

A Conversation about Trees in East Berlin

Sterre Barentsen

‘Ah, what times are these, when
a conversation about the trees is almost a crime
For it encompasses silence about so many injustices.’
- Bertolt Brecht, *To Those Born After*, lines 6-8.

Gardening has often been cast as being unpolitical and interpretations of East German society in the immediate aftermath of 1989 saw a retreat into the garden as a withdrawal from the world and from politics. This viewpoint was most notably expressed by Günter Gaus, who termed the phrase “Nischengesellschaft” (A Society of Niches), to describe a society who’s inhabitants ‘have come to terms with the regime of their state through the possibility of the niche, of individual happiness in the corner.’¹ In his book *Wo Deutschland liegt*, it is above all the Schrebergarten (allotment garden) that is labelled as ‘a favourite among the private corners.’²

In a journey through several archives, which ends with a walk on the Parkstraße in Pankow, I attempt to show gardening at its most political in East Berlin. In the face of decaying urban areas and dying street trees in East Berlin, East German artists prove Günter Gaus and Bertolt Brecht wrong: a conversation about the trees does encompass so many injustices.

note: several sections included are from Sterre Barentsen’s PhD Thesis, "An Environmental Art History of the late-GDR".

¹‘Es ist geradezu ein Kriterium der mitteldeutschen Nischen, daß ihre Inhaber, ihre Einwohner sich durch die Möglichkeit der Nische, des individuellen Glücks im Winkel mit dem Regime ihres Staats arrangiert haben.’ Günter Gaus. *Wo Deutschland liegt: Eine Ortsbestimmung*. Hoffmann und Campe, 1983, p. 157.

²‘Hoher Favorit unter den privaten Winkeln ist der Schrebergarten, wenn irgend möglich mit Wohnlaube.’ *ibid.*, p. 162.

