

James, Sarah E.: *Common Ground. German Photographic Cultures Across the Iron Curtain*. New Haven: Yale University Press 2013. ISBN: 978-0-300-18444-0; 267 S., 10 Farb- und 170 SW-Abb.

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Sarah James' comparative study of photography in Cold War East and West Germany considers the serial photographic image, or photo-essay, as an intervention deployed by documentary photographers, theorists, and exhibition designers on both sides of the Berlin Wall. Proceeding from an introduction that pits Edward Steichen's iconic 1955 exhibition „The Family of Man“ at MoMA in New York against the comparatively obscure Bertolt Brecht volume „Kriegsfibel,“ also published in 1955, as equal and opposite photographic reactions to the post-war impulse toward collective humanism in the 1950s, James goes on to interrogate a series of photographic projects in the East and West that serve as intersection points for communication among the two Germanys, as well as a host of other contemporary and past influences both within and outside the German speaking world. She moves from Karl Pawek's answer to Steichen originating in West Germany, the 1964 „Weltausstellung der Photographie“ (world exhibition of photography) „What is Man?“ to East German Evelyn Richter's unrealized documentary series embodied by single photographs, to Western Bernd and Hilla Becher's industrial images that for her destabilize the subject-object relationship and constitute an attempt at collectivity, and back to the Eastern context with Rudolf Schäfer's „Totengesichter“ series, which elegantly depicted the recently deceased in the morgue of East Berlin's Charité Hospital. James situates each project within its local and contemporary context, but crucial throughout is a grounding of the divided German cultures of the Cold War in the shared German cultural past – in particular, the rich photographic environment of Weimar German culture, where the photo series came of age as a social and political, as well as visual, entity. Perhaps the great-

est strength of the book lies in this steady and careful consideration of Weimar influence in both East and West, and of the attendant overlappings that belied the solidity of the barriers between the two German societies.

James is also attentive to the mixed historical influences of „The Family of Man,“ that great influencer of documentary imagery outside the US, and the dominant presence of German photographers and its roots in German photo exhibition history, largely from the Weimar era. She prods the idea of the documentary image, and reveals the mobility of the subject and the political substructure of such images in both East and West – in particular the ways in which documentary projects were designed as „atlases of instruction,“ to use Walter Benjamin's term, or „primers“ indebted the Weimar „New Vision“ model of photobooks designed to instruct the public in a new way of photographic seeing to suit the new context of modernity. However, in the postwar context, after the destruction of a coherent German identity by fascism and national division, these primers all seemed to trade in a Brechtian practice of „Verfremdungseffekt“ (alienation), in which realism – embodied by the documentary – is „made strange.“ Steichen's universal humanism was answered by Pawek's „contrasts“: his „Weltausstellung der Photographie“ selectively injected conflict, where Steichen's blended it out into a largely harmonious, but blinkered human experience. Evelyn Richter's images bring out the incoherence of private and public realities in the GDR, and the Bechers' industrial repetitions invoke an „idealized, collective subject“ that cannot be pinned down by postwar consumerism (p. 184).

The especially compelling chapter on East German photographer Rudolf Schäfer's „Totengesichter“ photo series, produced 1979–81 in a climate of loosening standards of censorship in the GDR, places this series in juxtaposition with August Sander's portraits, and suggests the parallel nature of debates around the ideas of the collective and individual in both the Weimar and the East German socialist context – two contexts in which typologies figured greatly, but in which they had vastly different functions. James brings

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out the acceptance of Sander as a prototype for socialist realist considerations of class and „realistic“ portraiture that was largely dominated by types, as well as the dominance of „Sanderitis“ in the documentary projects produced in the looser era of the late 1970s and 80s in the GDR (p. 203). James's choice of Michael Schmidt's „Ein-heit“ (U-ni-ty) photo series of 1991–94 is the perfect capstone to all of these studies, exposing the collapse of divided projects of interrogating the realism of the documentary image in both Germanys into a revelation of the irretrievably fractured German self in the post-unification context.

Overall, this is a study that benefits from a broad consideration of theoretical, literary, and visual context for each project under consideration. If I have any objection to the comparative approach employed by James, it is only that, while her study fleshes out the East German context in revealing and multi-valent ways, it leaves the structure of the underlying archetypes intact: the transgressive documentary photographer vs. the all-seeing, all-censoring state. But she does complicate existing readings of one of the most well-known figures of GDR photography, Evelyn Richter, whose documentary images she reframes as „made with multiplicity at their core,“ and effectively presents the theoretical context of photography discourse in the GDR, which was all but dominated by Berthold Beiler, the most established photography scholar of the period, with a complexity missing from the literature to date (p. 108). Her analysis deepens the understanding of Cold War photographic culture more generally, giving a context to the extensively analyzed „Family of Man“ and its influence in both Germanys that has not been provided before and troubling the received wisdom on photography projects such as the Bechers' industrial images.

Though this book will be enormously useful for historians as well as art historians, the flood of well-chosen images with which James has illustrated it sets it apart from most histories. James has designed the book not as a comprehensive history, but as a series of essays that all focus on the „meta-photography“ of the photo-essay that emerged in the documentary projects she chooses. Much like a comparative German companion to Blake

Stimson's „The Pivot of the World“<sup>1</sup>, this book examines a mode of photography with political and ethical underpinnings and a historical moment. If the book feels a little overwhelmed by the ever-multiplying trajectories of the theoretical and cultural contexts of both Germanys, this is only the other side of the book's major strength – a consideration of German documentary photography projects in the Cold War on their own terms (not as addendum to a broader art history), and without isolating East and West from each other, from their webs of influences, or from their shared German Past.

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<sup>1</sup> Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World. Photography and its Nation*, Cambridge 2006.