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The Essence of Our Existence

BY ASTRID MANIA

POWERFUL WOMEN - SUSAN, 1993, silver gelatin print, 50 x 50 cm. Copyright and courtesy the artist.



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

Herlinde Koelbl

Herlinde Koelbl's work is most often described as "sociological." Renowned for her photography, videos and films as her incisive interviews with notable cultural and political figures, Koelbl has dedicated her artistic career to exploring an enormous range of topics and themes. What connects the various elements of her oeuvre is her seemingly inexhaustible interest in, and empathetic approach to, the human condition. She directs her camera at people from all walks of life, revealing a keen eye for the roles we play, and the necessary props and settings that help in maintaining our appearance, in investing us with an identity, as she captures moments of genuine presence.

Born in 1939, Koelbl is a self-taught photographer, which may partly explain why her work seems to be relatively untouched by the aesthetics of dominant schools or figures within the (West) German photography scene that informed the practices of many of her contemporaries. Koelbl began her artistic career when she was in her late thirties; a friend had given her a roll of highly sensitive film for her Agfa Silette camera—a casual present that marked a life-changing moment. Her first published photographs were embedded in the journalistic contexts of renowned German weeklies *Stern* and *Zeit Magazin*, as well as the *New York Times*. Despite these early successes, photography wasn't the most obvious choice of career. After all, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, photography was still fighting to be recognized and respected as a visual arts genre in its own right.

The Rise of the Author

In West Germany, the foundations of a supportive public and commercial infrastructure for photography were just being laid. In 1977, Documenta 6, labeled the "media documenta," was considered revolutionary in that it included a wide range of historical as well as contemporary photography. It was also the year when Cologne's Museum Ludwig established its photography department; soon after, Essen-based Museum Folkwang accessioned the collection of distinguished photographer Otto Steinert. Art dealers also began to venture into the realm of camerawork. Artists Bernd and Hilla Becher initiated their iconic typologies of industrial buildings, rooted in the documentary photography of pioneers such as Eugène Atget and August Sander; the Bechers' visual language would become a, if not the, dominating influence on young photographers in West Germany.¹

There were still other developments in the field of photography. The years when Koelbl took to the camera were also marked by emerging discourse around the notion of a socially engaged *Autorenfotografie* ("auteur photography"), so different from the documentary approach of the Bechers. Coined by German art historian and curator Klaus Honnef in 1979, the term delineates a common approach characterized by "a subjective and emotional analysis and representation of social and political topics, while at the same time appealing to the photographer's responsibility for the content and the usage of photography."² In his informative essay on Koelbl's practice, theorist Hans-Michael Koetzle celebrates her as "a universe of her own,"³ but nonetheless suggests situating her work within this movement, with its artistic and (socio-)critical ambitions: "It is a photography that, in every aspect, carries the thumbprint of its author: from the choice of its topic and its structure down to its individual perspective and visual language."⁴

1. This is by no means to ignore or lessen the work and impact of East Germany's photographers, and certainly not that of (female) colleagues such as Evelyn Richter, Sibylle Bergemann or Ute Mahler, but just to give a very brief idea of the context in which Herlinde Koelbl started her work.

2. Gisela Parak, "Schöne neue BRD? Autorenfotografie der 1980er Jahre," in *Schöne neue BRD? Autorenfotografie der 1980er Jahre*, ed. Gisela Parak (Braunschweig: Museum für Fotografie, 2014), n.p. Trans. AM

3. Hans-Michael Koetzle, "Kaleidoskope des Sozialen, Anmerkungen zur Fotografie von Herlinde Koelbl," in *Herlinde Koelbl, Mein Blick* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2009), pp. 277–283, 277. Trans. AM

4. Ibid.



THE GERMAN LIVING ROOM - FLAT-SHARING COMMUNITY, 1979, silver gelatin print, 40 × 60 cm. Copyright and courtesy the artist.



CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN - GARDENER (JAPAN), 2010, c-print on alu-dibond, 140 x 110 cm each. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

The Personal Is Political

One of Herlinde Koelbl's first projects was her photographic journey through West German living rooms ("Das Deutsche Wohnzimmer," 1978-80), described by academic Gisela Parak as an "emphatic synthesis of photo reportage and social analysis."⁵ These early black-and-white portraits of families, couples and individuals from various social backgrounds in their diversely styled domestic environments were certainly key to establishing Koelbl's reputation as a sociologist. In the resultant photo book—the first of a number to come—the photographs were even accompanied by statements from their protagonists. This project was the beginning of Koelbl's exploration into all things human: "What is the essence of our existence? What is it that motivates us? These questions recur all the time. Love, greed, hatred, faith, fear, power, sexuality, death. I want my pictures to reveal how somebody 'is' via body language and presentation, to show the balance, but also the discrepancy between life and look. Sometimes I expand my stylistic devices into the realms of text, film or video installation to show a person's thoughts, mind and language, to convey a picture that is much more complete."⁶