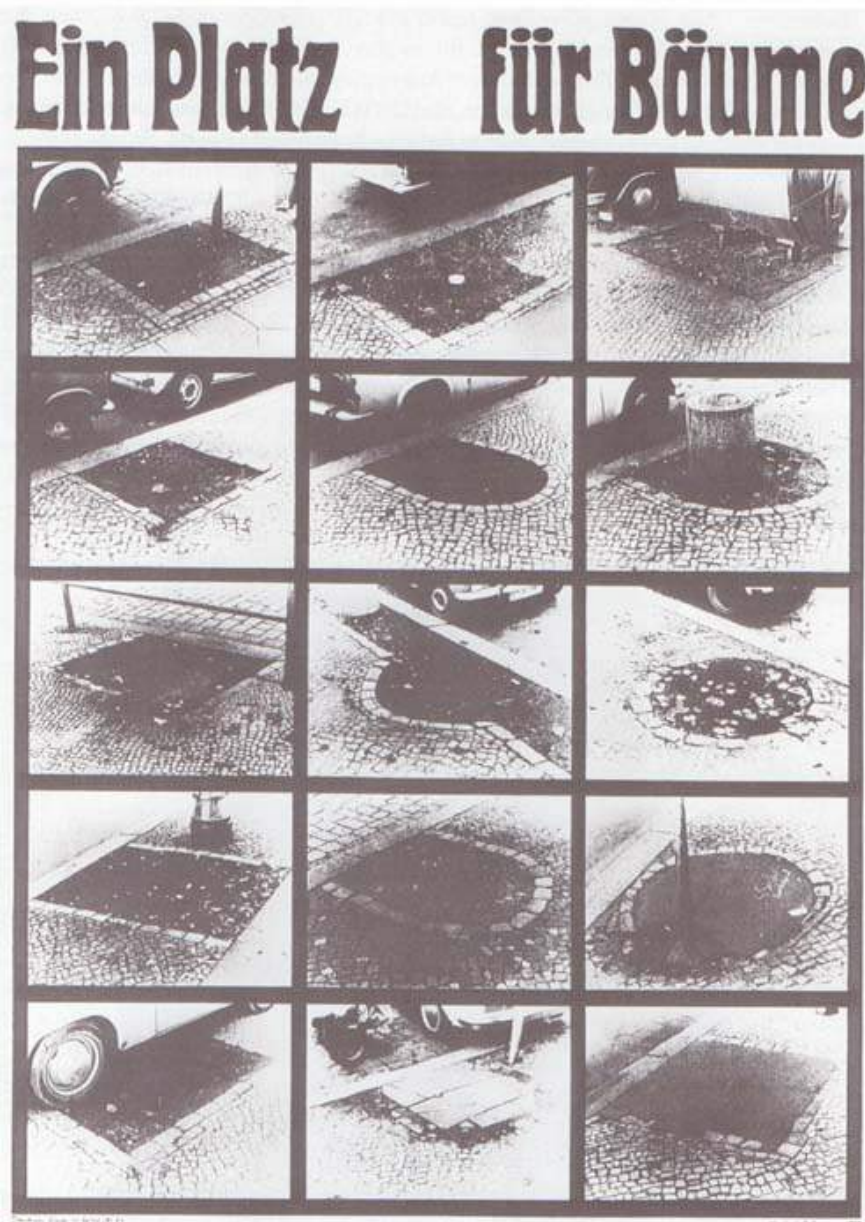


Figure 1: *Ein Platz für Bäume*, Manfred Butzmann, 1978, Offset Print. source: SKD online collection.

In Pankow, an area of East Berlin, a poster by the artist Manfred Butzmann appeared in 1978 with the words 'Ein Platz für Bäume' (A Place for Trees). The nine photos each show a place on the sidewalk where once a tree had stood. Pankow, sometimes sentimentally referred to as 'das Grüne Pankow' (The Green Pankow) because of its many trees, parks and gardens, began to suffer from dying trees in the 1970s and 80s. The small stones in the shape of squares or semi circles placed in the sidewalk stand as witnesses to trees which had once grown there. Manfred Butzmann documented these urban remains of the once green Pankow. Butzmann would hang up his posters about the deteriorating conditions of his local Pankow in stores, libraries and around Pankow. He found a role between artist, local activist, historian and gardener that would drive his many initiatives and projects. On his poster *Ein Platz für Bäume*, he left a deliberately large gap after the word 'place' to parallel the empty places in his area where trees once stood. Perhaps no city is defined by its negative spaces as much as Berlin - particularly Cold War East Berlin: where a grey-nameless gap appeared on the West side of all East Berlin city maps; where the wall created a no-mans land that stretched right through the middle of a city; where the empty lots of houses destroyed in the war remained; and where during the years of the GDR old buildings and neighbourhoods became architectural gaps in between the state's new and ambitious high rise projects. Butzmann occupied himself with all these different types of 'gaps' and 'shadows' found in the urban landscape of Berlin.



Figure 2: Arche Nova: Forum für Ökologische Gestaltung in Umwelt und Gesellschaft, Arche - Das Grüne Netzwerk i. den Ev. Kirchen, DDR, 1989, source: Robert Haveman Gesellschaft Archiv der DDR-Opposition

The East German activist group *Arche* dedicated its second samizdat publication to the forest deaths in East Germany and its third samizdat publication to the urban decay of the GDR's cities and towns. In *Arche Nova 3* they included a survey in which they counted the trees and ranked their health. It was conducted over several years in different areas in Berlin; Pankow had by far the most dying trees, in 1986, of 1275 trees survey, 93.6% of the trees showing some form of illness and 27.9% were recoded as being over 50% "bald" or dead.

