

SUMMARY

Tina Bara, Cornelia Schleime and Gabriele Stötzer are rebels. Living in the GDR during the 70s and 80s, these women scream of desire, determination and courage. Their longing for freedom is insatiable and they turn to art as their way of self expression. In a system that oppresses young and creative people, they use photography to express their feeling of complete helplessness. As the conflict with the state security service ("Stasi") of the GDR escalates, the artists are forced to make a decision: To stay or to leave. The film by Pamela Meyer-Arndt introduces a new, boundless perspective on the art and the lives of these fascinating women.

THE DIRECTOR

Pamela Meyer-Arndt (author & director) was born in Cologne, 1967. In 1986, she began studying film at University of Fine Arts in Hamburg, where she was taught by Helke Sander and Gerd Roscher. She did her postgraduate studies at the NYU Graduate Filmschool, supported by a DAAD scholarship. Pamela's studies at NYU lasted for three years, in that time she was able to create multiple fictional short films and was able to learn from independent film productions including mentorship from renowned director Amos Poe. Subsequent to her studies in Cologne, she worked in the field of feature films and commercials. In the year of 2003, she moved to Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin. The omnipresent traces of German history, like the crumbling of the old facades, and the shimmering atmosphere of an ongoing existence of Bohemia of the East, inspired her to look for photographic documentation and witnesses of the GDR. This investigation lead to the beginnings of what would be the documentary film about photography and art in the GDR, called "Ostfotografinnen" ("female photographers of the East") in cooperation with Sibylle Bergemann, Helga Paris and Gundula Schulze Eldowy. Since that point in time, Pamela has been utilizing biographies of artists from Eastern Germany, such as the photographers Ute Mahler & Werner Mahler and Roger Melis. Her films can be seen on public television, as theatrical productions and at cultural events, as well as in cinemas.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Looking for protagonists for this film, I asked myself: Which female artists were active as photographers as well as dissidents?

There was no easy answer to this question as most dissidents were mainly politically active and didn't take photography as seriously.

But I was looking for art that left a strong impression, held me in its spell, that I could not let go of.

Some of Tina Bara's, Cornelia Schleime's, and Gabriele Stötzer's photography startled me at first. It took me some time to make sense of it. In the process of shooting the film, the atmosphere during our conversations was extremely emotionally charged which even made me dizzy sometimes. I remember needing to get some fresh air on the balcony while shooting with Gabriele in Erfurt. Her stories were incredible to me. To have the government set up a photoshoot in which she was supposed to photograph a transvestite, only so that they could use it as an excuse to accuse her of pornography and have her arrested - unbelievable. Tina and Cornelia had traumatizing experiences as well.

When I reflect on what motivated me to make this film, I think of the strong, universal expression in the photographs. The pictures are impressive depictions of female resistance in times of extreme oppression. These works of art are timeless and could have been made all over the world. Skin, nudity, vulnerability, the gesture of extradition - it is so strong and still moves me

emotionally. I wanted to give this form of self-expression a stage where it could be seen widely by the general public.

Lastly, one final question: Would we (from the West) have ever suspected so much sense of freedom on the inside of the GDR as it can be seen by those three women? Surprisingly, the photographs are just recently being discovered, through this film and elsewhere, and are now being brought to light. Finally.

CONTENT

Strange worlds full of unbelievable pictures. A young woman is being tied by her hair, the past has its grip on her. Scantly dressed young people in front of crumbling façades and time seems to stand still. A person wrapped in aluminium foil in the fields of Dresden, like an alien on a sheep meadow. In the 70s and 80s, the three “rebels” create many performative photographs like these, discovering themselves and introducing a form of art that expresses something real. Taking pictures and the experimental filming of super-8 films is just as valuable as the results it creates. Strong female underground on the inside of the GDR.

Tina Bara, Cornelia Schleime and Gabriele Stötzer are artists active in the underground art scene of East-Berlin, Erfurt and Dresden in the 1970s and 80s. They work on their own, collaborate with colleagues and friends or in the artist collective. Directly or indirectly, their art always comes from a biographic background. As young women, they have a feminine view on their world. In order to oppose the interchangeable art of the state’s propaganda, they create a unique and intimate imagery. Meanwhile, they are constantly under surveillance and are pressured by the “Stasi” (state security service of the GDR) and their unofficial members.

The Stasi intends to put Gabriele Stötzer behind bars. A member of the Stasi proceeds to set Gabriele up by creating the opportunity for her to take photos of a transvestite with the intention of using the photographs as proof in order to arrest her for pornography. After years of waiting for permission to leave the GDR, Cornelia Schleime is forced to leave the country over night in 1984. The threat to go on a hunger strike gets her the permission to go West. In 1989, Tina Bara gets married in order to leave the GDR. Only decades after did she realize how deeply the change from East to West actually affected her.

