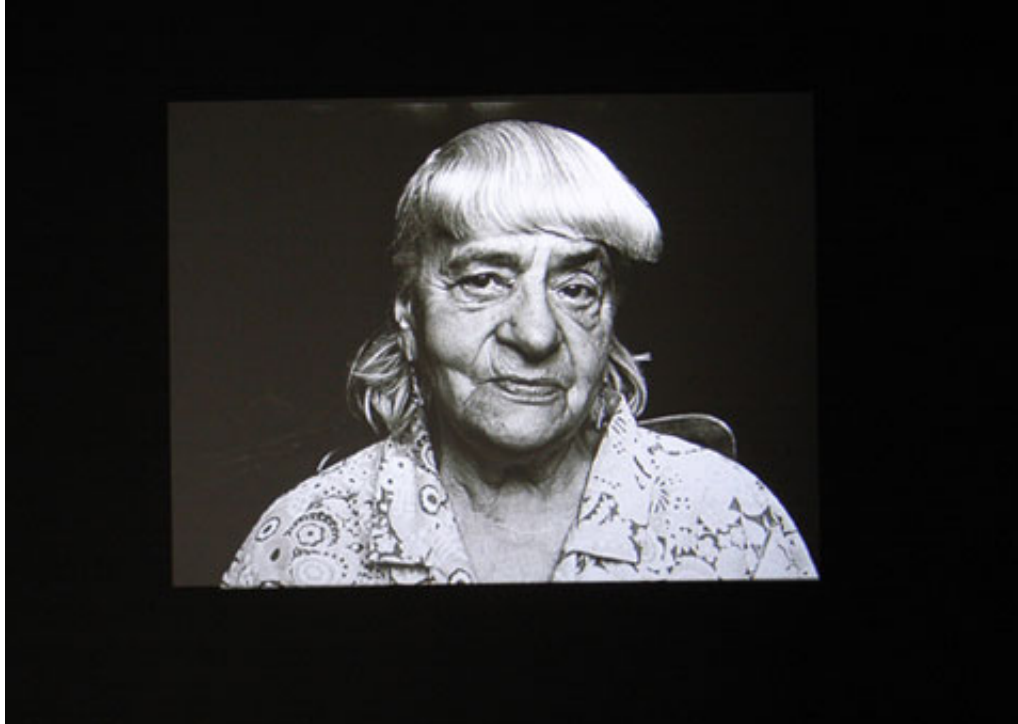


## The Highlights - Musical Box with a Dancing Ballerina

About Gundula Schulze-Eldowy's collage,  
*Im Herbstlaub des Vergessens*, 1983-2009



There once was a dark, gray, cold, misty world, and in this world a broken-down city, forgotten by the other nations. A strange place, still wounded by the war that had ended 30 years before, and badgered by the government that tried to rebuild it. A young woman, 23 years old, came to live there, in a little apartment of a backyard house. Under the black chimneys that were constantly exhaling dirty smoke from cheap brown coal, this young woman took her camera out on long walks. Strolling through the streets she snapped the ruins, the old cars, the snow on the sidewalks, the old cobblestoned places, the signposts advertising businesses that had closed a long time ago. She met people and asked them to pose for her. Sometimes they took her along to their flats; sometimes they even took off their clothes to show their vulnerable bodies.





Detail of Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, *Im Herbstlaub des Vergessens*, 1983-2009, slide show with b/w and colour photographs, sound, projection. © Gundula Schulze-Eldowy. Exhibition shot by Paul Huf, 2009.

She watched the young and the old fall in love and hold each other tightly in this hostile, melancholic town. The young were wild and rough, while the elders were full of memories, haunted by the past.

Besides photographing she recorded the stories she was told and added her own feelings and impressions. So she became a part of this world, a chronicler with the tools of an artist and a writer. And in her pictures the cold wind is blowing, but it is a cold wind from a city that doesn't exist any more.

That young woman was Gundula Schulze-Eldowy, born 1954 in Erfurt, East Germany, and trained as an artist in Leipzig. The broken-down city was East Berlin, where she spent the 1980s in the neighborhoods of Mitte and Prenzlauer Berg. The romantic title of the work that combines the material collected back then could be translated as "Under the autumn leaves of oblivion" ("Im Herbstlaub des Vergessens"). I discovered this pearl recently in a black box of the show "Transition Society, Portraits and Scenes 1980 to 1990" ("Übergangsgesellschaft, Portraits und Szenen 1980 bis 1990") at Akademie der Künste Berlin. Schulze-Eldowy chose the format of a slide show of about 40 black-and-white and color photos accompanied by a sound track to catapult her memories of a long-since-disappeared Berlin to our times, 20 years after the wall fell.

The small, enclosed space that houses the presentation allows for an intimate and personal encounter with the images. A fire wall covered with a white chalk graffiti, a backyard with tightly whitey underwear on a clothesline, the fading paint on the façade of a shoemaker's workshop-these still lifes and cityscapes alternate with portraits of residents with striking features, A voice-over in rough Berlin dialect recounts stories about drafty flats with poor heating, the music box with a dancing ballerina on top, and the prostitutes at the corner. It is tempting on the first glance to identify the depicted people with the speakers, but it quickly turns out that the links between images and text are loose. They do not illustrate each other, but create a poetic fabric that touches the visitor's wealth of experience gently, And they recall what the illustrator Heinrich Zille affectionately named "Milijöh" (Berlin dialect for "milieu"), in his humorous drawings of Berlin's proletarians a century earlier. So it is not only the apocalyptic atmosphere in the capital of the slowly perishing GDR that Gundula Schulze-Eldowy conjures with this collage; in its songs, rhymes, and stories we also encounter the leftovers of the carnivals, cabarets, and ball houses that filled the once-so-glamorous interwar Berlin.

My personal enthusiasm for this artwork springs from its commitment to reality and its sensitivity for the poetic dimension embedded in the life around us. The stories are always out there. A modesty of tools or the limitations of the situation don't matter: As an artist you only need to go out and pick them up!