

Awaiting Germany's Photo Boom

by David Galloway

COLOGNE — "The photo boom in Germany is just around the corner," according to gallery owner Rudolf Kicken. But he adds with a wry smile, "We only have to manage to survive for the next five years."

Kicken's survival tactics include not only an ambitious range of historical and contemporary exhibitions in his own Cologne gallery but the shows and catalogues he packages for museums. He has also realized his dream of an international photography fair, to run parallel with next year's "Foto Kina" trade fair in Cologne.

Kicken's optimism is shared by the PPS Gallery in Hamburg, together with his belief that the West German public has to be educated to look at photographs in a new way. Many of the exhibitions consist largely of works on loan — like the Irving Penn retrospective (until Sept. 28), the first showing of the American photographer's work in West Germany.

Given Germany's contributions to camera technology and photography's role in the days of the Bauhaus, it seems at first incongruous that collectors here should remain so sluggish in their response.

Fotografica, the Augsburg auction house, notes that nearly 60 percent of annual sales are accounted for by cameras and accessories; books and photographs make up the balance, but the value of the photographs is almost exclusively determined by the fame of the sitter.

The fault lies partly within a traditional museum structure, whose rigid organization scarcely allow photography a berth. Only Essen, Bonn and Hamburg have separate photographic departments, though other museums have recently made important acquisitions.

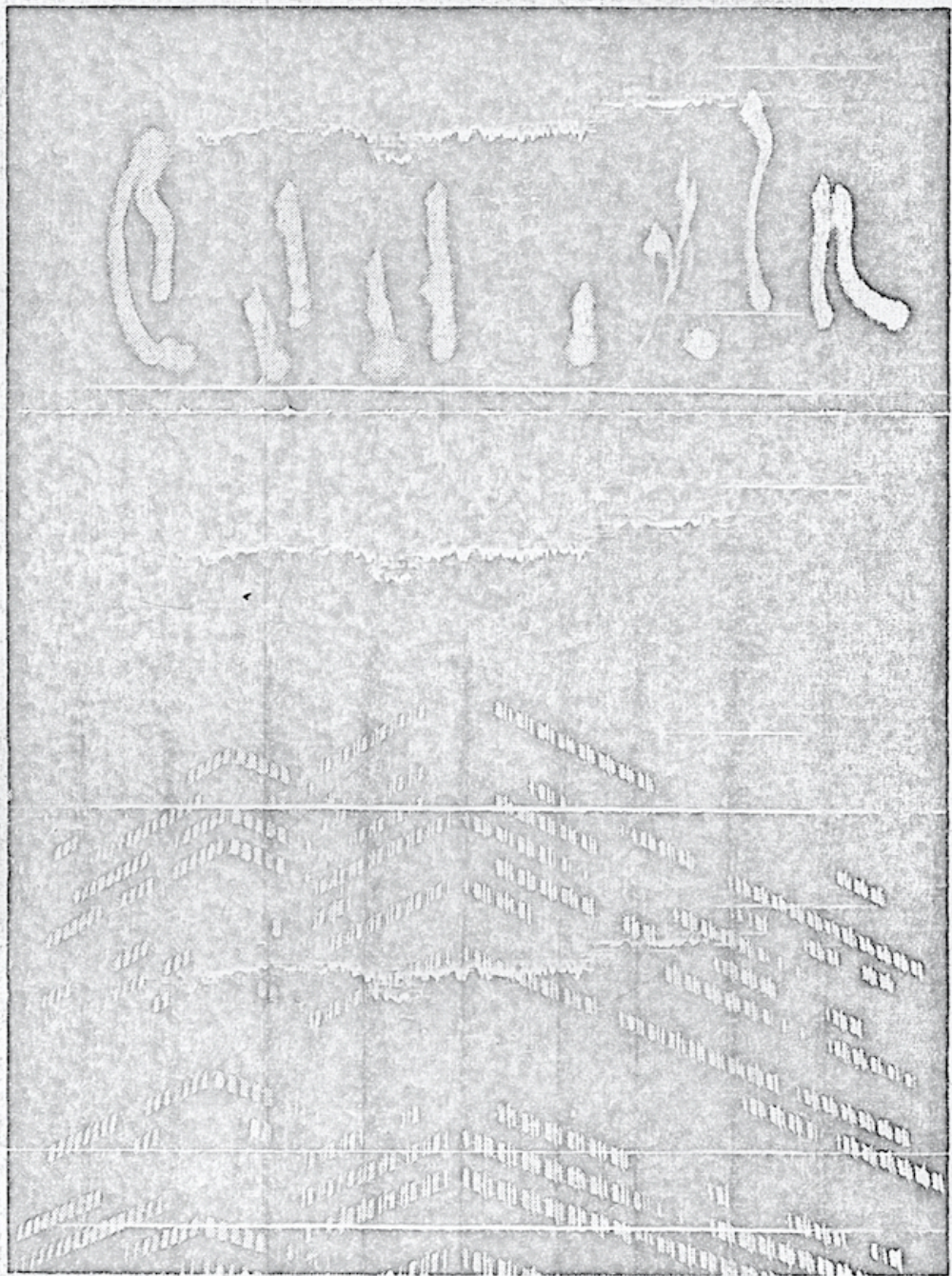
Furthermore, the fact that photography is not officially classified as a fine art means that students and artists interested in the medium are excluded from many grants and fellowships. With few exceptions, such gifted contemporaries as Ulli Weiss and Ute Klophaus slip into museums only by the service entrance, to document the activities of "real artists."