These remarks equally sum up Koelbl's artistic and conceptual approach to her series "Kleider machen Leute" ("Clothes Make the Man," 2008-11), pairs of images that depict the same person, first in formal work attire, often a uniform, and then in a casual outfit (in one instance, the subject is in his birthday suit). Here, too, the protagonists, who come from a broad spectrum of ethnic backgrounds, speak for themselves, explaining which clothes they prefer and why, highlighting and revealing the complex and often invisible social hierarchies and barriers that are manifest in one's attire. Koelbl's most famous

5. Ibid.

6. Herlinde Koelbl, Preface, in *Koelbl* 2009, p. 5. Trans. AM



TRACES OF POWER -
ANGELA MERKEL,
1991/2006, silver gelatin
print, 50×50 cm each.
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the artist.

series to date, "Spuren der Macht" ("Traces of Power," 1991–98), takes a comparable angle in that it is a longterm study into how worldly power is literally embodied in and changes those who wield it. Koelbl photographed and interviewed German political and economic leaders repeatedly over the course of this project, at more or less regular intervals. The public interest in this series rose correspondingly with the fame and ranks of its protagonists, including former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his successor Angela Merkel, which lends this project a historic dimension.

Working in series has been the one constant in an oeuvre that is not only varied in its choice of subject matter, but also in its formal means. Koelbl's pictures are shot in color as well as in black-and-white, at a studio or on site—any combination of which can appear within the same series. Most of the protagonists pose for the camera, while some appear to be caught off guard, like the fur- and jewelry-clad socialites in "Feine Leute" ("High Society," 1981–86). Thorough research into the history and cultural, social and ethical implications of a project precedes all of Koelbl's camerawork. It is no surprise, then, that her images are infused with art-historical references, as in "Opfer" ("Sacrifices," 1996), which turns the bloody laceration on a slaughtered lamb into a Caravaggesque wound of Christ. Other correspondences are purely serendipitous, like the untitled picture from "Haare" ("Hair," 2003) of a woman baring impressive cleavage, with her face hidden under a profusion of golden locks, evoking the famous flower mask worn by Sheila Legge in her 1936 surrealist performance at London's Trafalgar Square. Rather than trying to develop a signature style or brand, Koelbl focuses on devising an apt approach to portraying her subjects, a task that at times demands as much discretion as persistence, as was the case when photographing and interviewing survivors of the Holocaust for her "Jüdische Portraits" ("Jewish Portraits," 1987–89).

Female Trouble

Koelbl's photographic and journalistic practices have, beyond the German-speaking world, met with great recognition, garnering awards including the Leica Medal of Excellence and the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. Astonishingly though, she has not been celebrated for her achievements as a female artist in equal measure. This is probably due to the fact that she never actively engaged in the debates around feminism taking place within artistic circles, eschewing theory in favor of a pragmatic, just-do-it attitude to her work (a fearlessness that for instance took her to military shooting ranges all over the world, resulting in her series "Targets," 2008–11). Apart from keeping her distance from particular artists' or photographers' schools, Koelbl was never vocal about declaring any personal affiliations, feminist or otherwise. This is not to say that she wouldn't qualify as a role model for a younger generation, both with regard to her topics and her biography. When Koelbl started her practice, female photographers, except for those with an exclusively and explicitly feminist agenda, were rare. Artists we today consider pioneers of the field, such as Lee Miller or Germaine Krull, did not head the now ubiquitous "Ten most important women" lists back then.⁷

For someone like Koelbl, strictly feminist discourses would have had, in the early 1980s, little to offer: many Western feminists were at best ambivalent toward the notion of (photographic or moving) image, their reservations fueled by Laura Mulvey's seminal dissection of the male gaze.⁸ At the same time, feminist visual artists who had turned to photography and video—avoiding the overpoweringly male discipline of painting—focused on their own bodies when exploring and challenging the patriarchal, objectifying images of women in the arts, advertising and pornography.⁹

7. When Whitney Chadwick visited Roland Penrose in 1982, on research for her book *The Militant Muse*, she reports that he was adamant when it came to the contributions of colleague and former partner Lee Miller, reducing her to the passive role of the muse. "They weren't artists," Roland said [...] "Of course the women were important," he continued. "But it was because they were our muses." Whitney Chadwick, preface to *The Militant Muse: Love, War and the Women of Surrealism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), pp. 7–15.

8. In her famous 1973 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

9. Cf. Inka Graeve Ingelmann, "Female Trouble – Die Kamera als Spiegel und Bühne weiblicher Inszenierungen," S. 29–37, in *Female Trouble – Die Kamera als Spiegel und Bühne weiblicher Inszenierungen*, ed. Inka Graeve Ingelmann (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008), pp. 29–37.



MEN - FRANK, 1983, silver gelatin print, 50×50 cm each. Copyright and courtesy the artist.

