

Episode #2 OASES

Intro

“Exactly, she was absolutely silent. And she was small and fine-boned and so serious with it.”

„I don’t know if I fell in love with her at that moment“

“She had exactly the right presence for a photographer”

“Her sense of humour was really quirky. I miss that“

This is Sibylle Bergemann – The Woman Behind the Pictures. My name is Anne Waak. In the four episodes of this podcast I will be exploring the life, work and character of one of Germany’s best-known photographers. In order to get to know Sibylle Bergemann, I visit the places that played an important role in her biography and I meet people who were close to her, who lives with her, loved her, worked with and celebrated her. Together with them, I retrace her life: From the beginning of her professional career in the 1960s in East Berlin, to the time when she began to photograph for the pioneering GDR fashion and culture magazine Sibylle, and later, when she experienced the upheaval, of the Fall of the Wall in her late 40s, until 2010, when she died at the age of only 69.

#2 OASES – Where Sibylle Bergemann and her friends ate, drank, partied and debated

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *“It was the most important and wonderful time in my life. We would always cook, sometimes buying stuff with the last of our money. It was fine. It was no problem for me cooking for up to 40 people. It was quite normal.”*

Sibylle Bergemann – we’ve just heard her in a documentary film made shortly before she died – was an uncontested wizard of photography. But she was also an excellent host who loved cooking and did it very well when she and her husband Arno Fischer opened their home to visitors.

“Luxury for bohemians in the East was not about money or success, but about being free to run their own lives,” wrote the journalist and author Jutta Voigt in her book “Bull’s Blood Years”, which came out in 2016. Bulls’ Blood was the name of a Hungarian red wine that was popular in the GDR. “Freedom to run one’s own life,” Voigt went on, included the parties in flats backing on to Berlin’s tenement yards, in studios in Dresden, Leipzig, Halle, Jena and Karl-Marx-Stadt, spontaneous or planned, on a weekday or at the weekend.”

What kind of places were these for the Fischer-Bergemanns, these homes? What happened on those evenings and nights? Who dropped by, what did they eat and drink? What did they celebrate or discuss?

Even in the little rear courtyard flat at no. 2, Hannoversche Strasse 2 in Mitte, where Sibylle Bergemann lived with her daughter Frieda and Arno Fischer until the mid-1970s, the door was so to speak always open. Birthdays that fell on a Tuesday were celebrated on a Tuesday, not at the weekend. And if it wasn’t anyone’s birthday, Tuesday would do anyway.

ANNE WAAK *“I read, or maybe Sibylle Bergemann said herself, that for the first ten years in Hannoversche Strasse they had visitors every evening.”*

UTE MAHLER: *“That’s quite possible.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Oh God. Every evening? I’m impressed.” {... } “What time did they arrive?”*

UTE MAHLER: *“It didn’t really matter. You went along when it suited you. There was no beginning and no end.” (laughs)*

ANNE WAAK: *“And of course nobody said in advance because nobody had a telephone, I imagine.”*

UTE MAHLER: *“No, you just turned up. And if it was midnight you could be pretty sure it would still be ok.”*

When the doorbell rang, the Fischer-Bergemann dogs barked. The visitors were other photographers, journalists and artists, people like the graphic designer Grischa Meyer, who remembers the evening he first met Bergemann and Fischer:

GRISCHA MEYER: *“We were sitting there in the evening and it was quite odd. Arno was sat at a big tape deck recording some kind of Western music. He went on for nights. They were things I’d never heard, let’s just say. {...} Sibylle Bergemann looked to me like she had come out of the dark room overtired. Apparently that was the arrangement, Arno did his music with a bit of vodka, Sibylle was in the dark room. {...} I came from a fairly respectable home and for me it was quite freaky.”*

The neighbours complained about the noise, daughter Frieda because her privacy was being disturbed.

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“I was still a child, really. I didn’t find it that great that there were all these goings-on every night. Sometimes I didn’t dare walk past them to the bathroom. {...} In the mornings I had to creep off to school because they were all so tired still. {...} We only had one and a half rooms. My room was right at the end so I had to pass through them. And if I had forgotten anything I had to go back. One morning my satchel got caught on a mirror. There was one hell of a smash. But we all laughed.”*

After the family moved, the apartment in the old building at Schiffbauerdamm 12 was the new meeting place, a photography salon. The living room in the 160-square-metre flat had double doors and an oak parquet floor, a sofa and a few chairs, crates and boxes full of photos. Bergemann and Fischer decorated it with palms, oleander and bay trees, with mirrors, porcelain figures and dolls’ heads. Frieda had her own room, Sibylle used the salon, Arno kept his collection of cameras in the fourth room in upside-down aquariums.