One of the rare exceptions is Monika Baumgartl, whose work of the 1970s has been thoughtfully presented by the Kunstverein in Bonn. Her most characteristic pieces are series exploring process — the phases of the moon, sprouting seeds, the knife-edge of light drawn across the night sky by a passing jet.

During her stay in New York in 1978 she produced the monumental "Week of World Trade Center Symphony," seven night profiles revealing the continuous metamorphosis of what most of us would regard as static forms on the horizon. She also began to use the light of the moon as a brush with which to paint against the sky.

It is rare that a contemporary West German photographer can expect such attention, but the atmosphere is markedly more receptive than it was a decade ago. Works from 10 major European photographic collections are currently touring Germany, and the Kunsthalte in Cologne has painstakingly documented the history of color in photography.

Such public events have a fruitful counterpart in the activities of Wuppertal's Loretta Baum-Ischebeck, a private dealer who has introduced a growing circle of collectors to the achievements of Berenice Abbott and Edward



Monika Baumgartl's "Message" (1978) recently shown at Bonn's Kunstverein.

Weston as well as to the brilliant German photographers of the 1920s and 1930s.

Meanwhile, the role of photography as a source for new modes in modern art has been richly documented in retrospectives for Raoul Hausmann and Laszlo Wols — both exiles who spent the final decades of their lives in France. The Hausmann retrospective at the Kestner-Gesellschaft in Hannover shows the vital links between photographic experiment and Dadaist vision. It also leaves no doubt of Hausmann's ability to follow his own injunction to younger photographers: to push beyond the imitative capacity of the camera lens "to a form of spiritual expression."

The Wols retrospective, sponsored by Frankfurt's Kunstverein, spotlights the little-known photographic achievements of a painter celebrated for breaking fertile soil. Some of these remarkable photographs resulted from commissions with which Wols sustained a meager existence until his death in 1951 in a

Paris hotel room; others are experimental, often intimately biographical works. Studies of gutters and decaying walls reveal structures concealed to the fleeting eye, and their richly textured surfaces clearly shaped Wols' startling painterly vision.

Despite this flurry of activity, the boom Rudolf Kicken awaits may well turn into a whimper. Museum budgets have been frozen at a moment when prints by "classic moderns" have soared in price, and photography still ranks last on most lists of acquisition priorities.

After four years of struggle, Berlin's Gallery Trockenpresse has closed shop, and Kicken himself admits that many of his most important clients come from abroad. One of West Germany's greatest photo archives is piled like bales of scrap paper in a storage room at Bochum University. The boom is still in the overdue.