

Tagesspiegel 1

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Deutsche Kinemathek

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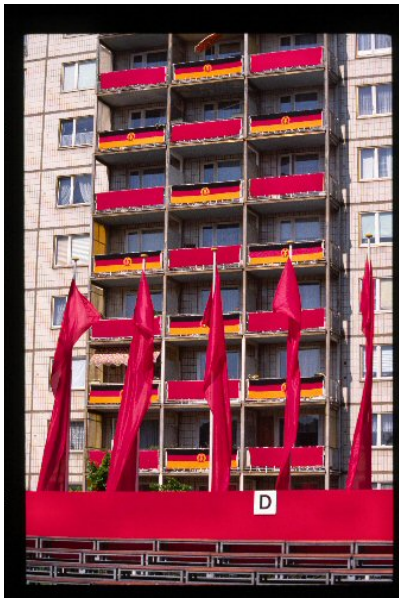
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Year of Change 1989

We were the People

The German film museum presents a special exhibition in the Filmhaus on Postdam Place
Private Photographs from the autumn of the Year of Change 1989



The autumn of 1989 began in May. On May Day, the population morosely paraded for one the last time on the Karl Marx Allee on behalf of the party and the government leaders. On a large, red banner stood the slogan that epitomized how the SED imagined the role of the people: “Everything with the people, through the people, all...the people.” The word after “all” is not discernable on the photograph made by the American, Edward G. Murray, because a huge loudspeaker obstructs the view. Murray was also marching on May 1, 1989, inadvertently supporting the party and the government leaders, as he was just fleeing from the state police (illegal money exchange): “The mass of people among whom we thought we were safe suddenly started to move... I thought the only way to avoid trouble was to start taking photographs as if this was my assignment.” We owe our gratitude to the German Film Archive and their special exhibition, “We were so free...” for the fact that these wonderful photographs of the

May Day demonstration, with Erich Honecker smiling for the last time, did not end up forever hidden from the world in Murray’s family album in Massachusetts. The Film Archive collected 6000 private photographs taken between the spring of 1989 and the autumn of 1990. Normally, the Archive would consider itself obligated to give priority to the more versatile images taken for non-private uses, but in this instance, they reversed their priorities. The year 1989 was a miserable movie year, which the Film Archive attributed to the fact that the real images were occurring in reality and not in films. Following this perspective, they assembled not only 6000 photographs but also innumerable private videos along with the work of well-known documentarians such as Thomas Heise, Volker Koepp and Helke Misselwitz.

Rainer Rother from the Film Archive and Thomas Krüger from the collaborating Federal Agency for Civic Education are unanimous regarding the goal of the exhibition at the Filmhaus on Postdam Place. Says Krüger, “The producers of historical policy include certain images and exclude others.” Down with the monopoly of images! Krüger must have been quite annoyed by other image policies, as he even chose to speak at the opening about a “colonialist, hegemonic view,” which takes the place of “the multiplicity of perspectives.” He spoke while almost stretched prone in his seat, with an unpleasant, fixed expression of fatigue and tedium on his face. What a contrast with the Krüger of twenty years before documented in the exhibition! Hidden behind a black long full

beard, preaching the 1:1 currency conversion ratio, he looked like an escaped orthodox monk. What perspectives!



This unusual show attempts to construct “from below” a visual history of the long short year during which the May 1 formulation, “... everything through the people, every ... the people” became reality. Perhaps, the Federal Agency director hopes, “in this twentieth year we can finally have a discussion about history such as has never taken place before.” Does that come off using this material?

Let us stay with May 1, and take a look at the following May 1, 1990 as captured by Reiner Hoffmann in Berlin. His video shows the people, that is to say, himself and Mrs. Hoffman at dinner. They are eating something they could not have imagined possible a year before—lox! And they are drinking champagne with it. The video continues until the lox has been consumed, and the summary of the table conversation reads, “And tomorrow we will eat caviar and buy a Mercedes!” The exhibition finds interesting those things that people found interesting back then. They are right. Somewhere during 1989, most people realized that any day something could happen that was unimaginable only days before, whether in Gotha or Eberswalde. Thus, they took along their photo apparatus and their video cameras to create their “History and I” pictures.

Anyone who is taking pictures has already become a self-observer. This is why there are so few pictures of the first Monday’s demonstration in Leipzig. Not only because photo apparatuses would have destroyed the aura and it would have been hard to simultaneously carry a candle and a camera—the tension was too great. And every shutter click would have broken the silence.



Many images are like picture riddles. What should be remarkable about the marketplace in Rostock full of automobiles? It’s been like that for a long time. Only now, in July 1990, there wasn’t a single Trabant or Wartburg parked there. All the cars were made in the West. “The curiosity about each other was so strong,” recalls Ulrike Schmiegelt, who set this unusual picture project in motion at the Film Archive, “I would have completely forgotten that by now” Most likely, this is

not only true for her, and for this reason the middle section of the exhibition is perhaps the most beautiful—full of images witnessing encounters between Germans and Germans, traveling in boats and in stagecoaches to meet each other. It culminates in the

image from some moment where a single demonstrator is holding a lone placard: “We were the people.”

The exhibition title, “We were so free:” sounds only marginally more confident, but it is actually not a summary, but rather quotes a kitchen wall. On the wall of a kitchen of an abandoned Prenzlauer-Berg house, in March of 1989 there were the words, “I dreamt/ that winter was over/you were here/ and we were free.” Today, when thanks to a cell phone camera everyone can be his own chronicler at every moment, such an exhibition would no longer be possible. In fact, it was not possible to show all the pictures from those days either, not even the 6000 photographs that were sent in. For this reason, the exhibit is supplemented by a very considerable Internet archive.

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