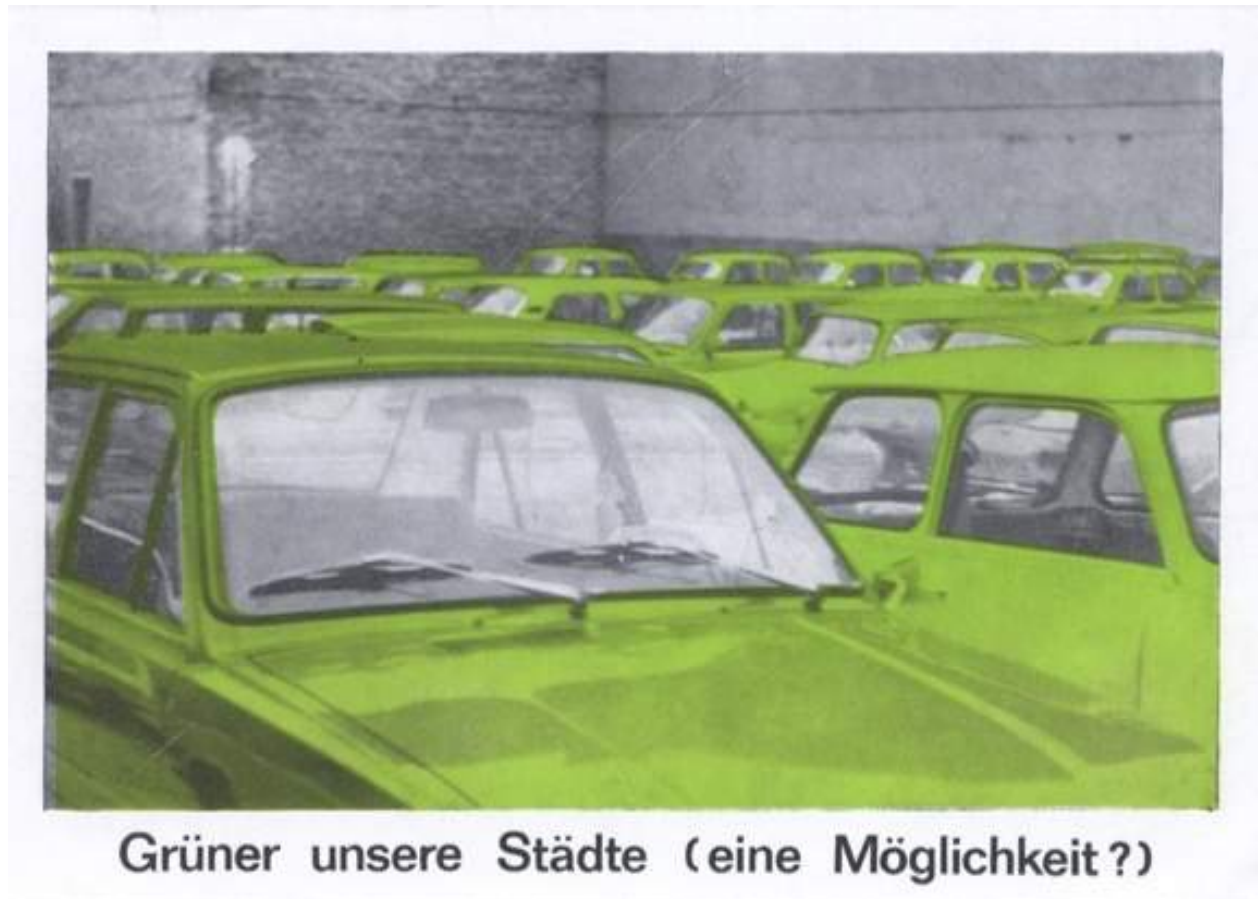


Figure 3: *Grüner unsere Städte*, Joseph W. Huber, 1970s-1980s. source: Joseph W. Huber Archive, Museum Schwerin.

East Berlin artist Joseph Huber called his postcards “Denkzettel” which attempted to make people think about a problem and warn people into action. His partner Karla Sachse has explained that these Denkzettel ‘had postcard format so that they could easily disappear into pockets or be passed from hand to hand, he toured them tirelessly throughout the country and displayed them in small exhibitions.’ (Karla Sachse. *Karla Sachse und Joseph Huber*. 2019. URL: <https://aufbruch-herbst89.de/portfolio-item/n81/>) Many of his postcards addressed specific environmental topics, for example he made a series of postcards which dealt with the pollution caused by the ‘trabi’ (East German car), including the postcard “make our cities green” which proposed to paint all the cars green. Huber’s used humour to draw attention to the local problems in a state which was beginning to crack and who’s utopias and promises were far from sight.

