Awakened from a Dream. On Andreas Mühe
by Jana Hensel

Andreas Mühe actually didn't want me to write this essay for the catalog of his first exhibition at a museum. His gallerist had the idea, and he needed to do a lot more persuading than usually to bring Andreas Mühe around to the idea. At first Mühe stuck to his opposition. That's something Lars Dittrich, which is to say, the gallerist, told me in confidence later on, and it is no less in confidence that I now pass this information on to you. But please, keep it to yourself. Please treat not just this piece of information but everything in the following with care. I'm serious. There's a life at issue here. A human being doesn't have more than one. Andreas Mühe's life.
How do you write about someone you don't know? Someone you get to know in a sort of crash course because after all you ought to, you must get to know him. To the reader, this may well be a quite peripheral and, more saliently, a pretty banal question. That's how the business of journalism works, you will object. But it's like walking into a minefield. You step into someone's life, court him to gain his trust, and try to pry his soul open, hoping, perhaps, for a few nano-seconds at most of access. I write that because many journalists like to pretend that that's something they can do in their sleep.

Engaging someone like Andreas Mühe, you become more than usually aware of this game, which is in reality a brutal business. You may imagine this young man as a bashful and perhaps even timid person. You might not think so, since Andreas Mühe's command of the repertoire of public representation is virtually unrivalled in his generation. Is that the other side of his reticence? But you realize, when, among all the chatter, the constant and incessant chatter and blather that generally surrounds us nowadays, when Andreas Mühe for once gets personal in conversation, when he tries to get personal, when he starts talking about himself, about his work and his family: even then he does so with a palpable sense of discomfort. And so he speaks like someone who can keep sentences that start with "I" at arm's length. As though he were capable of talking about himself as another. Or: as though it were someone else talking about him.
There is a picture by Andreas Mühe that is different from his others and yet enters into a sort of secret dialogue with them. It is perhaps the most rigorous self-portrait he has made so far. It shows an old Volvo — Andreas Mühe's first own car — whose headlights cast a narrow wedge of light into a dark forest. The license plate reads B—AM 3100. "Well, I'm white trash," he remarks about this admittedly slightly embarrassing plate number. The picture happened to Andreas Mühe when he was twenty seven years old. It was life, real life, that brought him to this place, to this forest and before these trees. Later on — by coincidence, it

is a year that has passed, coincidentally quite precisely fifty-two weeks — he drives back to the place and restages, in his wonted fashion, the picture, which was really an incident, a caesura. The mise-en-scène is rigorous, precise, disciplined, and yet melancholy. Artificial, almost, like a film still. As though we could capture in photographs what we cannot get under control in life. Set things in order, after the fact. That evening in the spring of 2007, Andreas Mühe learned that his father's life was coming to an end.
That it would soon, very soon cease to exist. How may someone feel who learns that his father will now leave him forever? A father who was already more absent than present in his life. A car, a forest, a narrow wedge of light, black trees. No moon.

Whenever I met Andreas Mühe, at a coffee shop, at his studio — he sends me a photograph of it via text message to make sure I'll find it, writing, "between the old Lenin and Strausberger Platz" and again at a coffee shop, he always carried a large portfolio of his photographs under his arm. The way a knight would carry his shield. A Blackberry in his hand and the car keys, his shirt half tucked into his pants, half hanging out. That's how today's young people go out. Always on the go, on the way somewhere, permanent travelers even when they're often in the same place. Someway, somewhere, sometime. Toward infinity, awakened from a dream. Who is Andreas Mühe? The very first entry in his curriculum vitae represents an irritation. Born in 1979 in what used to be Karl-Marx-Stadt. Ok, so people speak English in today's Berlin. But what is someone who didn't know East Germany — who hails, let's say, from New York — going to do with that sort of information? There's probably nothing left for him to do but to be irritated. Someone was born in a town that no longer goes by what was its name just a moment ago. Fine and good. But why does Andreas Mühe insist on this name his native town itself shed in no time, as though it were an old summer coat? Mühe draws lines, invisible, visible, that extend into the present.

