

Episode #3 EMMA

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.

#3 EMMA – What kind of person was Sibylle Bergemann? What is distinctive about her photos? How did she go about her work and what was it like to stand in front of her camera?

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *“What I experienced as happiness in life were quite brief moments, in between things somehow, taking photographs or in the dark room, or mostly in connection with work. And of course, obviously, private moments, but always brief.”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: “On my first day at school you didn’t even have a film in the camera.”

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: “That’s true.”

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: “I realise that if I’m in the dark room and I can see that something decent is taking shape, suddenly everything is all right again.”

One thing emerged very clearly while Sibylle Bergemann was looking back over her life in 2010, not long before she died. It is that she found her happiness above all in photography. That is what drove her and what she carried on doing right to the end, sometimes to the point of exhaustion.

But who was the woman behind the camera? And how did those photographs happen? What is so unique about them? Those are the questions I will be exploring in this episode.

After they left the flat on Schiffbauerdamm in 2004, Margaretenhof was the setting for Sibylle Bergemann’s private life. Out here, in the house that the Fischer-Bergemanns had been using since the late seventies, Sibylle Bergemann at some point stopped being called Sibylle. When her granddaughter was born in 1994, she became Emma.

FRIEDA VON WILD Interview: “Sibylle said she didn’t want to be called Oma [Granny]. Her full name was Sibylle Emma Louise, so she said: It’s going to take a while till the child can say Sibylle. And in no time everyone here knew her as Emma.”

LILY VON WILD: “Even Arno called her that. {...} We didn’t have a typical granny-granddaughter relationship anyway. {...} Today when I say Sibylle, it makes her a third person.”

Who was that person Sibylle – or Emma – Bergemann? In the conversations I had with those who knew her best – granddaughter Lily, daughter Frieda, the actor Meret Becker and others who worked with her over many years – two attributes came up again and again:

LILY VON WILD: “When I think of her, I always have in mind the quiet manner that we all have in our family.”

RUTH EICHHORN: *“But that was so typical of her: to say nothing. Simply to say nothing.”*

MERET BECKER: *“She was small and fine-boned and so serious with it. She wasn’t at all the type to try currying favour. She was dry and serious.”*

JOHANNA WIELAND: *“That is the image one has of Sibylle, so silent and untalkative. Something else she had, though, was an incredibly Berlinish sense of humour. Incredibly earthy, we shouldn’t forget that. We were in Thailand, she was taking photos of the kitchen, crouched on a ladder. So this is someone who hardly ever said a word, and then she goes: ‘Dark as up a cow’s arse.’ {laughs}”*

GRISCHA MEYER: *“Her sense of humour was a bit off-the-wall, her humour was very Berlin. That forged bonds straight away.”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“Her sense of humour was really quirky.”*

CLAUDIA ENGELBRECHT: *“Serious, focused, came across as aloof, with her own brand of Berlin humour. Few words.”*

UTE MAHLER: *“That Berlin slang, but the dry wit too. That was what fascinated me: total silence, but if she did say anything she hit the nail right on the head.”*

AMÉLIE LOSIER: *“Reserved, and her sense of humour – spot on.”*

So, as a family friend put it in a little rhyme: “In aller Stille knipst Sibylle” – Sibylle snaps shots silently. And if any word did ever pass her lips, it was wry, dry and witty. She was quiet but assertive. She sometimes smiled and occasionally giggled. But she laughed openly as rarely as the people in her pictures, who never laugh.

The journalist Ingeborg Ruthe once described her as “an artist with the tenacity of a marathon runner”.

Former GEO editor Johanna Wieland confirms Bergemann’s assertive style: *“She was like a conductor, conducting everyone. {...} Very definite and without a word too many. {...} She was as focussed as a ballet dancer or a conductor. Because she knew exactly what she wanted. And what she needed and wanted to do in that second.”*

The actor and singer Meret Becker got to know Sibylle Bergemann after the political changes, in the days when Berlin was untamed, open and unrepaired. Becker and her partner at the time, Alexander Hacke, had converted a few rooms in the Hackesche Höfe into a theatre: the Chamäleon. Meret Becker was rehearsing for a variety show.

MERET BECKER: *“Chamäleon was in ’91 or ’92, so I was 23. Sibylle, or some woman, turned up and began taking pictures all over the place. No one knew who she was and somehow we realised the pictures were for Sibylle, the paper. {...} So Hacke says: This is Sibylle, she’s taking a few photos. And she flitted around with her camera. We weren’t too bothered. Then she came back the next day. I was rehearsing, without make-up. That has its charm too. But then I got myself done up and she said: Can we go back in the room where you were tap dancing? So in I went and that’s when those photos were taken with that special atmosphere and suddenly the magic was there that she always created. There aren’t many photographers who get that intensity. Who reveal the magic that goes on in the ordinary world.”*

Over the years Meret Becker and Sibylle Bergemann met frequently to work together. They made photographs for Becker’s acting agency, for record covers and for a new variety show.

