

A Life Dug Out of a Shoebox

In Conversation with Helke Misselwitz

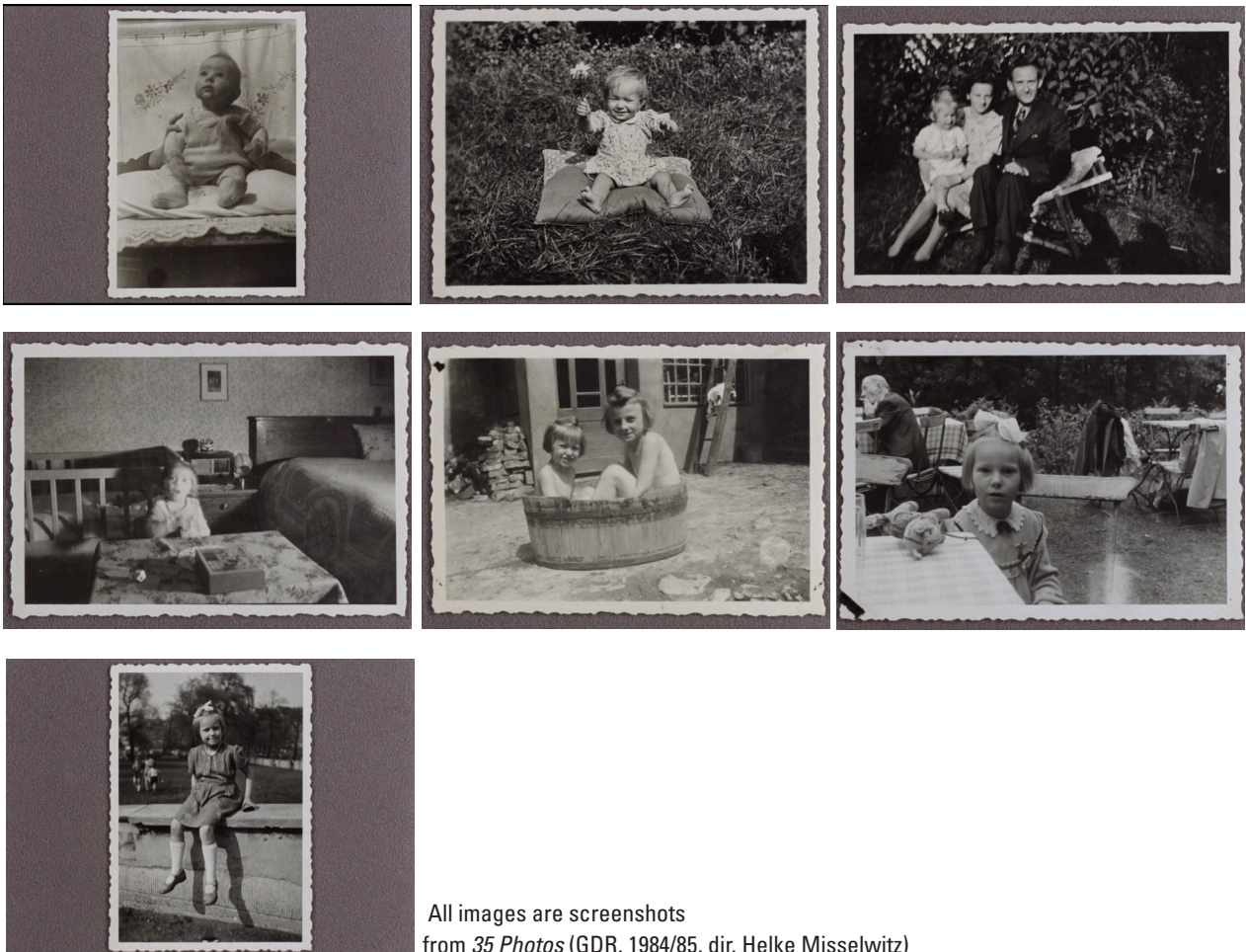
Gusztáv Hámos: How was your photo film *35 Fotos/Bilder aus einem Familienalbum (35 Photos/Pictures from a Family Album)* (GDR 1984/85) created? Could you tell me a little bit about the creation of the film?

