

Artistic and political interest led photographers Angelika and Bernd Kohlmeier (born 1962 in Munich and 1953 in Cuxhaven respectively) to accompany sixteen Members of the German Bundestag on election campaign tours. Not bound by the terms of a commission, the artists were at liberty to decide what they photographed and when. In doing so, they deliberately opposed the kind of media imagery so omnipresent in our times. They employed analogue technology, developed their negatives in the traditional way and printed their photographs on classic black and white barite paper. In addition, they took pictures only in natural light and – most importantly – they did not stage their motifs.

studio kohlmeier Politics Unmasked

The exhibition shows each Member of Parliament in a sequence of three photographs. At least one of these is a large-scale portrait. These pictures frequently resemble snapshots, deliberately out of focus, taken from an angle and with the subjects in shadow. Occasionally, the face is cut off by the edge of the photograph or pushed to one side, turned away from the viewer or shown from behind. All these features normally rank among the ‘deadly sins of photography’ and would never appear in a classic studio portrait, which nowadays would also be retouched at the computer.

The pictures that range more widely offer a similarly unorthodox perspective. Keeping at a distance from the motif, the photographers sought to minimise artistic intervention so as not to reduce the authentic character of the situation they were recording. The Kohlmeiers focused on capturing the politicians in humdrum

places like workshops or car showrooms, either before or after official appearances, when their countenances lacked the tense expressions generally noticeable when they face the public. They often seem thoughtful or preoccupied, like anyone else, whether politicians or not. These are ordinary people, without posturing and pretension, who are going about their daily lives and communicating with others on an informal basis. The exhibition might well have been titled ‘Encounters’, not least because the photographs enable viewers to encounter a country’s political representatives on a more purely human level than in the staged images purveyed by the media.



The encounters recorded by Angelika and Bernd Kohlmeier are of a special kind: they reflect in a striking way our understanding of democratic political culture. In capturing ‘fruitful moments’, the photographers reveal unobtrusively that these are encounters not between rulers and their subjects, but between equal members of a community: they show decision-makers elected for a limited period seeking contact with others on a familiar, everyday basis. How different these images are from the staged mass choreography seen in pictures brought back from North Korea by Andreas Gursky, in the photographs taken by Aleksandr Rodchenko and in the films of Leni Riefenstahl! And how far removed they are from the portraits of rulers in feudal epochs, with the aloof poses that seem so distant and detached. Unlike such images, the Kohlmeiers’ photographs speak a visual language that does justice to



our notion of the democratic way of life and encourages critical thought. They also prompt comparison with Herlinde Koelbl’s photo installations *Macht (Power)* and *Wille (Will)* in the Paul Löbe Building of the German Bundestag and with Andreas Gursky’s large photograph *Bundestag* in the Reichstag Building, both in Berlin. Although these works embody quite distinct artistic approaches, each of them makes an impact similar in meaning and power to the Kohlmeiers’ photographs.

Angelika and Bernd Kohlmeier make visible in a number of ways the natural, civic, quintessentially human face of politics in a democracy, presenting politicians in private surroundings or recording events possessed of an inner momentum so intensive as to banish all thoughts of pre-arrangement. The variety of pictorial approaches they have developed allows for virtually no repetition, and not a hint of

routine, in the entire sequence of images. That is the great strength of these photographers' visual reporting, for, despite the recurrence of similar situations, they consistently use their visual idiom to enshrine the uniqueness of each and every person. So deeply expressive of human individuality and immediacy are their mises en scène that stereotypical notions of what politicians are like simply do not arise. Instead, the photographs let viewers experience politicians as people like themselves, as fellow citizens, sometimes cheerful and talkative, sometimes earnest and thoughtful, as human beings finding their way in daily life just like everybody else. The exhibition thus supplements

its aesthetic rewards by helping to combat the false image of a society supposedly divided into two mutually exclusive groups, 'us lot down here' and 'you lot up there'. Viewers leave the exhibition in the awareness that they belong to a democratic society of equals that enables them to identify with their parliamentary representatives.



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