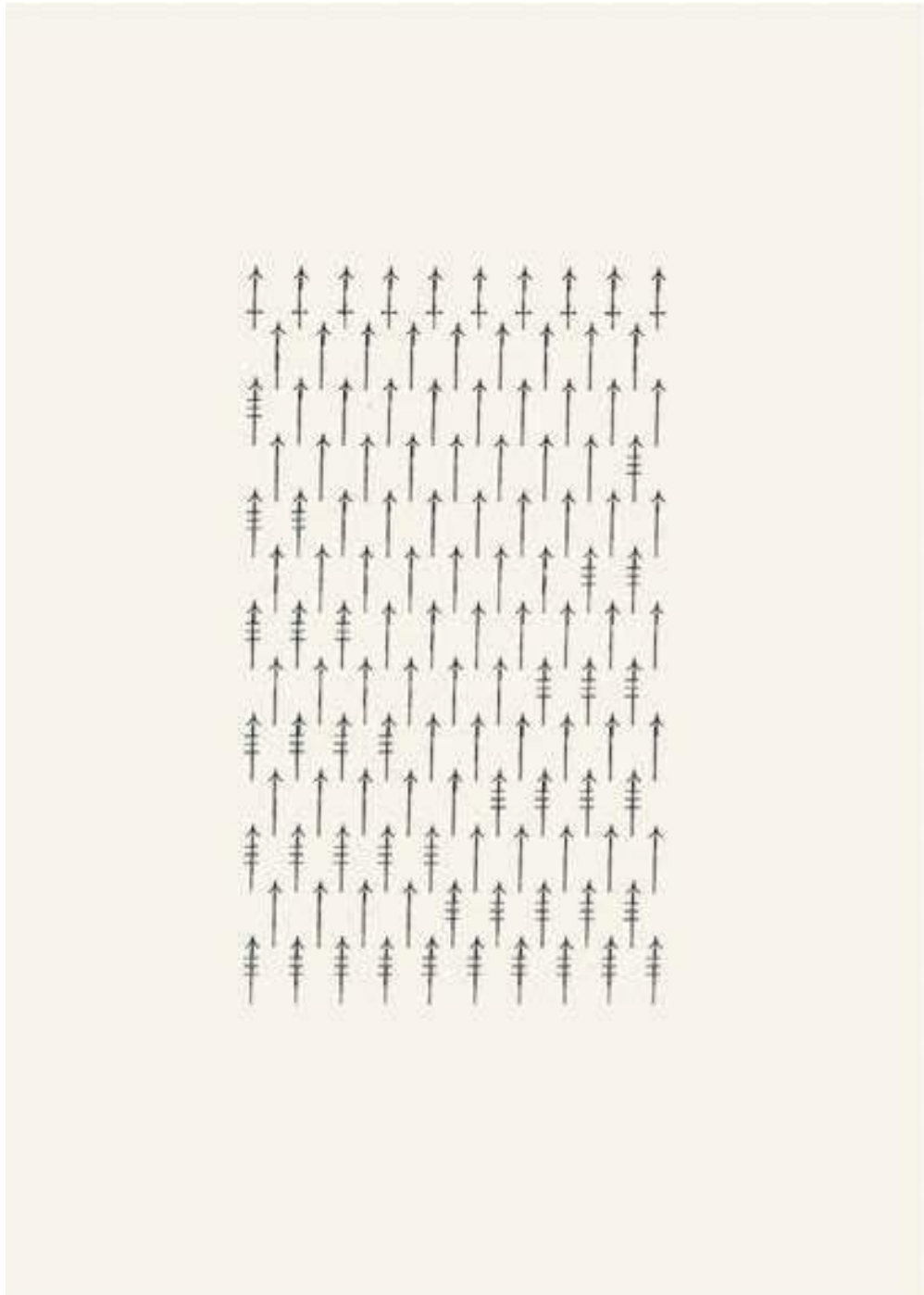


Figure 4: Trees, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, 1970s-1980s. source: Chert Lüdde Gallery, Berlin.