Helke Misselwitz: I rediscovered an old binder entitled “35 Photos” while preparing for our meeting. It even still has the production number on it and... “Suggestions for the *Kinobox* 1984.” The *DEFA Kinobox* was a program series with three- to four-minute contributions for which I worked at the time. I prefaced the first draft of ideas in May 1984 with the following text:

“17 million people live in the GDR.
The year has 365 days.
The republic has existed for 35 years.
How can 140 meters of film convey a sense
of the life that is contained in these numbers?
Of success and defeat.
Of joy and sorrow.
Of hope and hopelessness.
Of love and pain.
Of monotony and excitement.
Of struggle and indifference.
Of kindness.”

I created several versions. This is one of them: "A man or woman born in 1949. 35 photos, one for each year of life, flipped open from the family album or dug out of the shoebox. Photos that each of us has in varying technical and artistic quality. Additionally, we hear the voice of the person in question, each with a brief statement. Image and text don't always have to correspond to each other."

There was a second version: "35 photos taken by a male or female photographer from 1949 to 85. 35 portraits regardless of the year they were taken. I'm thinking of photographers like Evelyn Richter, Arno Fischer, or cameraman Christian Lehmann." In the manuscript dated July 5, 1984, I wrote, "Three women born in 1949 will be featured." Later, I decided to focus on one woman: "Karin, only child." Already in the exposé it says: "For this purpose, present-day shots will be edited into the series of photos."



GH: So, after you were approached to contribute to a *Kinobox* for the 35th anniversary of the GDR's existence, you immediately came up with the idea of a photo film. How do you explain that? Is it related to your special relationship with photo albums? During our photo film symposium at the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen in Potsdam-Babelsberg, you mentioned that photo albums and photographs have played a big role in your life since childhood.



Images from the film's first live-action sequence.

HM: In a way, I grew up with photo albums. Before I started school, I was often sick and would lie on the corner sofa at home. I knew that in the downstairs bookshelf, behind the closed cabinet door, there was a stack of photo albums: albums of my father, mother, grandparents, and also of us, the children. So I took the stack. Simultaneously, I picked up art books. All the ones that were there: Rembrandt, Goya, van Gogh and put them next to it. Then I switched between the books and photo albums. I kept looking at the pictures of my parents, my grandparents and imagined their lives. With my mother and grandmother, it was relatively easy because the photos had been taken in our home. My father, however, came from Leipzig, which was farther away. So I had to do a lot of imagining.

GH: How old were you at the time?

HM: When do you start thinking creatively? It started when I was three.

GH: How long did it last?

HM: Until I started school and began reading. Nevertheless, I kept looking at the photo albums. It remains that way to this day. When I go home today, I take my mother's photo albums and ask questions. Back then, I hardly ever asked questions. I just looked at the albums and let my imagination run wild.

GH: You looked at the old pictures in the photo albums and fantasized about what kind of life it was. I think at some point you were aware of the reality you were living in, and you tried to understand the relationship between the one you were living in and the one you saw in the photos.

HM: The life depicted in the photos has little to do with real life. The moments that were chosen and captured were mostly cheerful moments. I think that bad moments are not photographed, at least not by amateurs.

GH: Not for the family album!

HM: Eventually the time came when I started to think. I must have been eight, nine, or ten years old by then. I could no longer reconcile the cheerfulness in the pictures with the accounts of the Nazi era. In other

words, what was taught in school in the GDR or what you could read in books was completely different. That raised a lot of questions in me that I didn't ask my parents. The photos showed my father in a Wehrmacht uniform and my mother in a League of German Girls uniform. When I was younger and hadn't started school yet and didn't know anything about the circumstances of the time in which my parents lived, it was just a uniform, which had no meaning for me. But when I began to understand the connections... I think there was even a time when I hated my parents for taking part in it and not fighting back. At school, it was explained that the purpose of the Nazis was easy to see through. So, it should have been obvious. And apart from the Nazis, there were only resistance fighters. About the whole petty bourgeoisie, most of the population who lived during the Nazi regime, there was no—or hardly any—talk. Later, I found something about it in the books of Anna Seghers and other authors. But at school, there was such resistance. When teachers didn't answer my questions, it really made me harbor feelings of hatred.

