interesting decade. The photography itself qualifies as and has been dubbed social

documentary and/or journalistic photography, but the touch of nostalgia in many of the photographs hints at poetry. This is most obvious in Sybille Bergmann's series *Berlin 1990–1996*, especially pages 137, 140, 141, 142–143, 145 and 146–147, but also in Maurice Weiss' *Ciel de Plomb (Leaden Sky) – 1994–1996*, especially pages 159 and 165. In fact, the “humanist, poetic realism” of the OSTKREUZ group is noted by Boaz Levin in his introductory text, *Shot, Counter Shot*.

The photographs are arranged in four roughly thematic chapters, centered around a tension or contradiction ingrained in the topic: *Departure and Farewell*, dedicated to a new city and a new age ushered in by the fall of the Wall and to a society that would cease to exist; *A City Disappears, a City Emerges*, which looks at the urban landscape, particularly at debates on public and private space as well as commemoration; *New Liberties, Old Convictions*, which explores the rapidly changing social fabric, marked by diversity, commercialization and globalization, as well as the rise of the “newly empowered radical right wing”; *Welcome to Utopia?*, which addresses the colliding visions of a future society. Within these thematic chapters, the exhibition shows the work of four of the agency’s co-founders, Sybille Bergemann, Harald Hauswald, Ute Mahler, and Werner Mahler and some long-time members, Annette Hauschild, Thomas Meyer, Jordis Antonia Schlösser, Anne Schönharting, and Maurice Weiss. The photographs are arranged according to the logic of the sections created, at the same time keeping an eye on the chronology of events. While this makes sense for the exhibition as it helps its viewers focus on the events of 1989 and people’s reaction to them, the changing city, the evolving society, and the sometimes-unfulfilled dreams of the city’s inhabitants, it engages less successfully with the themes highlighted by the catalogue.

The catalogue, dedicated first and foremost to the metamorphosis of the city and tracing the relationship between humans and urban space, approaching the use of space, its reinterpretation and appropriation, is focused, like the exhibition itself, on details, on showing everyday events in the lives of Berliners during the 1990s. It also picks up the themes suggested by the photographers and frames them conceptually to facilitate the understanding of an era, that Boaz Levin, one of the curators of the exhibition, considers a time of “promise, uncertainty and contradictions”. In his view, it was a time when “the impossible became possible”, immutable truths—like the permanence of a specific political regime—had morphed into contingencies and competing visions for the future. This view consolidates the image of a city in flux, hovering between myths and dreams and the reality behind them. In this sense, the catalogue does not presume to offer a comprehensive history of the 1990s, it merely explores how events at that time are reflected by the work of nine photographers.

Boaz also points out that photographs are likely to become iconic, “shaping our collective memory and narratives of the past”. Thus, the exhibition and the catalogue are intended to link images to identity and memory, highlighting that perceptions of the past are informed by one’s view of the present, turning the past into a myth, a way of organizing the world, an assertion that every historian would do well to remember. It makes one aware that these images do not

provide a window into past realities but rather into the ways that individuals who had lived the events looked at the past, while adding their reading of these visual documents, their thoughts and emotions to the mixture.

Inevitably, the entire project focuses more on the East than it does on the West, as the DDR/GDR, the country that had taken shape after World War II gradually became the country that no longer existed. Most of the photographers came from the East while the land that was frozen in time, like Sleeping Beauty's castle, was located in this area. The themes that bring the project together seem to be the city landscape, the right to public space and the possibilities of re-shaping and re-appropriating it. These are all discussed from different perspectives in the three texts that conceptually frame the photographs and, in a sense, provide a code to deciphering, not just the images, but also the language created to designate the new realities of the 1990s.