Mail Artist Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt also made several typewritings dedicated to the theme. She created many works in which she used the dashes on her typewriter to create patterns of trees. These aesthetic arrangements of trees use very simple means to show the alarming rate of deforestation in the GDR. In her typewritings the pine trees start to lose their needles until they become mere stumps. In the 1970s and 80s experts started to become increasingly concerned of the damage caused to the German forests by air pollution and acid rain generated by industry. Large acres of forests in Germany were suffering from moderate to severe needle loss. These simple patterns of trees losing their needles are a comment on the environmental situation in the GDR without being directly provocative.



Figure 5: Nature is Life Save it, Joseph W. Huber, postcard. source: the Rehfeldt Mail Art Archive, Chert Lüdde Gallery, Berlin.

East Berlin mail artist Joseph W. Huber sent sunflower seeds to his correspondents and encouraged them to grow sunflowers. He would send little packets of sunflower seeds labeled with 'Volkseigene Saatgutbetriebe der DDR' (People's seed farms of the GDR) through the post. On a tourist postcard of the Alexanderplatz in East Berlin Huber wrote 'put a sign of nature in the city,' on the reverse, he explains, 'This "action task" goes in this moment to ca. 70 addresses all around the world. Please make it and mail in the fall a documentation of these flowers.' Huber refers to his own home city of East Berlin using the center of the city, the Alexanderplatz, as an example of a lack of green space in the city. But it is the action itself of disseminating the seeds and the act of collaboration with people all over the world which turns it into a globally minded project.