GH: Most likely because an unexplored subject had been addressed, especially since all the others had supposedly been resistance fighters. And when you discover people in your own family album who participated, it makes you feel alone.

HM: I was ashamed about that. Then, when I was able to make my own films at the film academy, I made it my subject, and I also gradually understood my parents. That's why I think photos from a family album by themselves are more of an "external" historical document. It absolutely needs a comment to go with the picture. That's why I came up with the idea of selecting one photo for each year in *35 Photos – Pictures from a Family Album* and letting the protagonist comment on it. I wouldn't have been able to convey what the film says in the three and a half minutes with the photographs alone.

GH: It's striking that your approach with the photos is actually one that's in contradiction with the official commission. To put it another way: "35 years of the GDR" – an anniversary that should be celebrated is on one side, and on the other, I see the life of a GDR citizen. However, this fact is not emphasized very much. What is expressed is her fate, her middle-class life. And this stands in an interesting tension with what the commissioner may have originally intended.

HM: I even backed myself up with a quote from Jürgen Kuczynski, with which I had prefaced the draft of *35 Photos*: "Our representation of history is often only brief leaps from one highlight to the next. People have, above all, everyday lives."

GH: Everyday life, bourgeois everyday so to speak.

HM: Absolutely. It was this contradiction in the conception of GDR history that struck me, and what I had learned from my parents' immediate history through the photos and their stories. My parents omitted many things, as did the state's ideology. What was really told and portrayed of everyday life in the GDR? Above all, on television and how was it told? Most of it was based on the highlights, and they were heroic. There were only a few documentaries in the GDR, such as those by Jürgen Böttcher or Volker Koepp that told a different story. My approach to *35 Photos* was: How do people really live? What truly defines their lives? And these 35 years of the GDR, what does it mean in detail for each individual fate? Of course, I didn't think of any solutions or social achievements. But that still becomes incidentally apparent in the film.



GH: What becomes incidentally apparent?

HM: Incidentally, the story tells that everyone could attend school and that it was possible for everyone to choose the profession they wanted. That it was possible to have children and to place them in daycare or kindergarten. However, it becomes apparent through Karin's example and her comments that the old, bourgeois habits and ways of life were still practiced, of course. In other words: she put aside her needs for the sake of her husband, and then he left her.

GH: How did the process unfold exactly? You submitted the various drafts of ideas and at some point, someone gave the okay and said, "That's interesting." Obviously, the person who commissioned it wasn't a hundred percent aware of what might result from that material. Because, as you said, the finished film wasn't used for its intended purpose because *35 Photos* was considered too banal on the one hand and too sad on the other.

HM: *DEFA Kinobox* group manager Bernd Burckhardt liked the idea immediately and gave his approval. As a result, I was able to film. The film wasn't particularly expensive to make. The 35 photos on the animation table, the sound recordings I actually made as sound recordings only, and only the three shots where Karin



is standing in front of the camera were shot as live-action images.

GH: How did you come up with the idea of integrating real film sequences into the photo film?

HM: I wanted to show Karin in natural motion. I wanted to see her face truly alive.

GH: And did you get that?

HM: Together with the cameraman, I wanted to see her face in a certain light. This particular shot wasn't going to be something that a friend or someone in the family would take, but rather we wanted to deliberately see her. And it had to be different from moments that one captures for a family album. I'm very happy about it because I think that what she tells us is expressed on her face. It might even have been what gave the nudge to not release the film initially, I would imagine.

GH: Can you elaborate on this?

HM: There is self-confidence in the revelation of her fate, a certain strength that seemed to others as if Karin was sad. She had already reflected on this before I met her. It was no longer the pain that was in the foreground. She had really reflected upon the fact that she had conformed, put herself on the back burner, and that this was not good. The studio director had a long conversation with me at the time. He was struck by her sadness. He didn't recognize that it was important for Karin to tell her story and, in a way, to reveal herself in front of the camera. In this way, Karin also became visible to others.

GH: Is it really the case that those moving shots are so particularly sad?