ANNE WAAK: *“Like a kind of display case.”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“Loads of aquariums. Then Arno would go to some pigeon-fancier fair and once he stood at the door with a cardboard box full of holes. He certainly kept bringing birds back. Gradually it turned into a bird room. At Alexanderplatz there was a pet shop, and he would always buy the ones he felt*

sorry for. Of course he felt sorry for all of them. Then there were Namaqua doves, Gouldian finches, which are really pretty, colourful little birds. It got out of control.”

ANNE WAAK: *“They had their own room, and usually he went in?”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“So could we to feed them.”*

Because Arno Fischer was such an animal lover and because the birds did their very best to help, the collection grew over the years.

ANNE WAAK: *“How many were there at the peak, would you say?”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“In that room? At least a hundred, I’m sure.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“What?! And one bird could whistle?”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“There was Jakob. The first one was a myna and could talk. He had my mother’s voice and kept saying: ARNO?” (laughter)*

ANNE WAAK: *“No!”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“Arno? And: But Jakob, but Jakob.”*

“Amazing, a flat like a stage set!” called one stage director at the sight of it. And this stage is at the same time a salon attended by international photographers. Sibylle Bergemann once explained how that came about

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *“We had quite a lot of visitors, with lots of colleagues and students. And the French Cultural Institute had an exhibition space on Unter den Linden. And this man, Dominique Pailarsse, was mad about photos, and whenever there was an exhibition there they would ask – not only French people but mostly French: What is this here, we want to meet East German photographers. So they would often come round to us if they had an exhibition on. They would all sit there on the sofa: Cartier-Bresson, Koudelka, Robert Frank, Newton – those were fantastic evenings.”*

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *“We had quite a lot of visitors,*

Unlike her husband Werner, Ute Mahler chose to miss a lot of those evenings because she feared her photographic heroes – gods, she says – would lose their magic if she saw them in the flesh.

UTE MAHLER: *“That was a conscious decision. I didn’t want to be disappointed. Some of those photographs meant so much to me that I just didn’t want that.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“So which ones did you see?”*

UTE MAHLER: *“Helmut Newton. He came in and had a big stature, shining. That’s probably why I didn’t see June. It was very strange. At some point people showed him photos. I showed him my fashion photos and he looked at them very politely (laughs). That was so touching. He wasn’t interested in the slightest. But I wasn’t disappointed. You can sense how someone looks at pictures. But I don’t think it was what he wanted to see. No idea.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Who else was there that evening?”*

UTE MAHLER: *“About 10, 15 people, 20 at most.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Was it a meeting of equals?”*

UTE MAHLER: *“Definitely. I thought it was quite astonishing when I think how respectful we are today when we meet great photographers. There was respect, but among equals.”*

Grischa Meyer was there on another evening – when the Franco-Czech photographer Josef Koudelka was visiting.

GRISCHA MEYER: *“It was quite funny. He arrived with a sleeping bag, unrolled his sleeping bag out on the floor in one of the rooms above us here and packed all his cameras into it. He stayed with Arno for a few days and wandered around East Berlin. And then moved on. He was a bird of passage. That was a fantastic evening. Meaning he showed fantastic photographs and there was a great conversation and the whole photography gang that had formed around Arno and Sibylle, they were there.”*

“It was here,” writes Jutta Voigt, “where the common cause of photography was kept alive by constant reviewing and comparing. Where only one form of

solidarity mattered, solidarity with the best photo. For hours photos were studied, passed around, evaluated. It was not about personal success. It was about a photographic programme that extended beyond photography. It was about imagination and contradiction, about the truth of the image and the truth of the country, that was the aspiration. Against the GDR, for the GDR.”

Sibylle Bergemann herself once said: *“The client’s verdict is important, what is decisive for us is our colleagues’ verdict.”* That verdict is handed down here, in private homes.

Of course during these evenings they don’t just listen to music by Tom Waits, Leonard Cohen and the Rolling Stones – certainly not The Beatles – and dance and talk about photographs. They drink too, and drink hard. At the end of the GDR its average citizen was drinking fifteen and a half litres of schnapps a year – 2.7 times as much as in West Germany at the time. They drank Kristall vodka (popularly known as the Blue Gagger), Moskovkaya vodka, Nordhäuser Doppelkorn, Goldbrand and Kirsch-Whisky. And with that red wine, white wine, sparkling wine and beer.