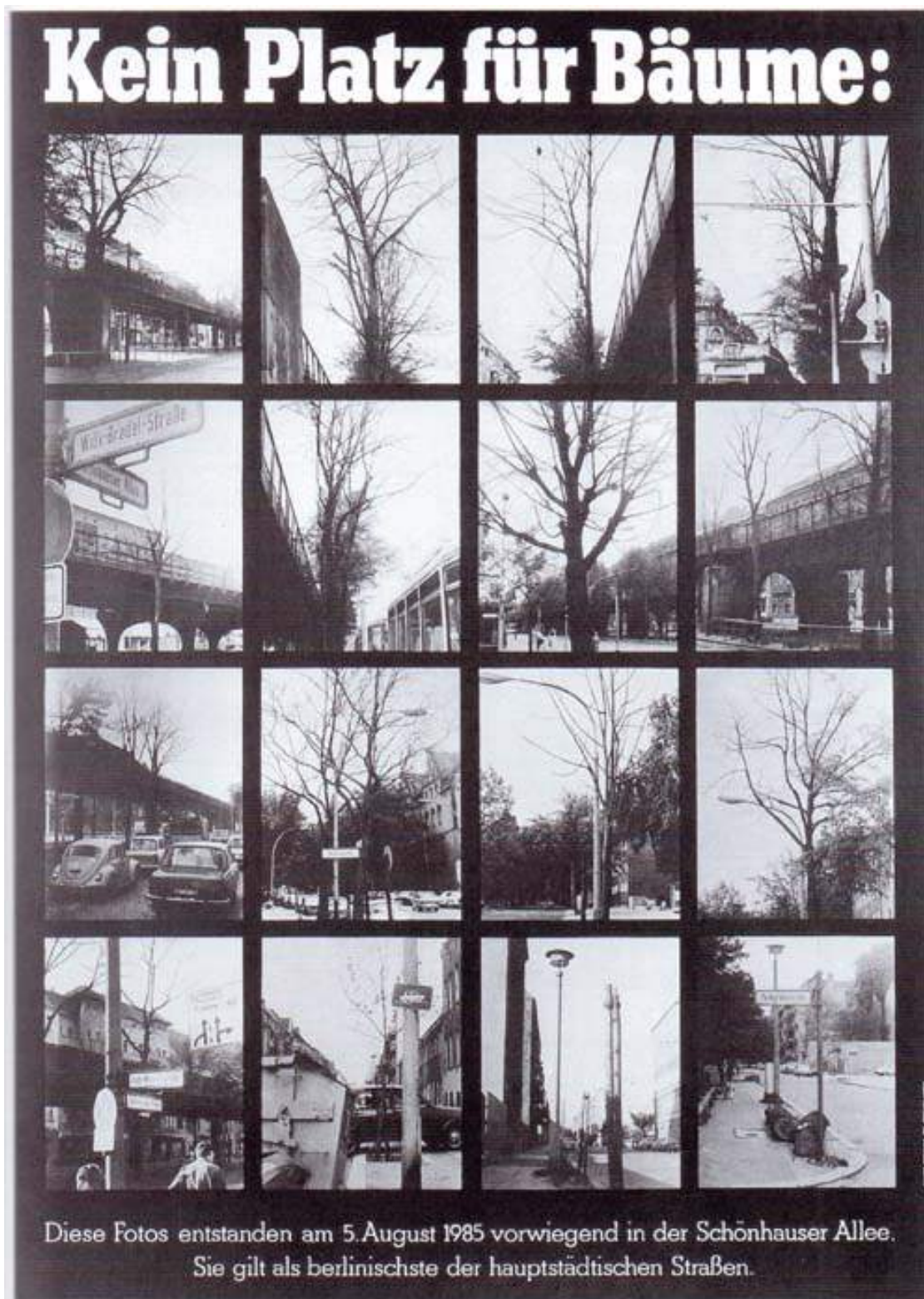


Figure 7: *Kein Platz für Bäume*, Manfred Butzmann, 1985, Offset Print. source: SKD online collection.

Manfred Butzmann returned to the subject of street trees in 1985, seven years after he made the original poster *Ein Platz für Bäume* poster; this time he presented sixteen photographs of unhealthy and defoliated trees struggling to survive in August on the Schönhauser Allee under the title of *Kein Platz für Bäume* (No place for trees).