HM: No, not at all to me. The real sequences are very vivid. I didn't understand the decision not to show the

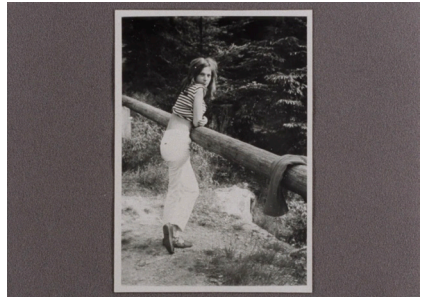
film at the time. But I understood the notion of those responsible, like the director of the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films. He, too, of course, lived a petty bourgeois life. He had probably been married for 30 or 40 years and lived a seemingly happy family life. Perhaps there was fear that something would come to light. In any case, their image of women who have a family and give up their jobs temporarily was shattered. An image was destroyed for them: women must be happy, must have a fulfilled life even if they stay at home for a while.

GH: I can imagine the reaction of the head of the documentary studio as a delayed Kuleshov effect. Your protagonist narrates her life and at first, we follow along with the photos and the narration. At the end, when Karin is seen in action, we project the narration, which we only become aware of by seeing this woman, onto the person in the real-life sequence. Therefore, it's possible that the studio director could see something in it that is not visible on her face because it's in the narrative. Why did you film her in the stairwell?

HM: I didn't want to shoot with artificial light inside the apartment, and so to take advantage of the natural light, we moved to the stairwell. I think she's not quite as recognizable in the photos. They're just "silent" photos. That's kind of history. In the real-life sequence, standing in front of the camera, she becomes real, and it adds another dimension. It could've been that she had already become history. It could also have been that I found her life somewhere, the way one often finds life in purses or in a shoebox. Then I might have had a conversation with her only in sound, but that too would've already passed. But in the moment when Karin appears in front of the camera, she exists in the here and now.

GH: And this way, she becomes real?

HM: She truly becomes real, she lives.



GH: And steps out of the fiction and becomes a real person, and the head of the documentary studio can easily project his own fears and concerns onto her, especially the statement that conformity isn't worth it in the long run. Of course, this, too, can be projected back to the director. It can cause anxiety. In 1984, he already suspected that very soon no one would be interested in conforming to GDR ideology.

HM: This is in addition to the fact that there's a social dimension behind her statement. Back then, I disagreed with the DEFA director and explained my interpretation. That made him think and sparked something that led him to tell me, after a long conversation, that I understood a lot about women and asked if I would like to make a film about women. That was the impetus for my long documentary about women in the GDR – *Winter Adé* (GDR, 1988).

GH: You didn't want to make any changes to the finished film *35 Photos*?

HM: No, it wasn't a matter of editing the film, but he didn't think it was suitable for the *Kinobox* installment on 35 years of the GDR. The film was released a year later in another *Kinobox* (39/1985) with the changed title *Pictures from a Family Album*. It wasn't just this woman's life that made him sad, but it didn't seem representative to him.

GH: Let's say you would have shown a public official or an outstanding female worker as a poster person in your film, a worker with several awards, for example, in whose fate you would have also found all the banalities and sadnesses. Do you think that would have been accepted in 1984?

HM: I think so, but that's just speculation. It also depends on how well-known the person is. I don't think it would have been difficult to shoot it. The question is whether it would have been released. And would there have been a well-known person who would have opened up like that? For *Winter Adé*, I initially wanted to show—in addition to the other protagonists—a woman in an executive position. There weren't many in



the GDR. There was one from the Energiekombinat Braunkohle (Energy Combine Brown Coal) who had the nickname “The Iron Lady.” I didn’t even make it to her but was turned away by secretaries: “We can send you press material,” or “You can read about [her] in the archives.” I said, “I’m not interested in that. I’d like to meet her in person and have a conversation.” Of course, I wouldn’t have asked her anything different than what I asked the other women, and I didn’t want to meet her at her desk. That wasn’t possible, and so I ruled her out as a protagonist. This would have probably posed difficulties for *35 Photos* too. Of course, I could have chosen someone who won awards every year, but I didn’t think that way. I wanted to show an average life.

GH: While making the screenshots from *35 Photos*, I noticed that there are 37 photos in your film. Can you explain that?

HM: Really? I must have miscounted. There was no reason for it. Maybe I didn’t want to leave out certain photos, or the text required it. I don’t recall it in the least. I can’t even verify it because I don’t have a copy. 35 entries are marked in the transcript of the original text.