MERET BECKER: *“I liked the searching, that she took the time to do that. And the not being satisfied. Where you think: What? Someone doesn’t like it? But with her it was crystal clear that she wasn’t after a beautiful person or the perfect image. It was the search for some kind of enchantment, something nobody’s seen yet. That’s what she was looking for.”*

Asked how Sibylle Bergemann went about her portraits, her long-time friend and colleague Ute Mahler explained:

UTE MAHLER: *“She knows exactly what she’s after, or she knows when she might get it. But she is very reserved when she is taking pictures. Sometimes you feel: I could do with a word of praise here or a word of criticism or just help me out somehow. Am I sitting properly? Is how I look what you want? She let people stew, but that was just her way. I felt you had to go along with it.”*

It's easy to assume that these two friends who are pursuing the same profession and who, especially in their fashion photography, are never just recording fashion but are actually making portraits of the women wearing the clothes – that these two photographers must surely be rivals. For the most interesting commission, the best picture, the greatest recognition from colleagues.

UTE MAHLER: *“No, we didn't steal each other's pitch. I joined Sibylle, the magazine, because Ms Bergemann asked me: Wouldn't you like to do some fashion photos too? {...} Then she said, give me a few pictures and I'll show them to the editors. And that's what she did and six months later I was taking photographs for SIBYLLE.”*

Sibylle Bergemann always had at least one camera with her, whether she was walking around Berlin, driving around the country lanes of Brandenburg or discovering foreign cities. For her, taking pictures was like breathing. Stopping was simply not an option.

In 1986 she travelled to Amsterdam with the sociologist and writer Irene Runge. They created a book together there: “Don't keep calling it Holland”. Runge notes on Bergemann: “We walk through the narrow streets. I always wait while she takes her photographs. She is always taking photographs. Dogs, women, couples, light, old men, weary passers-by, hurrying ones, windows, sales girls, shop window dummies. Click. Count the quarter seconds. I stand a few paces off, watching as her gaze settles on what she has discovered. Then she lifts the camera. Often events move faster than her gaze. Then she is silently exasperated.”

She is exasperated because the decisive moment has slipped by without letting her capture it. Or as her daughter Frieda put it:

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“I think she often imagined the picture beforehand and just adjusted it until she found the picture she had in her mind's eye.”*

The quest for pictures takes time, a lot of time. Which she lacks elsewhere. In her obituary for Bergemann in 2010, the journalist Regine Silvester wrote: “I can remember how she dreamt of perfection but was anxious about inadequacy. Had she looked after her daughter well enough, with time and tenderness?

Mediated well between the child in puberty and the man who came along later? Like many women, female photographers rushed to and from between career and household, wanting to do everything right and make everything nice. Arno Fischer put an end to her tightrope walk with a few choice words: ‘People want to see your photos, Sibylle. Not your kitchen.’ That, she said, strangely liberated her.”

Ute Mahler again:

UTE MAHLER: *“I'm a very hard-working photographer too. But Sibylle was much more affected. She was far more passionate. You wouldn't think so because she was so reserved. She was obsessed in the positive sense. She just had to do it. It was really quite special. I don't know any male colleagues who worked so hard. It wasn't for the glory. It was about finding the pictures. {...} I think that's what impresses me most. Having your own idea in your head and finding it everywhere.”*

Sibylle Bergemann finds her pictures. And when she presses the trigger, everything is almost always right. In the dark room she usually enlarges the whole negative. “I have almost no photo where I crop,” she said on one occasion.

After unification, when she travelled far more and took colour photographs on the road, she worked on the brightness of the tones until they matched her perception of the place.

Former GEO editor Johanna Wieland co-edited a picture book of Sibylle Bergemann's travel photographs:

JOHANNA WIELAND: *“I went to her archives. She made the colour prints herself and there are whole boxes where she kept printing one image again and again until she had the colour just as she wanted it. It was so moving. All her trial runs are still there.”*

Picture editor Ruth Eichhorn also recalls how they worked together at GEO on those immaculate images:

RUTH EICHHORN: *“We would never have dared to... why would we? They were perfect. Our printers made every effort to replicate Sibylle Bergemann's print as authentically as possible.”*

In this quest for perfection, between her urban forays, fashion shoots and returns from abroad, Sibylle Bergemann spent many hours enlarging her negatives. In the small two-room flat on Hannoversche Strasse she turned half the kitchen into a darkened chamber. Later on at Schiffbauerdamm she used the old maid's room between the kitchen and bathroom to develop prints. In Margaretenhof a ground-floor door still carries the sign "Dark Room".

Bergemann herself once recounted how she spent the evening of 9 November 1989 in the dark room of her flat on Schiffbauerdamm. It wasn't until she listened to the news that she realised what was happening just outside the living-room windows, where the border crossing-point at Friedrichstrasse Station had suddenly opened up.