He does not live in Karl-Marx-Stadt for long. His mother, Annegret Hahn, a dramaturge, will start working at the Volksbühne in Berlin when he is one year old. Initially, Andreas, his father Ulrich Mühe, and later also his brother Konrad, who is born two years after him, stay behind in Karl-Marx-Stadt. Then the family moves to Berlin. They live in Schöneweide, a working-class neighborhood, as Andreas Mühe describes the East Berlin district, and there are only three of them; the father is gone. Over the years that follow, the son rarely sees him. Andreas starts school in Schöneweide. "At POS [polytechnic secondary school] Arkadi Gaidar," he says, laughing. When he thinks of this period, the first thing that comes to his mind are the civics lessons, where the children in the elementary level, as it used to be called, were taught the structure of social life in socialism. The boy took an interest in these

questions, it's a subject he's good in, and even today he remembers what he was told: Kabelwerk Oberspree, a state-owned industrial complex where cables and wires were made; the National People's Army's printing plant; Lacufa, which produced lacquers and paints. These lessons taught him that everything is in its rightful place, that there is an order to the world and that the things in it have their functions. That's something even children understand, or: something children understand better than anyone else. They are positively greedy for such simplifications. Life is to be like a letter case before their eyes, neatly subdivided and readily comprehensible.

His own life, by contrast, quickly becomes confusing. During the years that follow, the family of three is always on the move. Hamburg, Berlin, Brandenburg an der Havel. When the mother finally takes the dramaturge's position at the theater in Stralsund, Andreas and Konrad have had enough; they decide to stay in Berlin, alone with their nanny. At some point the boys kick even her out of the house, and from then on they live pretty much on their own. Something people don't understand anymore. Something no one would do anymore. But that's how it was back then. And it was good that it could be that way back then. Andreas Mühe's mind has retained only shreds of recollections from this life on the move: Turkish fellow students in Hamburg stuff him into a garbage can; he smokes his first joint on Kollwitzplatz; the sons and daughters of East Berlin's former upper crust gather at the high school in Berlin-Pankow he briefly attends. Andreas never told them who his father was. Their aloofness, he hated it. But that too remains a mere episode. He is constantly changing schools; now because he is moving, now he is made to repeat a grade, now he gets expelled because he skips class too much and hates school anyway.

Today, his life has grown calmer again, at least on the surface, and he might retrospectively sell these teenage years as a time of rebellion. He might forge them into an austere and rough image. The media, we all know, like that sort of thing. Mühe, the son of artists, a good kid gone astray, they would write. That's probably how they would do it in the West. But Andreas Mühe values his family, and so he passes on the opportunity. He probably didn't even contemplate the fact that he might tell the story of his youth this way.

But in East Germany after the fall of the Wall, the trajectory of his teenage years was almost shockingly normal. Chaos came from outside, not from inside. The best thing we could do was to try and react. We all skipped school, we all stopped taking our teachers seriously, we all rarely ever saw our parents. They were too busy with what is in retrospect rather euphemistically described as arriving in a new era. In reality, it was then —during those easily-forgotten years downwind from the great event of 1989 —

it was exactly then that we lost our faith. In anything and anyone.

The world was out of joint, had slid out of its order, and not a stone was left standing. So who was going to try and come tell us some story? “We had sex amid the rubble and dreamed”: this line from a song by the Hamburg band Die Sterne always comes to my mind when I remember those years. The writer Clemens Meyer, who is two years older than Andreas Mühe and grew up in Leipzig, has described this condition, this chaos better than anyone else in his debut novel. And it is only now that I notice how similar the words are that we choose to describe the period. Meyer’s novel bears the title “Als wir träumten” [When We Dreamed]. It is too early to tell what has remained of that time. After all, no more than a few days have passed since the upheaval. A distrust of authorities, this much I know, dates back to that time. A distrust that has struck deep roots. Our generation has responded to the era’s radical changes in two ways: some started running, they’re positively racing, forever racing; others stopped dead in their tracks. They have not yet recovered the measured rhythm of their steps. Andreas Mühe, no doubt,
is among the first group.

If you asked me what from these years you can find in Andreas Mühe’s pictures even today, I’d say: “Everything! Just take a close look!” But perhaps that’s an exaggeration; I myself am a child of those times, and so my perspective is hardly a neutral one. “Much,” is probably the more accurate answer.

Mühe’s cold aesthetic: in my view, it is the product of how fucked up our teenage days were. We adopted a jaded hipster attitude because we didn’t want to end up as history’s roadkill. It was the exterior shell of an illusion: the belief that we’d grown up at a younger age than others.
Mühe’s melancholia: it ensures that this cold aesthetic never appears truly cold, restoring a hint of human decency to his art. And it derives from the pervasive sense of futility and transience during those years. You will remember: not a stone was left standing.
Mühe’s clarity, his eye for structure: they vouchsafe an answer to his quest for order, for visual comprehension. You need to know chaos to feel the fascination with order; need to be closer to chaos than to order.
Mühe’s image of humanity: the human figures in his pictures are always small. The space in which they find themselves — which may also be a natural setting — offers them no foothold. They rarely dominate the situation, instead being dominated by it. And sometimes they succumb. You need to have lost your faith to feel this way.