Urban space is the main theme of Jens Balzer's text *In Transition – Zones of Freedom and Violence*, which deals with Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ) as contested terrains, but also as supposedly ahistoric worlds, understanding them, in the wake of cultural theorists, such as Hakim Bey/Peter Lamborn Wilson, as post-modern continuations of the Christian carnival, a suspension of societal rules and norms. These spaces disappeared before they had time to solidify into institutions, but, while they lasted, their strategy for liberation was permanent revolt or uprising that constantly changed methods, places, and forms of organization. In spatial terms, that meant a decentralized proliferation of experiments in living, where squatters, artistic nomads and techno DJs were the new actors of the early 1990s. They were all engaged in using the liberated space of the anarchic state of East Germany, transforming society and creating subcultures.

One prevailing phenomenon in the 1990s was squatting. This is well illustrated by *Mainzer Strasse, 1990* (Harald Hauswald), a section dedicated to events surrounding the thirteen buildings in Friedrichshain, occupied by squatters with dreams of a shared autonomous life. In November 1990 the buildings were raided as part of a large-scale police operation which led to major clashes and the downfall of the Green party government coalition. Squatting is also illustrated by Annette Hauschild's photographs in *Our House, 1992–1998*, which documents experimental ways of living and creating together in the derelict and deserted buildings of former east Berlin. In these areas, young people squatted, changing both culture and urban planning.

People in the 1990s also found ways of expressing themselves in the temporary open spaces, which led to a proliferation of techno clubs housed in the abandoned industrial buildings of former east Berlin, particularly in the now completely gentrified districts of Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg. One particularly

representative and perhaps influential club was *Tresor*, founded in 1991 and located in the former *Tresorraum* of the Wertheim Department Store, expropriated by the Nazis during World War II from its previous Jewish owners. These clubs turned Berlin into a major techno music scene throughout the 1990s. *Tresor* in particular continued to be part of Berlin's techno scene until it was replaced by a shopping mall. It was then that the endless party moved outdoors and became part of the Love Parade. This is conveyed by the photographs *Techno, 1990–1997* (Annette Hauschild), mostly taken in the abandoned buildings in east Berlin where several techno clubs were active. The subject of *Techno, 2000* (Anne Schönharting) is the music scene brought to the masses by the Love Parade, which transformed this particular trend from a subculture to a mass movement that influenced the ideas, habits and lifestyle of an entire generation. This is clearly shown by Annette Hauschild's photographs in the series *Tanzen* (Dancing) from 1996 but also by Thomas Meyer's *Tresor, 2000*.

A third temporary autonomous zone proved to be the internet. The intention at the time was to create a new digital future by linking information technology to political idealism. This also turned out to be a dream because, in Jens Balzer's opinion, it was turned into a "turbocapitalist machine" and "online shopping mall" by Amazon and e-Bay. Again, this is illustrated by Maurice Weiss's photographs in *Digitalize it, 1999* and Annette Hauschild's *Brave New World, 1998*, taken when it was still believed that the World Wide Web could be the site of a visionary start-up scene that would change everyday life.

These innovators were not alone in attempting to appropriate space, as far-right youths' subcultures including skinheads and neo-Nazis attempted to create zones of counter power and counter societies inspired by nationalist revolutionaries. These were more locally embedded, as neo-Nazi and skinhead cultures were prominent in Lichtenberg, where one of the photographers, Ute Mahler, documented the life of an activist nicknamed Bomber in 1993.

Social transformation within the two societies is also highlighted by a group of photographs focused on diversity. In the west, a multi-cultural society had developed in the wake of significant immigration caused by economic needs, when so-called guest workers were brought in, during the 1960s. This type of diversity however was completely unfamiliar in the east, as citizens from east and west had been socialized in completely different systems. This often led to individualized clashes between different societal groups, while some groups exploited social uncertainties, fomenting fears regarding the integration of foreigners. Integration is however bound to happen, albeit slowly, as Werner Mahler's series *S-Bahn, 1990* is attempting to persuade its viewers. This in an inspiring, if perhaps unrealistic, view of public transport as a socially integrative tool.