ANNE WAAK: *“15.5 litres of schnapps per capita was the annual consumption. Schnapps. Not wine, not beer, schnapps. Can you confirm that?”*

GRISCHA MEYER: *“More or less, yes. Especially as there was a reason every day. Somehow things looked better through a glass. And it was relatively cheap. Life on the whole was relatively cheap.”*

Life was cheap, jobs were safe, and there was practically no competition between people. All the greater was the appetite for life of those who tried to carve out their own artistic freedoms in East German society. It was a physical appetite too – right across society: “In 1986 every East German ate 96 kilos of meat, 43 kilos of sugar, 15.7 kilos of butter and 307 eggs,” writes Jutta Voigt in her book “The Taste of the East” about eating drinking and living in the GDR. “We were world champion consumers.”

And yet the range on offer is limited. Nobody has to go hungry, but “the supply situation lurched between doing without and overindulgence,” observes Voigt. In the particularly cold winter of 1969/70 there were no potatoes or milk, another year there was no coffee because prices had risen on the global market. People muddled through on evil-tasting surrogates, popularly known as “Erich’s glory” after the most powerful man in the land, Erich Honecker, General Secretary of the SED Central Committee. They would go from the supermarket to one shop and then the next in quest of tomatoes, oranges, cold meat and soup powder.

Sibylle Bergemann does not only invite her visitors in. She feeds them too.

UTE MAHLER: *“Sibylle was a fantastic cook. I remember a cucumber soup that she discovered later on out here in Margaretenhof. Made of pickled gherkins. It sounds dodgy, but it was fantastic. She really enjoyed trying recipes out and making them, and I think she would go out and buy the ingredients too. Which meant carrying, and it took time. But we were used to that, to what was in stock and what wasn’t.”*

When Bergemann’s granddaughter Lily von Wild shares memories with her mother Frieda, she sees the photographer standing in the kitchen in Margaretenhof out in Brandenburg, at the house the Fischer-Bergemanns rented from 1979 in addition to their flat on Schiff’damm:

LILY VON WILD: *“My main image is of her in the kitchen. She is standing there at the chopping board. It’s dark outside. I am tired or I stayed awake because I always liked being out here. She spreads something on bread for me. But then I’m on my own again because she is working.”*

LILY VON WILD: *“She put an apron on for me. That’s right.”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“There was always an apron hanging there. I don’t use them, don’t know why. She really was a gifted cook. And it went without saying that she cooked if people came. At Schiff’damm there was a phase when that kind of thing was quite easy: ready-made pastry on a tray, mince over it, tomatoes. A kind of puff pastry pizza. Geile Tomaten. That’s stuffed tomatoes with breadcrumbs, garlic...”*

LILY VON WILD: *“They are so ahead of the time. All my friends, if I go to any parties, say no, no, Lily must do*

the Geile Tomaten.”

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“I remember an amazing potato salad.”*

LILY VON WILD: *“I was just thinking that.”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“This family is always fond of a potato salad.”*

LILY VON WILD: *“At Christmas we came here as a family. She had no problem spending the whole time in the kitchen. But the food was plenty and good and important too. It always took forever and there were no presents until after we had eaten.”*

But Margaretenhof was not just for the family. Friends and students visited as well. Amélie Losier studied in the early noughties at the private school co-founded by Arno Fischer, “Fotografie am Schiffbauerdamm”. These days she lives in Kreuzberg and while I visit her she thinks back to her first encounter with Sibylle Bergemann:

AMÉLIE LOSIER: *“My first memory that I still have was while I was doing the course at Arno’s school, because he invited us to his home in Margaretenhof to talk about pictures and edit them. She was there and that is my first memory of her, coming by now and then and looking over his shoulder, making a comment, or Arno would ask her: What do you think of this one? And then she baked a cake for us all and I was so pleased and so impressed. THE Sibylle Bergemann is baking us a cake. That’s the photographer from Ostkreuz, from the agency.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“What kind of cake was it?”*

AMÉLIE LOSIER: *“Apple... There was pastry round it and apple inside. And a dusting of sugar on top.”*

Not ten kilometres away from the house in Margaretenhof was Schloss Hoppenrade. The neoclassical manor house built in the 18th century, mentioned by Fontane in his writings, a place of raucous festivities, balls and receptions, was for six years a summer residence for a circle of friends close to Sibylle Bergemann and Arno Fischer.

Nowadays the three-winged palace and its extensive park are closed in by a neatly trimmed hedge. The house with the beige façade and the balcony supported by four columns over the front door is in aristocratic hands again. When Bergemann discovered it in 1972 during an excursion for a reportage it had been empty for decades and was visibly falling into ruin, with a crumbling façade and grass in the guttering. For 37 marks and 40 pfennigs a month she rented three of the seigneurial rooms on the first floor and turned them into a summer playground and workplace.