Lily von Wild remembers what it was like as a child visiting Margaretenhof:

LILY VON WILD: *"I always had to amuse myself because either she or Arno was in the dark room. I used to sit in the car outside Ostkreuz. Hours would go by before she came downstairs again."*

Ostkreuz – that was the independent photographers' agency, inspired by Magnum, that Sibylle Bergemann founded with colleagues after the Wall came down. Sibylle Bergemann was 48. Like so many other East German photographers, she had to adapt to new conditions as a result of the political changes.

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *"In '89 the idea came up that maybe we should form a group again. And there were seven of us who founded Ostkreuz. Ute and Werner Mahler, Harald Hauswald ... and me. We wanted to carry on with the auteur photography that we reckoned we had been doing, and not turn into some sort of service providers."*

She was too old for fashion photography by now, she later claimed. Picture editor Ruth Eichhorn disagrees:

RUTH EICHHORN: *"Too old, that isn't quite right. {...} But the designers had never used an East German photographer for fashion production, whoever it may have been. I think there was a certain arrogance at play there. Besides, the market was much trickier, more turbulent and more established. I don't think she would have made it."*

Unlike in the GDR, there was no longer a fixed schedule of fees for photographers. Every payment had to be negotiated afresh with every contract. The people who had been able to divide their time between partying, debating and taking photographs now had to earn serious money – and that in a new competitive scenario.

Ute Mahler recalls that her husband Werner was the one who wanted to bring Sibylle Bergemann and Arno Fischer on board at Ostkreuz:

UTE MAHLER: *"Werner was the driving force behind setting it up. Then we just looked around to see who we rated highly, who had a distinctive style, and also who we respected. And of course we asked Arno, but straight off he said no."*

ANNE WAAK: *"Ego?"*

UTE MAHLER: *"And he was 20 years older, 60. He didn't fancy the prospect."*

Arno Fischer had no faith in the idea and didn't think the agency would last two years. Sibylle Bergemann, on the other hand, became a founding member of Ostkreuz.

Amélie Losier, who studied from 2001 to 2005 at the photography school set up by Arno Fischer on Schiffbauerdamm, remembers what she learnt from Sibylle Bergemann:

AMÉLIE LOSIER: *"What I took away from her, and what moves me, was her treatment of colour. {...} What I also found very striking was the fashion photography that they did for SIBYLLE, which in that context, of course, was very important and socially critical, that way of photographing fashion, or rather people. People who really have nothing to do with fashion. In locations that are not so – wow! – colourful and whatever. Quite different from the fashion pictures I had known up until then, that I grew up with in Paris."*

One of Losier's favourite pictures by Sibylle Bergemann is of actor Meret Becker.

AMÉLIE LOSIER: *“That is a picture that I always come back to when I give workshops myself, apropos portraits. I ask the pupils whether it’s a portrait or not, because the students say that for a portrait you must look at the camera. Then I show them this example and I introduce portraits in a different way. {...} This is Meret Becker with gold dust in her hair {laughs}, she is looking from the back to one side, not into the camera at all, but despite that, with this blurred background and this posture there is something completely serene about it. Time that suddenly stops and the exchange between this person and the photographer.”*

Meret Becker herself clearly remembers the day that photograph was taken. First she and Sibylle Bergemann tried to make agency pictures, the kind where Meret Becker looks as natural as possible, preferably without make-up, lending herself to as many potential roles as possible. The photos made that way, she says, were not especially noteworthy.

MERET BECKER: *“And then at some point I got a woman to do my hair and tip gold glitter on my parting. And at some point towards the end I lay on the floor and said: Chuck the glitter in my face. And she goes: Uh. Then we did another session... And that session spread into four hours.”*

Perhaps it was Arno Fischer who came up with the most poetic description of his partner’s photographs. They were “like poems that come from inside”.

Since her death and then his, it is Bergemann’s daughter who has been taking care of the photographic estate.

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“Because, because naturally I feel I have an obligation, because I promised her, literally on her death’s bed... Where is it going to go? Who is going to do it? {...} Especially now with all the work for the exhibition, we couldn’t let just anyone decide about all these old things. Only Lily and I can do that. {...} She didn’t want to go anyway, but at least she knew that I would sift through it all in my weirdly thorough way.”*

What Frieda von Wild never suspected is how much time she would need just to look through the thousands of photos.

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“Yes, I underestimated it. We’ve been working on it now for 10 years and I still haven’t held every picture between my fingers. Because we only ever deal with the latest request.”*

Shortly before her death, Bergemann began sorting her oeuvre. She threw photographs out, disposed of contact sheets. But which of the countless other pictures did she hope would survive? What was to be done with torn and dirty prints?

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“I am so grateful for Lily, because now she has studied the history of photography, and these days she looks at things in quite a different way. But yes. Who if not us? We have always been the closest to it all.”*

After this close-up of the person and photographer Sibylle Bergemann and how she worked, the time has come to broaden our horizons. And look at what happened when she left East Berlin and the GDR. When she did the thing – apart from photography, of course – that she was most eager to do: travel.

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.