GH: You say, “There’s always a reference to photography in all my films.” Is there a particular reason for this, or does it happen rather intuitively? Or do you consciously juxtapose photography and film?

HM: I refer to photography in various ways in my films. Sometimes I capture protagonists in the moment when they look at the photographer or the cameraman and pause, like Christine Schiele in the briquette factory [in *Winter Adé*]. The process of creating a photograph, that is, how you position yourself, how you want to be seen, is an important moment in many of my works, such as the family portraits in *Wer fürchtet sich vorm schwarzen Mann* (*Who’s Afraid of the Bogeyman*, GDR, 1989). But it must never cause a halt. The beauty of film, compared to photography, is that there’s also sound. Photography, on the other hand, is



Images from the film’s second live-action sequence.

silent. This is the difference in which I apply photography to film.

GH: Your process follows the tradition of early portrait photography of the 19th century. In those days, the material was extremely light-insensitive and had to be exposed for a long time. Something very similar happens in the sequences from your films: Those being portrayed had to hold out for a very long time because whoever moved eventually disappeared from the picture. To become visible on the picture, you had to enter into time. When you use film to simulate this process of taking a photo, you also enter into time. There are various signifiers in your photographs, clues about the people who are photographed. For example, in what context they would like to be shown and what identity they would like to assume. These are the two aspects of early portrait photography.

HM: The important thing for me is that it's a staged moment and to clearly communicate that there was an encounter with the people in front of the camera, a very deliberate encounter.

GH: I noticed in the wedding pictures from the unreleased footage of your film *Fremde Oder* (*Foreign Oder*, Germany, 2001) that the people simulated the shutter release moment themselves. There was a moment when almost everyone froze as if a photo was actually being taken. They implied with their bodies and their gazes: "Now! Push the shutter!"

HM: Yes, they posed for the photo.

GH: Do you know the documentary *Album Fleischera* (*Fleischer's Album*, Poland, 1962) by Janusz Majewski? It's a Polish photo film, an anti-fascist propaganda film. The film commentary claims that a forgotten photo album of a Wehrmacht soldier named Fleischer was found somewhere near Wroclaw. It contains several hundred photographs, ranging from Hitler's rise to power and the retreat. *Fleischer's Album* embraces the family album as private amateur photography, as a narrative, and as a formal idea. The film is interesting precisely for the reason you mentioned earlier: The compilation of a single-family album is obviously staged, fiction. That album was probably never found in that way with all those pictures and in that order, although the commentary would like us to believe that. It's likely fiction because the history of the Nazi regime and World War II can be gleaned from it in this way. Even if these photos had belonged to one or several family albums, as a viewer, I lose the family connection because of the photos' historical organization, the retracing of the career, and the war. Ultimately, what I see in the main character, whose name happens to be "Fleischer" (Butcher), is a metaphor for a German soldier who made a career during the war and then disappeared without a trace.



Images from the film's third live-action sequence.



A Life (GDR, 1980, dir. Helke Misselwitz)

HM: I made a film with photos in film school called *Ein Leben* (*A Life*, GDR, 1980). I actually found this life in a box. It's still in the basement. A box with photos, photo albums, court documents, letters to a woman, and from that woman. Maria Bartel was her name. She was a baker and came to Berlin from East Prussia in 1920 at the age of 19. Her life was thrown away as part of a "decluttering" initiative. That was what they called it in the GDR at the time. In the West, it was called bulky trash. This took place on a quarterly basis, four times a year, and I roamed around those sites regularly. And one day, I found a large plywood box in Grünau that had "UFA-Film Distribution" written on it. This life had simply been thrown away. It was so exciting to uncover the woman's life and to trace her life's phases based on the letters and the addresses on the letters. I found out that she had died. At the end of her life, she worked as a salesclerk in a haberdashery at the Frankfurter Allee commuter train station. I was able to find her boss in Grünau, who told me about her.