Grischa Meyer again:

GRISCHA MEYER: *“Hoppenrade was fantastic of course in that it was so decrepit and about to cave in, that in itself gave it a certain something. Besides, they had the knack of placing a touring chair in the corner with a potted palm next to it, a nice old umbrella, and the room was done and dusted. Apart from that it was a lost cause {...} Everything was broken in some way.”*

And Ute Mahler:

UTE MAHLER: *“I was there because the two huge rooms had wooden panelling, but painted. White, mocha, at some point kind of greyish brownish white. It was awful. Sibylle had decided that the house had to be brought back to life. In the East you could get “Laxyl”, a ferocious acid. If you applied it with hot water it steamed. In the early days Sibylle’s hands were etched away all the time. It was madness, but she stuck with it to the end. Wooden panels right up to the ceiling, dark brown. Birch wood. There were these big windows that reflected the light so beautifully.”*

Sibylle Bergemann naturally used the beautiful light to take photographs. In 2001, in a documentary film, she remembered a fashion shoot with actors Katharina Thalbach and Angelica Domröse:

From the Movie: *Prinzessin für einen Tag*, 2001:

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *“They brought things along and dressed each other. There was a mirror here, you could shoot into that. ... It was never stressful actually. Somehow it was always easy. When we came out here it was like landing on an island. Everything fell away from you. It was another world.”*

Sibylle Bergemann and Arno Fischer made fashion and portrait photos here for the magazine SIBYLLE, the playwright Heiner Müller and the West Berlin photographer Michael Ruetz came here to work. And of course there were – parties.

Actor Angelica Domröse, who played Paula in one of the most successful East German films ever, “The Legend of Paul & Paula”, said in a documentary about Hoppenrade in 2001:

MAREN NIEMEYER: *“Do you have good memories of the parties?”*

ANGELICA DOMRÖSE: *“Oh, yes, they were quite exceptional. The Bergemann and Fischer parties were notorious. We had a real sense that we were beating with the pulse of the times. We are so very modern and we stand for what the whole world is feeling. (11.37) Not only in the GDR. You know, that was the hippie era and we had the feeling that in that sprawling palace where all of us were thrown together ...”*

Grischa Meyer remembers the parties too:

GRISCHA MEYER: *“There were funny parties, yes, people dressed up, of course. There was the flying party that everyone still talks about.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Flying party?”*

GRISCHA MEYER: *“Everyone either wore a propeller on their head and a bomber jacket or brought along a model aeroplane or something.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Did the parties often have a theme?”*

GRISCHA MEYER: *“There was often a bit of that, yes. I was only at one or two of the parties, but I was out there if Marina or other models went to be photographed. Then we would stay on for two of three days and they would do their fashion shoot and then we all drove home.”*

Ute Mahler particularly remembers the bed set-up:

UTE MAHLER: *“We spent the night there. They had these camp beds. If the entire company stayed, we all slept in one room. It was ok.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Holiday camp.”*

UTE MAHLER: *“Yes (laughs). It was fun and nice. But it struck me that my parents often came along too with their visitors. {...} They would often come too. There are lots of photos, like Arno barbecuing on the balcony.”*

Sibylle Bergemann again:

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *“Jakob, a myna, hung there, and in summer everything happened on the balcony. It got the sun all day. We had breakfast here. People were looking up all the time. Really we spent most of the summer in Hoppenrade on the balcony.”*

“We spent romantic barbecue evenings on crumbling palace balconies,” writes Jutta Voigt in her book “The Taste of the East”. “For the grill we used a metal boot wiper because barbecues were in short supply.”

One of the black-and-white photographs taken by Sibylle Bergemann in Hoppenrade shows a long dining table set for eating. On it, arranged as if in a random still life: wine glasses, plates, a big bowl of bread, a bouquet of wild flowers in a vase, several lit candles in curlicued vases. Soft light from two room-high windows in the background falls through the foliage of tall potted plants onto the scenery, which looks as though the guests are just about to come to table.

At some point, in the seventh year, unidentified persons break into the rooms of the palace. To Sibylle Bergemann they feel desecrated. And all the air and life drain out of Hoppenrade. They put it behind them. The memories of summers in the palace stay with them for a long time.

Now we have got to know the living and partying conditions that framed Sibylle Bergemann’s everyday life and the places where it unfurled, the next episode will tell us how she worked: What principles did she apply to her photography? What was it like to be photographed by her? And what questions now confront her daughter and granddaughter as stewards of her estate?

Credits

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The exhibition SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: TOWN AND COUNTRY AND DOGS. PHOTOGRAPHS 1966 – 2010, for which this podcast was made, is currently on at the Berlinische Galerie. On the museum website will find previously unpublished archive material from Sibylle Bergemann’s milieu, a playlist, videos, the recipe for die “Geilen Tomaten”, and of course lots of photographs to go with every episode.