

1986 BACK TO THE PRESENT

WELTKULTURERBE VÖLKLINGER HÜTTE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL KERSTGENS

25 APRIL TO 28 NOVEMBER 2021

PANDEMIC MEETS NUCLEAR DISASTER

It is early April 2020. I gaze out into the deserted street: no people, no cars moving. It all looks very surreal, but it reminds me of something. I reflect for a while and then pull down a ring binder labeled "Freizeit 1986". Leafing through the color contact sheets, it all comes back. Yet the images at the very top don't really seem to match the rest of the series, which was about consumerism and the leisure society. It will take a while before I can make the connection. They are photographs of the first days after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in the former Soviet Union on April 26, 1986. Back then, the streets in Germany were as empty as they are now, thirty four years later, in what is the initial lockdown phase of the coronavirus pandemic.

I had become a father in March and was starting to land my first photo assignments. I didn't really know whether I could or, indeed, should continue living the student life. I was searching for myself and trying to find out what it was I wanted to photograph. A very generous photography grant of 5,000 DM from the Association of German Caravan Manufacturers provided the ideal distraction. The photographs from all four grant recipients were to be shown at the Essen Caravan Fair in October 1986. After the exhibition, I filed away the contact sheets in a plain ring binder—until very recently.

Michael Kerstgens

Surreal normal—The "Year of Horror" 1986

Across Germany, the shift from an industrial to a service and recreational society is becoming noticeable, and today's World Cultural Heritage Site at the Völklingen Ironworks is a case in point.



TEMPO

NEW AWARENESS OF LIFE BREAKS THROUGH

Michael Kerstgens' photographs capture, with exceptional sensitivity and fascinating precision, this new and fragile mood. His images show that many of the people who were, little by little, seized by this new feeling still required a good deal of practice; and this despite the fact that the so-called Wirtschaftswunder had offered ample opportunities for training—albeit not for the vast majority.

KH

CAREFUL OBSERVER OF FREE TIME

Yet Michael Kerstgens' pictures are not concerned with the world of work and with the challenges of daily life. They are devoted entirely to "free time," i.e., to the leisure time that had grown during the "eighties"—thanks to a series of cuts in working hours—and which would soon develop exigencies of its own. Back then, free time was still an unfamiliar quantity and only just beginning to assert its own demands.

People's expressions and postures still betray the traces of an existence free of fun and pleasure. Yet the faces of those who have eagerly succumbed to this new leisure society already reveal signs of the particular pressures it can bring. The notion of "free time" comprises the concept of freedom.

His pictures capture scenes in the Ruhr area, around cities such as Duisburg, Mülheim an der Ruhr, Essen, Oberhausen and Bochum following a brief period of prosperity, this area found itself in dire economic straits immediately after the Second World War.



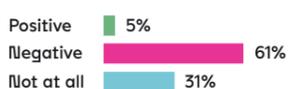
WORKOUT I

A THRESHOLD PERIOD THE 1980S

For the Germans — at least, those from the western half of what was not yet a reunified country—the 1980s is widely regarded as the best decade. Cultural historians describe it as a transitional period. For many Germans, however, it was the decade in which they first began to enjoy something that had previously been the preserve of the ruling classes: the ability to buy from a seemingly endless supply of goods, simply for the pleasure of it, and to bask in something like a sense of luxury. It was a feeling of not having to count every penny twice before spending it, as people said back then.

KH

HOW DID THE TRAGEDY OF CHERNOBYL CHANGE YOUR OPINION ON NUCLEAR POWER?



SOURCE: GREENPEACE, 2016

"That was it: Challenger, Chernobyl, Sandoz. How the future went up in smoke in 1986." Writing in the Süddeutsche Zeitung of January 28, 2021, author Bernd Graff reviews the epochal events of 1986. Prompted by the memory of the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle exactly thirty five years ago, he concludes that 1986 was a real "horror year," full of dark portents. As Jean Baudrillard would say in another context: "Things are still working. But we know they're heading nowhere." In retrospect, it does indeed seem like an omen: "three key technologies, upon which the modern faith in progress had always rested, [...] were suddenly discredited: space travel, nuclear power and the chemical industry."

Back then, however, the world had more to offer than an apocalyptic swansong for modernity. That's what we get to see in the photographs of Michael Kerstgens from the year 1986. Furnished with a grant from the Association

of German Caravan Manufacturers, he set out to capture everyday life and the world of sport and leisure, rather than the big historical picture.

His photographs show 1986 to be a year of surreal normality—invisible radioactivity included—somewhere between Orwell's 1984 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. And not a smartphone in sight.

"At that time, the Walkman was still triumphant over the dying of the forest. Today all devices announce of the climate catastrophe."

With the Challenger disaster, high above America, it had been a catastrophic start to the year for the aerospace industry. Yet the Germans still flocked to

their nearest airport to gaze skywards and marvel at the latest testament to the advances of aircraft engineering. "Born in the U.S.A.": although the United States under President Ronald Reagan were by no means exempt from criticism, the Germans were still fascinated by American Football, Jane Fonda and rodeos.

1986 was a year of contrasts and asynchronies. As Boris Becker celebrated his second and most important men's singles title at Wimbledon, two young boys were trying out their first groundstrokes against a tennis wall. Elsewhere, two young men sporting large letters on their bibs were anything but the "Boss." Meanwhile, at a gathering to celebrate the 60th birthday of an art collector, it seemed perfectly natural that an Aldi carrier bag would make an appearance.

It was during this annus horribilis that industrial production at the Völklingen Ironworks finally came to an end. Here, the air was already toxic long before Chernobyl. Moreover, you could actually see how harmful it was—unlike the radioactive clouds that blew over from Ukraine. Across Germany, this shift from an industrial to a service and leisure society—exemplified by the now historic Völklingen Ironworks soon to become world heritage site—was everywhere to be seen. It is precisely this transformation that Michael Kerstgens has captured.