That said, it is worth reviewing Koelbl's work from a feminist stance, especially in light of today's net activism and the online body positivity movement. Much like other earlier endeavors fighting restrictive beauty norms—Annekathrin Kohout provides the examples of publications *Radiance: The Magazine for Large Women*, created in 1984, and *FAT/SO?*, first printed in 1994¹⁰—Koelbl's photographic pleas for a more inclusive perspective, in terms of gender, ethnicity and beyond, didn't achieve the resonance they perhaps should have at the time. Her photographic series and book of the same title, "Starke Frauen" ("Powerful Women," 1993–96), came decades before hashtags like #EffYourBeautyStandards or #CelebrateMySize started employing the scope and speed of social media to campaign for more realistic and inclusive representations of female bodies: "With many of my topics, I was ahead of the times. Back then, people weren't used to seeing images of strong women. I made them visible."¹¹

Koelbl was certainly a pioneer when it came to her delicate and erotic portraits of nude men—old and young, from various ethnic backgrounds, some in the throes of orgasm ("Männer" ["Men"], 1980–84). It was as if Koelbl had anticipated Melody D. Davis's complaint about the lack of male nudes in contemporary photography ("No other woman had made a book about naked men!"¹² Koelbl told me). Observing that male nudes were limited to the bodybuilder and the pornographic actor, and that there were hardly any respectful images of men that would not equate the male body "with unilateral aggression (to or from the object)," Davis concludes: "Photographers of the male nude who do not accept this challenge help to conserve the tradition of the male physique as embodiment of a fantasy penis of power and privilege. Such a tradition radically limits the options for imagery of men, and this results in a loss of knowledge and pleasure for men and women both."¹³

Koelbl might be called a sister in spirit with some of today's young net activists dedicated to increasing visibility for marginalized bodies. But there is little accord when it comes to the means of doing so. Koelbl refuses to publish her work on social media platforms, preferring the safe—and, discursively, perceptually slower—space of a book or an exhibition. Contemporary feminist and other activist discourses that communicate their messages online via visual rather than textual methods require and produce a steady mass influx of images, specifically images that are simple and easy to grasp.¹⁴ Koelbl's images, in contrast, are infused with levels of pictorial and cultural complexity: "I do not just take a picture. I am approaching my topics in a very reflective manner. Take 'Powerful Women.' To me, they were beautiful and interesting because they reminded me of the images and sculptures of goddesses. They once were considered ideal beauties. I have always strived to see more than just a body."¹⁵

"Haare" is an example of a body of work that is strongly informed by the cultural history of its topic, complete with all of its implicit positive and negative discriminations. Here, we also find images that recall the posts of net activists in their display of body hair that today's repressive beauty norms generally deem unacceptable: on fingers, in armpits and the genital regions. In Koelbl's portfolio, these bodies are varieties among many others; "Haare" celebrates any hair (and lack thereof), regardless of color or style, or on which body part it appears, or whether it is intended as a token of individuality or affiliation.

But maybe Koelbl's sensitive portrayals are better suited to a more caring environment, shown to viewers less harsh and brutal than the trolls who populate the internet. *Countess Nina* (1991), for instance, a portrait of an 80-year-old former model at the Munich Art Academy, featured among the "Powerful Women," exposes her wrinkled skin to a lens that transforms it into a geological wonderland, reminiscent of a landscape of stratified sediment, giving beauty and dignity to an old, female body. The photograph comes with a double bind, appealing to an urge to both share and protect it from the world.

HERLINDE KOELBL was born in 1939 in Lindau, and currently lives and works near Munich. Her work has been exhibited internationally, including at Kunsthall Rotterdam (2009); Martin-Gropius-Bau Berlin (2009); Esther Cho Gallery, Seoul (2013); Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Bonn (2014); UN Headquarters, New York (2017); and Abtei Neumünster, Luxembourg (2017). She has published more than 20 books on her practice and has also written acclaimed documentary films. Her interviews with well-known figures are regularly published in *Zeit Magazin*. Koelbl has received numerous awards, among them the Leica Medal of Excellence (1987), the Bundesverdienstkreuz am Bande (2009) and the Kulturelle Ehrenpreis der Landeshauptstadt München (2015).

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10. Annekathrin Kohout, *Netzfeminismus, Strategien weiblicher Bildpolitik*, (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2019), p. 56.

11. Herlinde Koelbl in a telephone conversation with the author, March 1, 2019. Trans. AM

12. Ibid.

13. Melody D. Davis, introduction to *The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography* (1991), in Sri-Kartini Leet, *Reading Photography: A sourcebook of critical texts 1921–2000* (Farnham et al: Lund Humphries, 2011) pp. 189–191.

14. Kohout points out that the images' simplicity supports their communicative function, cf. Kohout 2019, pp. 9–10, 23.

15. Ibid., 11.