Gabriele Stötzer is the only one out of the three women who decides to stay in the GDR in order to continue fighting. In the early 90s, she gains access to the Stasi’s files on her activism, art and personal life. Consequently, she cuts off all the friends that betrayed and exposed her. Surveillance, lies and betrayal hurt the rebels so deeply that their wounds are still not healed completely. Many of the artworks shown in the film are just now being discovered and brought to light, so that they can be celebrated internationally.

THE PROTAGONISTS

Tina Bara is born in 1962 in Kleinmachnow. She is raised in Wilhelm-Pieck-Stadt Guben, a German-Polish city that was destroyed in World War II. The scars of the post-war period and the Cold War still have an impact on her life. During this time period, reconstruction and new construction is always prioritized, but the past destruction and resettlement is never addressed. In her teenage years, Tina is actively looking for young people that are critical towards the FDJ (Communist Youth Association) and the propaganda that controls the minds of many. She finds her people among artists in the Blues and Jazz scene, where she is acquainted with pacifist (and long-haired) men and women who desire to live in the city, away from their families.

Between 1980 and 1986, Tina Bara studies history at Humboldt University in East-Berlin, but she agrees with neither the authoritarian structures of the university or the ideologies that charge the particular subject of history. Her subsidiary art history, gives her the opportunity to intensely research World War 1 and the 1920s in Berlin. She finds correlations between art and politics which seem to still hold an impact at the time. She also works to contemplate the works of Surrealism, Expressionism, Dadaism and pacifistic left-leaning anarchist currents to compare her historical studies with the present day.

During her studies, she lives with Carlo Jordan, co founder of the Eastern Green Party, in a dilapidated house in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin. She is in contact with dissident groups, such as "Frauen für den Frieden" ("Women for Peace"), Berber Bohlen and Ulrike Poppe. The Stasi interrogates her multiple times and consequently, she gets to know their system methods for „state safety“.

The academic future as a historian is not fulfilling for Tina and she begins taking photographs of her surroundings in her early 20s. Fascinated by encounters with different people and the documentary, fictional and alchemistic potential that the medium of photography holds, she captures her friends and acquaintances in an authentic way, alone or in groups and often in the nude. She creates a resistance against ordered discipline and boring philistinism through a gesture of melancholy and naked skin that is openly on display.

In 1984, for the first time Tina Bara's art is published in the underground magazine for artists "Entweder/Oder" in East-Berlin. Her first photographic exhibition takes place in a gallery and cultural center in Treptow, 1985. She is lucky. Her photographs stick out and are considered a "breath of fresh air" in the field of photography at Artist Association. In 1986, the Association of Fine Arts surprisingly admits her and three other unconventional photographers of her time, Sven Marquardt, Robert Paris and Jörg Knöfel (none of them have an art school degree), to the organization. This is the turning point in her career. Tina now has a tax number and is able to work as a freelance photographer. She employs a friend as a formality in order to avoid the criminalization of refusing to work a preset job, just like her.

Every now and then, Tina works for commissions but her imagery as well as her content is often too controversial. She is asked to take photos of workers in a chemical factory ("Buna-Werke") so that they can be painted by artists from other socialist countries. Accepting this commission, she is looking forward to having access to the interior of the factory more than actually taking the portraits.

Secretly, Tina Bara takes photos of the extreme pollution and terrible working conditions in the factory. She is in deep shock about what she found. After she displays her photos to a small crowd, she has her camera confiscated. In this period of time, Tina also works as a researcher and photographer at DEFA-studios for documentary films. She works with the director Volker Koepp as well as on the movie „flüstern & SCHREIEN - Ein Rockreport“ by Dieter Schumann where she can use her experience of the Underground in East Berlin.

In 1986, she begins taking correspondence courses for photography at University for Graphic and Book Arts in Leipzig by professor Arno Fischer. Through this coursework she will be able to utilize her artistic work into the discourse of learning and studying.

Tina continues to take photos of the people surrounding her and physically puts her camera lens as close as possible to show their skin and catch people's emotions. She captures people at times of pain or misery. At the same time, she feels more and more trapped, suffers from the restrictions on self-expression and consequently, her mental health deteriorates. A large number of people are leaving the city to start a life in the West. Many of her friends access entry to the West by marrying Western German men, Tina Bara meets a correspondent for the East, Peter

Gärtner (a Western German man), and marries him in 1988. Right before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the artist leaves the GDR in the month of May and moves to the West.