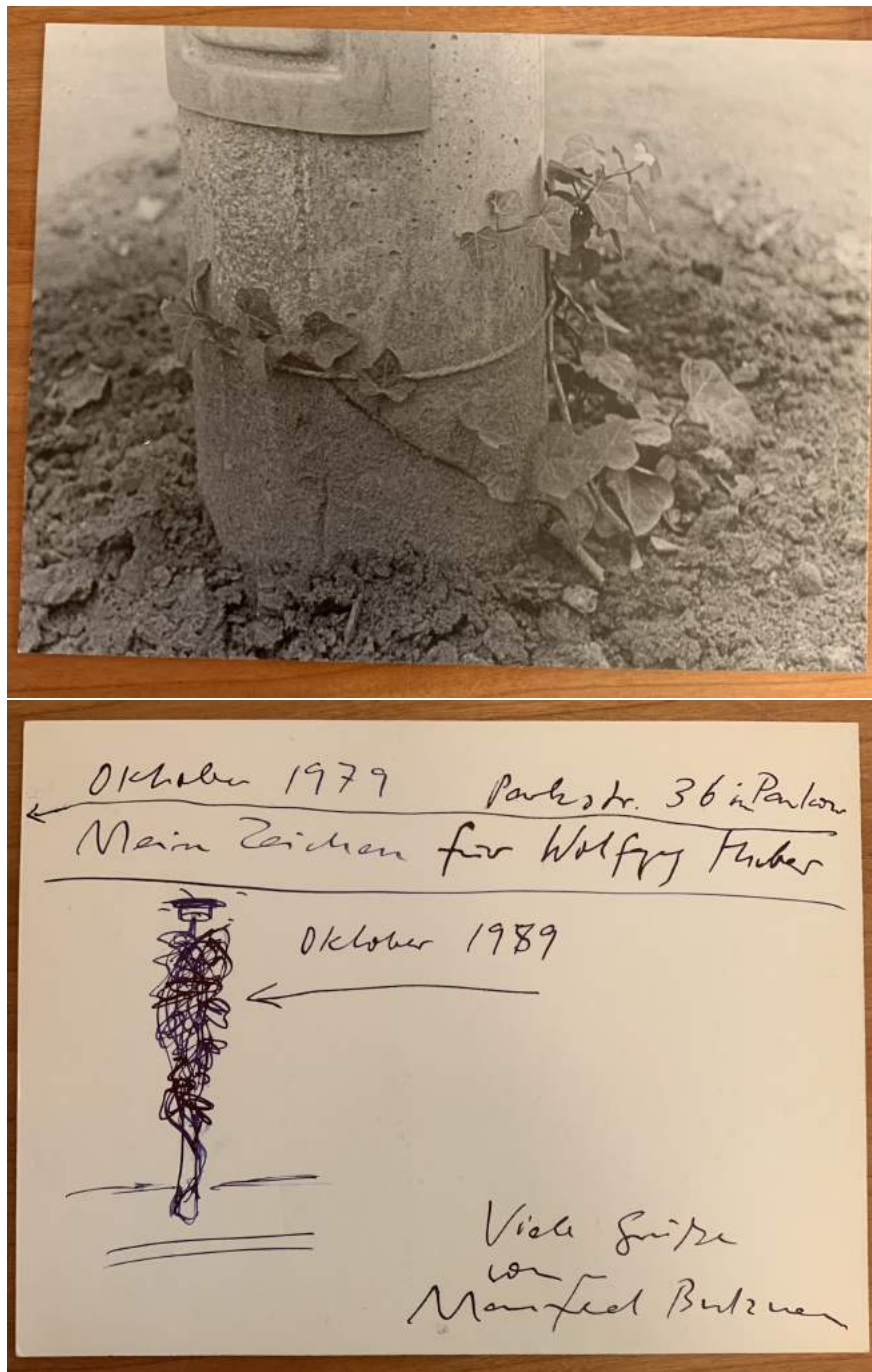


Figure 8: *Planting action at the lampposts of Pankow's Parkstraße*, Back of postcard from Manfred Butzmann to Joseph Huber, 1979, source: Joseph W. Huber Archiv, Museum Schwerin.

In a letter to Joseph Huber, Butzmann writes: 'But why always pessimistic pictures! Here's an optimistic one: The man-made lantern in front of our house will be planted with greenery - permanently (ivy grows old!).' Along with the letter he sent a photograph of the ivy he had begun to grow around a street light. On the backside he drew a small sketch of what the street light would look like in 10 years in October 1989.



Figure 9: "zum Beispiel": Planting action at the lampposts of Pankow's Parkstraße, Manfred Butzmann, 1981. source: SKD online collection.

Butzmann's planting action on the Lampposts of Parkstraße was then turned into another poster which became part of a series called *Zum Beispiel* (For Example) in which Butzmann gave examples of small positive actions people could take in their communities. He compiled twelve photographs of street lamps with ivy growing up them in his usual grid of evidence. His ivy planting actions, carry in them the ghosts of the trees in Pankow which are not able to grow, thereby exposing the carelessness of the authorities, and declaring the autonomy of the individual in a dictatorship.