However, I also added fiction to it. I put the box in an attic in Köpenick and declared it the finding place. In the film, people return to this attic again and again. Different people read the woman's letters, that is, my fellow students. For example, Thomas Heise reads a love letter, Christiane Mückenberger, whose film history class I attended, and secretaries from the film school read Maria's letters. And I comment on it. It's interesting that Maria Bartel's life is told only through her letters and photos. In between, you see the former boss sitting in the garden, the lawn mower behind her. We tracked down locations, shot the research sites, and incorporated them into the real images. The store she ran during the war no longer existed, but the premises did. A plumber was using the store at Traveplatz in Friedrichshain. The façade was crumbling, the stairwell was dilapidated, lackluster, but the house was inhabited like all old buildings in East Berlin, where workers, craftsmen, intellectuals, and students lived in the same building. There, I met a woman in the hallway to whom I showed the photos, and she said, "She was a very friendly and beautiful woman." That's what all the interviewees said. The photos, too, say the same. No matter whether she was a young girl or an old woman, she made a point of looking good, despite all the misfortunes that befell her, whether before, during, or after the war.

GH: That's fascinating, also in relation to the photo albums we've already discussed, especially here in Germany. In the photographs between the two wars, you may see a bourgeois life with the appropriate quality of objects and surroundings, which then changes through the Nazi era, above all the appearance of the people. Then, in the GDR, everything is reduced again in a considerable way, so that the aesthetic quality of the environment must have been strongly visible. But that's my imagination...

HM: It's just not true. That's the crazy thing! I don't think you can tell at all from my film *A Life* that she lived in the GDR until the mid-1970s, at least not in her home environment. And because this wasn't apparent, some reviewers reacted oddly to the film at the time. In private everyday life, there was none of the familiar GDR folklore that people think they recognize us by, even today. When people talk about the GDR in the media today, they usually do so as if we had lived on a different planet. They don't want to remind people that the GDR was a consequence of German history. At the time, in 1980, critics reproached me for making a film about a petty-bourgeois life, about a woman who was neither a Nazi nor a member of the resistance. But rather a woman who liked to live and was friendly to everyone, who hid Jews in the attic and provided for them (something her acquaintance mentioned in passing in the film) and sent pearl necklaces to East Prussia in exchange for food. And while the bombs dropped, she read her lover's letters from the front, who asked her if she had seen *Der weisse Traum* (*The White Dream, Austria, 1943*) yet.

GH: You spoke of a life thrown away. Isn't that the "normal" course of things? That when you have so much memorized material, a whole life like that, that at some point certain events lose their significance and we forget them, discard them?

HM: I think we choose what stays in our memory. I have always been curious to discover such a life in a box or photo album. Perhaps from my own experience with family albums, I wanted to know what really lay behind a photograph. Reading into pictures was a crucial impulse for me. At first glance, you find nothing special, mundanities, but then you gradually discover more.

GH: I noticed that in your unused footage of the Polish wedding (*Foreign Oder*), the people filmed, who watched the footage later, said, "Oh, we've already seen it all."

HM: What they meant was that yes, they had already seen everything in the footage from the video cameraman they had hired for the event.

GH: Such moments indicate that something very strange is happening to us. Namely, we're in a situation that is initially alive. That is, time flows. Afterward, we remember the event, for example, by talking about it. But if a photo of the event had been taken, then this photo would replace our memories. In other words, our memory is basically substituted by the photo. But in the case where people have the possibility to have their life events recorded from different perspectives, they are no longer interested in the second perspective. Perhaps a single document is enough for us.

HM: We showed them film clips, and they are certainly captured differently than a photograph. I think a photograph also evokes something completely different: a photograph leaves more room for imagination because it only shows one instant out of many. You can invent a lot more with a photo.

GH: But that would mean that a photograph actually contains much more “movement” than a film. The film floods you with motion, but you have to move the photograph yourself.

HM: I think that’s the way it is.

GH: An interesting paradox.

The conversation took place in Berlin on November 11, 2008.

Translated by Hasret Eleby

Gusztáv Hámos, media artist and art historian, has worked on the theory and practice of inter-media arts for two decades. His artistic work includes video, film, photography, interactive and site-specific installations, as well as walk-in 360° cinema spaces. He has curated film series and has organized symposia and workshops. He co-founded the Concrete Narrative Society e.V. and is a member of the collective top_OS. He is also an artistic advisor of SPUR.lab. He has co-published *bewegt/unbewegt* (Schüren, 2009) and has contributed to several publications on the topic of photofilms. Since 1989, he has been a lecturer at various universities. (hamos.info)



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