In West-Berlin, the political system is new and strange to her as she is not familiar with any of the rules. To strengthen her confidence in her new environment she takes portraits of women who have chosen the same path as her (moving from East to West). In the years of 1990 and 1991, she works on and completes the series „Körperkonstellationen“ (“constellations of the body”).

At Leipzig University for Graphic and Book Arts, she earns her delayed diploma in 1991. In 1993, she herself is invited to be a professor for photography at the University.

In the 2000's, Tina broadens her photographic work through texts based on conversations and engages with the possibilities offered by video recordings. She builds a close bond with her colleague Alba D'Urbano. They discover their common interests and themes and start working together on projects as an artistic duo.

In 2007 in Alba D'Urbano's office, Tina finds a catalogue by the artist Dora Garcia who used photographs of the repertoire of the Stasi in her own project. She recognizes herself in the cover photo, naked and with her face censored by a black bar. The catalogue also features a group of naked women, having a picnic at a lake. Tina and Alba follow the traces of the photos' origin. They start creating “Covergirl: Wespen-Akte” (“Covergirl: Files of a wasp”), a body of work that depicts how these personal photos of the organization “Frauen für den Frieden” (“Women for Peace”) were put on record by the Stasi and used by Western Germans in the context of art. A book with the same title was published in Leipzig in 2019 and the work has been shown in exhibitions many times.

Tina Bara received multiple scholarships and project support. She is able to exhibit her work nationally as well as internationally, publishes books and is part of international projects.

In 2016, she produces a photographic film “Lange Weile” (“Long while”) in which she uses the photographs she made during her time in the GDR and strings them together to form a story. The film is shown nationally and internationally with subtitles in multiple languages. It was presented at the International Women's Film Festival in Dortmund/Cologne, at the Photography Festival in Arles, at an exhibition about radical artists in the GDR in Dresden and Los Angeles and currently at the museum for contemporary art in Vilnius. In 2016, the photographs from the film appeared in a book with the same name, “Lange Weile”, in the edition titled “Fotohof”.

Currently, Tina Bara lives and works in Berlin and Leipzig while she photographs women ages 50+ posing with trees while leading discussion about the post war period in Europe in relation to their personal family history.

Cornelia Schleime is born in 1953 in East-Berlin and is raised as an only child. In 1970, she completes the training to become a hairdresser as a preparation to begin her studies to be a make-up artist at Dresden College of Fine Arts. She drops out of the field two years later and after a break, starts to study painting and graphic art at the same university.

In 1978, during her studies, she gives birth to her son Moritz and in 1979 she joins the Alternative Artist Collective in Dresden. This collective experiments with new art forms and mediums. Her participation in a controversial exhibition “Türen-Ausstellung” (“Exhibition of doors”) at the Leonhardi Museum results in her first conflict with the representatives of the official art politics,

because they deem the exhibition as a provocation. She decides to found the punk band "Zwitschermaschine" with artist Ralf Kerbach and others.

Cornelia completes her studies in 1980. She intensely occupies herself with „Körperaktionen“, which she documents through photography. As a reaction to her extended view on the conception of art and her critical exhibition, she is banned from exhibiting her art in the year of 1981.

In 1982, she goes back to East-Berlin, where she creates Super-8- movies. Her Partner Ralf Kerbach is forced to leave the country and go to West-Berlin that same year. In desperation, Cornelia Schleime tries to move to the West as well, but her requests are declined repeatedly. In 1984, during a bugged phone call, she mentions going on hunger strike. The overheard threat of a hunger strike finally permits her the ability to move and she is forced to leave the GDR within 24 hours. She must leave everything behind except for a few films, photographs and books. In West-Berlin, she lives with friends until she is able to move into her own apartment in 1985. During that time she learns that all of her work, which she had to leave behind in East-Berlin, has disappeared without a trace. She desperately tries to recreate the lost artworks: „I started to paint like crazy, to compensate for my loss, and recreate the style of those lost paintings.“ In 1985, Cornelia receives a cultural scholarship in Berlin which allows her to travel. In 1986, she participates in the exhibition "Malstrom" in West-Berlin, collaborating with Helge Leiberg, Ralf Kerbach, Hans Scheib and Reinhard Stangl. Between 1989 and 1990, she receives a DAAD / PS1 scholarship and leaves to work in New York for a year. She only begins to feel as if she belongs in the West when the Berlin Wall falls.