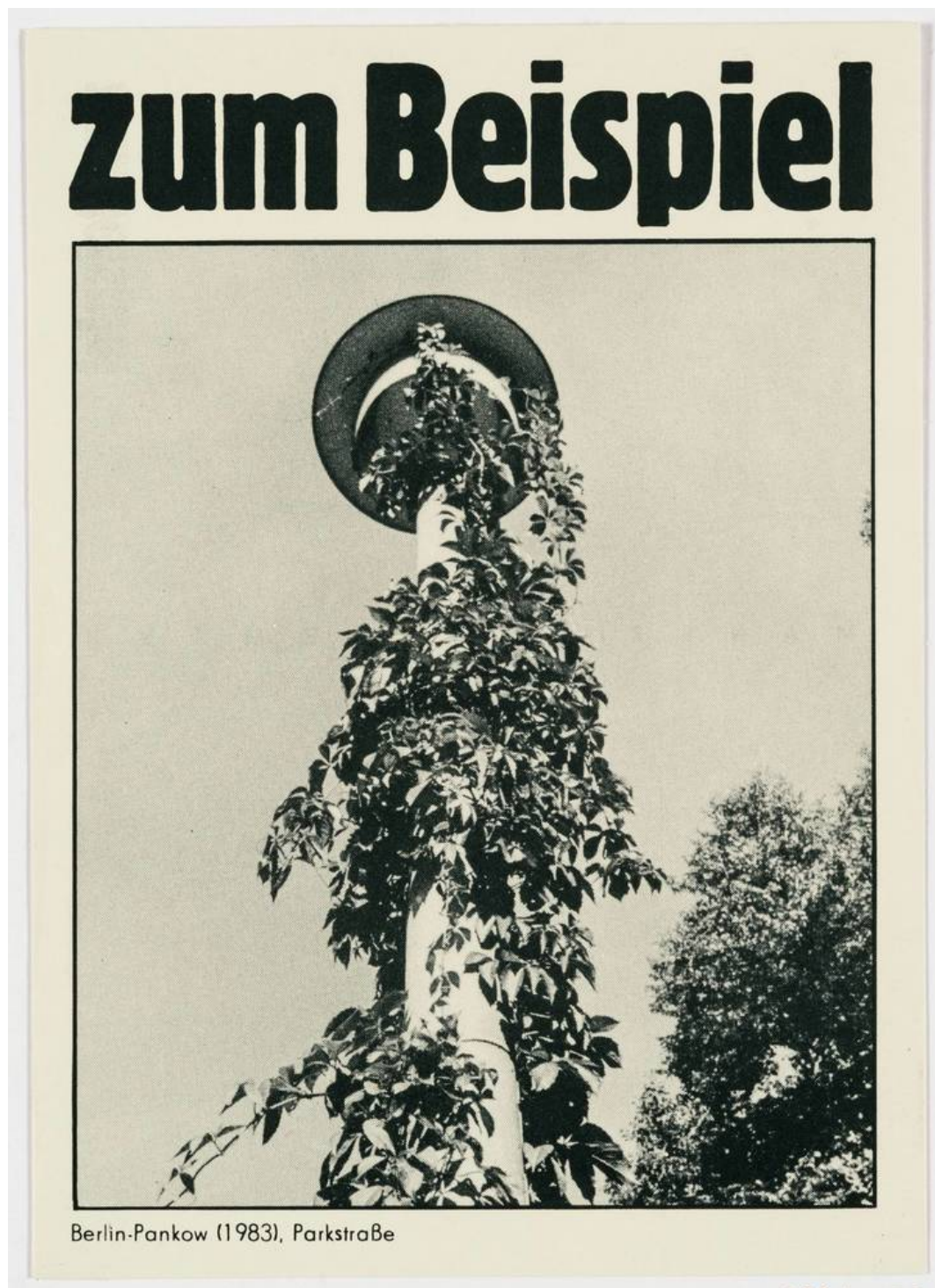


Figure 10: *"zum Beispiel": Planting action at the lampposts of Pankow's Parkstraße, Manfred Butzmann, 1983. source: SKD online collection.*

He also created a series of postcards, one from 1983, shows the materialisation of his drawing to Huber - a lamp pole completely covered in ivy - reaching all the way to the top of the lantern.

zum Beispiel



Berlin-Pankow (1983), Parkstraße

1984 - 70

Figure 11: *"zum Beispiel": Planting action at the lampposts of Pankow's Parkstraße, Manfred Butzmann, 1983. source: SKD online collection.*

He undertook these urban gardening actions with a certain sense of professionalism - he removed the tiles around the streetlight, in order to leave a patch of soil from which the plant could grow, he then meticulously created a circular border with the small cobblestones. 'It looked damn official' he recalled, 'no one could have anything against it, because with the effort that it took to make it look so official, no one expected this.' He attributes this level of meticulousness to the survival of these initiatives, saying that the authorities most likely assumed it had been done officially.



Figure 12: Green Lantern on the Parkstasse in Berlin-Pankow, photo taken by author on 9. February 2022.

Over thirty years after the fall of the wall and the end of the GDR, the Parkstraße is lined with healthy trees once again. Among the trees, ivy keeps on growing on street lanterns ...



Figure 13: Roots on a Lantern on the Parkstraße in Berlin-Pankow, photo taken by author on 9. February 2022.

... thick roots cling onto a lantern pole withstanding the many changes. Under pressure from his landlord Manfred Butzmann had to leave the Parkstraße in 2007, but his ivy continues to grow...



Figure 14: Tree growing around a lantern on the Parkstraße in Berlin-Pankow, photo taken by author on 9. February 2022.

... *Ein Platz für ein Baum.*