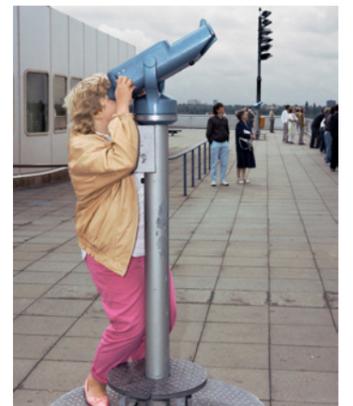
The general director of the Völklinger Hütte World Heritage Site today, was then a first-semester student. And sees himself in Michael Kerstgens' illuminating and, at times, alarming view of Germany. Viewed now, thirty five years later, it marks a voyage through time of a special kind, an individual as well as generational reflection.

The title of the book and exhibition "Zurück in die Gegenwart" owes its name to the 1986 film of the Star Trek series (Star Trek IV), a strange journey back in time from the 23rd century to the year the film was made. This is what the photographs of Michael Kerstgens do with us: they propel us on a voyage through time, back to the year 1986, where we marvel at what we see.

Ralf Beil



AMERICAN FOOTBALL I



AIRPORT II

It takes an attentive and expert observer like Michael Kerstgens to be able to capture such fleeting moments, which reveal much more than any of the attention-seeking poses of four decades later. As he always had a camera with him and was every bit as discreet as Henri Cartier-Bresson, people stopped noticing when he pressed the shutter. "I always had a camera when we were in the disco or going for a walk or playing football...". Moreover, he was one of them—someone very like the people he was photographing. He was around the same age as the younger of them; he shared their views and attitudes; and he knew of their hopes and desires as well as their worries and fears. It is this remarkable mixture of confidence and hesitancy, evident in so many of his pictures, that makes them so unique.

Klaus Honnef

EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK "MICHAEL KERSTGENS - 1986. BACK TO THE PRESENT" PUBLISHED BY HARTMANN BOOKS. SPECIAL PRICE AT THE EXHIBITION: 28 €.

BACK TO THE PRESENT



Excursion



Tempo



Soccer



Golf



Tennis



Car II



Disco I



Disco II



Cycling tour I



Cycling tour II



Car I



Rodeo I



Rodeo II



Rodeo III



Student party



Artists' Festival



Fair II

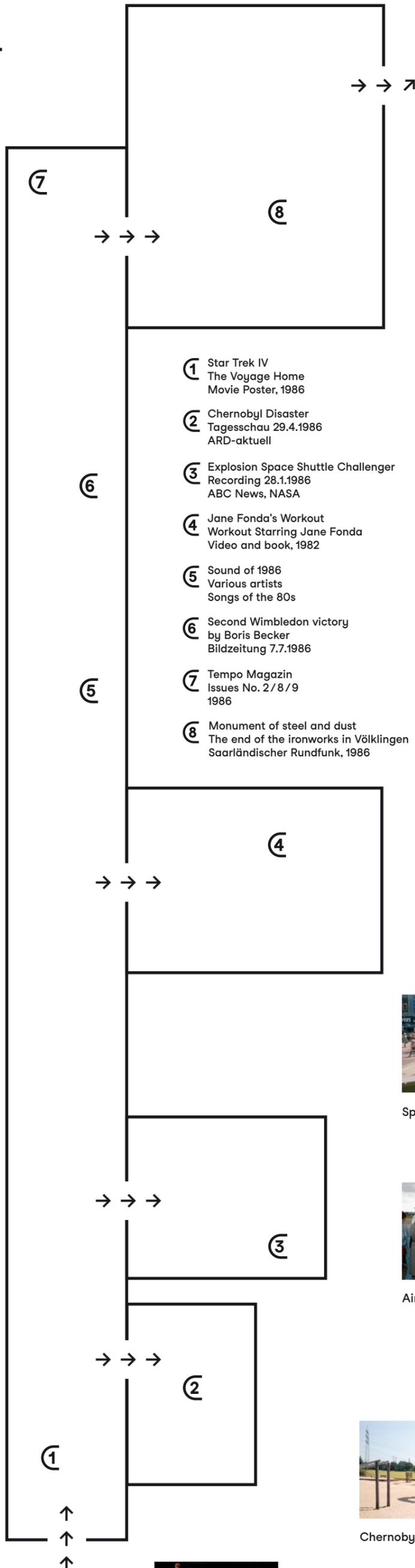


Rollerdisco



Fair I

EXHIBITION PLAN
BURDEN SHED



- ① Star Trek IV
The Voyage Home
Movie Poster, 1986
- ② Chernobyl Disaster
Tagesschau 29.4.1986
ARD-aktuell
- ③ Explosion Space Shuttle Challenger
Recording 28.1.1986
ABC News, NASA
- ④ Jane Fonda's Workout
Workout Starring Jane Fonda
Video and book, 1982
- ⑤ Sound of 1986
Various artists
Songs of the 80s
- ⑥ Second Wimbledon victory
by Boris Becker
Bildzeitung 7.7.1986
- ⑦ Tempo Magazin
Issues No. 2/8/9
1986
- ⑧ Monument of steel and dust
The end of the ironworks in Völklingen
Saarländischer Rundfunk, 1986



Outdoor pool I



Outdoor pool II



Outdoor pool III



Birthday of an art collector I - III



Workout I



Workout II



Workout IV



Workout III



American Football I



American Football II



Sportswear I



Sportswear II



Sportswear III



Airport I



Airport II



Airport III



Chernobyl I



Chernobyl II



Chernobyl III



Concert

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL KERSTGENS