In 1991/92, she finds out that her trusted friend "Sascha" Anderson, an unofficial member at the Stasi ministry, has also reported her. Reacting to this, she creates a series in which she combines her proper photographs with texts from the reports. The work "Bis auf weitere gute Zusammenarbeit" ("Except For Further Good Cooperation") is completed in 1992 as an angry persiflage.

Cornelia begins traveling abroad in 1990, going to Greece, Indonesia, Hawaii, Ireland and Kenya.

Between the years of 1992 and 2016, she receives multiple scholarships, highly endowed rewards and exhibits her work frequently. In 1995, she receives support from a foundation for female artists (Künstlerinnenförderung der Senatskanzlei für kulturelle Angelegenheiten) in Berlin and starts to coat her big paintings in asphalt coat and shellac. She is admitted to the Academy of Arts in Saxony in 2000 and releases her first novel "Weit fort" ("Far Away") in 2008. Her body of work wins the Hanna-Höch prize in the state of Berlin.

She continues as an activist. In 2022, the book "Das Traumbuch: Postkarten aus dem Schlaf" ("The Book of Dreams: Postcards from Asleep") is published by Rowohlt Verlag and written by her and Martin Walser. Her solo exhibitions include the following: Spring 2022 "Moonland" in Livingstone Gallery, den Haag, Netherlands, May through June 2022 "An den Ufern fernere Zungen" ("At the Shores of Far Tongues") in the House of Art Apolda Avantgarde and towards the end of the year at the Association of Art in Münster. She lives and works in Brandenburg and Berlin.

Gabriele Stötzer is born in 1953 in Emleben, Thüringen and is raised on the country-side along with three siblings. From a very young age, she is artistically active and begins her studies in German and art education at University of Educational Theory in Erfurt. Unfortunately, she is taken off the university register in 1976 because of her political activism.

In 1977, she is sentenced to one year in the female prison, Hoheneck, because of a petition against the expatriation of singer Wolf Biermann.

While still jailed, she decides to be active as an artist, as it is more likely for political activists to be taken into custody than for artists. She is required to work in a shoe factory, as a term of her three year probation after prison. At the end of her three year long probation she leaves the shoe factory to begin seriously pursuing her artistic career. She invests in a private gallery and occupies a house with her friends where she sets up a photographic lab and a space for weaving. She also organizes Pleinairs in Hüpstedt, where free-thinking artists can meet and work. Those types of organizations are being disbanded by the Stasi. Because of this, Gabriele Stötzer continues to lose friends and her social and artistic environment for multiple years.

Working solo she begins photography involving other women, which will become the essence of her work. In 1981, in collaboration with Cornelia Schleime, she creates a form of performative photography. She continues to use this format while looking for new groups, creating and shaping the artistic underground of the GDR. Gabriele is a writer, produces super-8 films in Erfurt and East-Berlin and works with punks. Alongside her sister, Gabriele founds a group for female artists in Erfurt, 1984. They raise public awareness with the help of performances and "Modeobjektshows". There are no Stasi spies among these women, so there is no risk to be liquidated.

The Stasi keeps an eye on Gabriele Stötzer and tries to set up a pretext to prosecute her. As she realizes later on, more than four of her male photo models, with whom she had worked on photo series and super-8 films, were unofficial members of the Stasi. Gabriele had been tasked by these unofficial members with taking pornographic pictures of a transvestite so they could later claim she had committed a crime and they could attempt to hold her accountable. Instead, her photographs turn out to be a documentation of androgynous aesthetics.

On December fourth 1989, she is part of a group of women who are the first to occupy a Stasi station in Erfurt. This inspires dissidents in other cities to do so as well, later that same day. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, she and the group of female artists become founders of the "Kunsthaus Erfurt" ("The House of Art, Erfurt"). She publishes eight books, among them is a book about her time in the prison of Hoheneck. Between the years of 2010 and 2020, she works as a lecturer for artistic performance at Erfurt University. In 2013, she receives the "Bundesverdienstkreuz" ("the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany") for her efforts to process the SED dictatorship. Her photography as well as her artistic works from the group of female artists Erfurt, are currently being discovered on a national and an international level. Especially after the exhibition "re.act.feminism.", Stötzer is considered part of the international elite. Solo exhibitions in the year of 2019: "Verführung" ("Seduction") in Loock Gallery in Berlin and Warsaw. Her art is also shown in group exhibitions such as "Feministische Avantgarde" ("Feminist Avantgarde") (Verbund Wien, 2021) and is published in the book "Parallel Public" by Sara Blaylock (The Press, Cambridge/ London 2022). She lives and works in Erfurt.