Mühe's surprisingly evident authorship: very few photographers of his generation have developed a similarly distinct signature style at so young an age. A profoundly original oeuvre. Mühe represents no school, he puts himself in no tradition. He stands all by himself, seeks to stand by himself in complete independence. Perhaps that's his response to the dis-integration of authority I've described.

The only continuity in his life is his grandparents' farm in the Uckermark region, where the children spend their vacations, often from the first to the last day that school is out. Andreas still goes there whenever he can. When he was a child, the grandfather, who is no longer alive, and the aunt took care of the boys. The grandfather told them stories, of the time before the war, of the war and the years after. How he went into captivity as a soldier in World War II; how his parents took their own lives on the farm just before the Russians arrived in Gramzow; how life continued on the traditional four-sided farmyard after the war. He told them these stories as he played Mills with the children or dug potatoes from the ground.
Andreas's friends in the village also come from the big cities. They, too, are mere visitors in the countryside. And together they get up to the sort of things you get up to at that age. Building shacks, carving arrows and bows, smoking cigarettes, stretching ropes across the road, stealing boats. At one time a moped driver skids on the cobblestones after hitting one of the obstacles the boys have placed on the road and loses control of his vehicle. There's an accident and a serious brouhaha. But the boys remain in hiding in the roadside ditch. Shocked by what they have done, they lie there, Andreas thinks he remembers, for hours, their faces pressed to the ground. They don't get up until the uproar has subsided.

Views of this landscape return in his pictures. There are the photographs of old stables and the facilities of the agricultural cooperative; there are the houses almost over-grown by trees. "Die Kinder von Golzow" [The Children of Golzow], an endlessly long film project whose makers have traced the lives of the people of a village in Mecklenburg over generations, is one of Andreas Mühe's favorite movies. He responds to it in his pictures.

Some beholders may be irritated by the fact that women are largely absent from Andreas Mühe's work. Most pictures show ascetic young men, their faces and bodies; a lot of skin. Yet the conjecture that homoeroticism is at work in these images leads in the wrong direction. It is the faces of Mühe's teenage years that reappear here. His guys, his buddies, they were his family, and they were his first subjects. Even today he has mountains of contact strips with pictures from those days. He photographed the guys all the time and everywhere. Holding beer bottles and smokes, at parties,

in fields, in apartments, in the streets of Berlin. In these pictures, people, his friends, still take center stage; they have not yet shifted to the edges, moved to the margins.

The light in his works is something else that absolutely needs to be addressed. It is a theatrical light that Andreas Mühe uses. Much has been written about it. He employs it like a stage designer. And who would be seriously surprised, given who his father was, and more importantly, who is mother is. Andreas and his brother were sitting in theater halls all the time, constantly watching — forced to watch — their parents' work. Eight and a half hours of "Hamlet" at the Deutsches Theater: Andreas was eleven, Konrad was eight. When they got bored, they fell asleep, waking up later to watch more. When Andreas Mühe is on the road with his old camera, one of the last people to take analog photographs, his gaze is fundamentally still that of a theater director looking at the stage.
He does not press the shutter release until he is satisfied with what he sees through the little box of his viewfinder. Much about his work reminds him of the stage design models for his mother's plays that littered all the apartments; the children sometimes illicitly used them as toys before they started to gather dust.

His pictures now turn this past into a present, blending it with new influences and new experiences. It is a hackneyed image, but Andreas Mühe has really become a traveler between worlds. There is, on the one hand, his fascination for the wealthy and the beautiful, the influential and the powerful; there is, on the other hand, his pursuit of those lines that extend from his past all the way into the present. Andreas Mühe mixes the two. In a good way. And he uses that mixture to do something that many East Germans still won't do: Andreas Mühe tells the story of how he awoke from a dream. He doesn't disapprove of everything he finds in the present, in today's world; what is more, he moves in this world like a fish in the sea. Sometimes he nonetheless feels like a stranger in it, but it takes determination to see that. He won't mind if you do, for he has found his language, has recovered it. Andreas Mühe has started to talk. I'm most eager to see what he will tell us next.