Space is also the subject of Janos Frecot's text, *An Empty Center- Notes from No-Man's Land*, which focuses on unbuilt spaces in the center, known as *Brachen* (fallow land), which mostly exist next to train tracks in west Berlin and which years of disuse have reverted to wilderness. There are also vast wastelands around west Berlin's train stations, which over the years have suffered significant metamorphoses. The text touches on several types of spaces, favouring squares as "rooms in which the city can be its ideal self", "places intended to impress and communicate" where "parades and markets are held". The social mixture in these spaces is reflected by the buildings, the front-facing buildings with *beaux étages* and the humble back buildings and attics, which housed the middle classes, the artisans, the artists and the workers.

Echoing the concern for space explicit in these texts, the photographs focus on border strips, also known as death strips, surrounding the Berlin wall, and their stories, the fate of derelict buildings, some destroyed during World War II, some left to decay in its aftermath. One of the most poignant stories, mentioned in the text but also represented in the images is the story of the "iconic squat" Tacheles, formerly a Jewish-owned department store called Wertheim, which became a space for creativity, for artistic and activist experiments, before they had to make way for new construction projects. Among other things, perhaps by way of compensation, the space now houses *Fotografiska*, a museum of photography, art and culture. As the OSTKREUZ artists were interested in the relationship between people and urban space, a number of photographs are devoted to the so-called Mauer Land (the Wall Land), neglected for decades, along with its surrounding neighbourhoods. This is best-illustrated by Thomas Meyer's *Mauer Land*, 1990 but also by the dystopic quality of Thomas Meyer's photos of former border strips.

In fact, a common theme of the texts and photographs on space is the divergent and increasingly commercial interests that have plagued Berlin's wastelands and even the new town center. In fact, undertones of outrage permeate the texts concerning the restructuring of Potsdamer Platz, an opportunity to re-think Berlin's city center, which has ended with turning public space into privately-owned territory, marking the shift towards unbridled capitalism. This has led to prolonged debates about the forms and uses of public space. While the transformation of Potsdamer Platz is the main subject of Maurice Weiss, *Ciel de Plomb*, a series that shows both the sky filled with construction cranes but also zooms in on the men working on the site. The outcome is presented in Anne Schönharting's series *A New Square*, 1999, remarkable through the stage-set quality of the space and the robotic appearance of its inhabitants. In the same vein, although the replacement of the Palace of the Republic, which housed the Volkskammer (the parliament of the GDR), with the Humboldt Forum, a

reconstruction of a former Prussian palace, is not explicitly criticized, the texts show awareness of the complexity of the issues involved in this decision, such as eradicating the built legacy of the past, the symbol of dictatorship, while recreating a space, potentially laden with national overtones and bring to the fore the problem of dealing with architectural heritage. This was intrinsically linked to Berlin's need to serve as Germany's capital. And this, in turn, implied that, in adjusting to the new political landscape, Berlin was meant to transform itself from a divided city into a metropolis. This is illustrated by Maurice Weiss' photographs, *The New Center, 1998–2001*. During this time, politics, power and media were concentrated in the new German capital, gradually changing Berlin's image and character.

The photographs also record people's reaction to change, in fact, to a succession of changes implied by the reunification. These include euphoria (Werner Mahler, *9 November 1989*), but also apprehension, an image of a police officer standing in the breach of the Berlin wall in Berlin Mitte in 1989 (p. 59), the expression on the workers' faces after finding out that the factory in Friedrichshain, where they worked, had closed (pp. 64–65). In this sense one of the most historically interesting set of photographs are those recording the withdrawal of the Allied Troops in 1994, which without verbal commentary manage to convey the very different mood in east and west and the misgivings people may have had about reunification (Harald Hauswald, *Of Departures and Upheavals, 1990–1995*; Harald Hauswald, *Hard Currency, 1990*; Ute Mahler, *Ibrahim Böhme, 1990–1996*; Annette Hauschild, *Do Swidanja/Farewell, 1994*; Maurice Weiss, *Beating Retreat, 1994*).

In order to capture the spirit of the times, between 1992 and 1998, Ute Mahler photographed a project called *Ratten 07*. This referred to the Volksbühne opening its rooms to a theatre group led by homeless individuals who sometime played themselves, while at other times they acted out roles, both in theatres and on the street. In similar manner and perhaps with similar intent, Ute Mahler illustrates further bottom-up attempts to use abandoned spaces in the city. By capturing the Summer of 1995, the photographer provides snippets of life in Berlin, such as Osman Kalim's two-storey garden house built on a squatted traffic island in the proximity of the wall in 1983. This further serves to show that the fall of the wall empowered a new generation to make the most of open spaces and lack of rules that were part of the aftermath.

The gentrification of neighborhoods was ushered in by the invasive presence of capitalism, captured in the image of a carousel with the buildings in Karl Marx Allee in the background (p. 57), but also by the transformation of neighborhoods, such as Prenzlauer Berg and Mitte, which were changed from socially-mixed city districts into gentrified neighborhoods (Sybille Bergmann,

Berlin, 1990). Another interesting example is Neukölln, a former working-class district which became highly distinct, defined as it was by the cultures that came together in this area, with potential for creativity and cultural exchange (Jordis Antonia Schlösser, *Neukölln, So Fern, So Nah, 2002*).

There is also an emphasis in this exhibition on the end of an era, the long 1990s. This sense of an ending is conveyed by images such as a photo of a Russian MiG fighter plane used as a scrap metal sculpture in Tacheles (pp. 60–61) and by the provocative, tongue-in-cheek attitude of Annette Hauschild's photos of the *Wrapped Reichstag – The final Night, 1995*, an installation conceived by Christo and Jean Claude, which involved the wrapping of the building in silver fabric. The ambivalence of its message is subtle, playing with the idea of wrapping up a spectacle, a performance, but also an era, a political system, a world. Equally moving is the focus on the Berlin Youth (*Berliner Jugend, 1999*). This is the story of people who only knew post-wall Berlin and had fallen prey to a globalized and commercialized youth culture.

This is perhaps the reason why the catalogue ends with an insightful text signed by Anne Rabe, *Berlin, Berlin, Berlin*, which amazes through the variety of viewpoints it brings to the fore and by underlining the importance of perception and the diversity of reception. The writer posits a personal point of view by stating that Berlin has been mythologized as a place which welcomes everyone with open arms, that the 1990s in Berlin were a better and more liberated era, a time of constant transformation and by confessing that, for her, the city was about being "whoever you wanted to be". The writer counters this by reminding readers that Berlin had nothing to do "with the province" while identifying herself as an East German, able to provide an East German perspective. In her view, the photographs in the exhibition speak of the transformation of Berlin and bring up a lot of unanswered questions, many of them 'what if' questions or, dare one name them thus, counterintuitive ones. One such question, and a particularly troubling one at that, is whether the reality that people lived, that people remembered and that people liked to remember ever existed. Anne Rabe reminds readers that the stories people tell leave out certain, less palatable parts like poverty rates in the 1990s that were high by all accounts, the experiences of migrants, who were not always made to feel welcome, the racism and violence in the 1990s, alluding to the political shift to the right, the stories of people who had to survive reunification, people who were not allowed into the clubs and parties so present in other people's reminiscences. The writer thus brings into question the nature of reality, of facts or events, the fragmented nature of recollections and the one-sidedness of reconstructions of the past. She ultimately links this to the struggle over space and built heritage, considering the latter the country's history etched onto the city's façades.

The concept of the exhibition does not nurture idealization or nostalgia as it points out that many current issues have roots in this much-discussed era, often portrayed idealistically or simply misrepresented, such as severe housing crisis, economic disparity, and social inequalities, gentrification, commercialization, nationalism, racism, and violence. The catalogue brings to the fore the heated debates that marked the era, particularly on urban renewal and use of public space and ultimately its significance for identity and memory.

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