Fun on the Titanic: Underground Art and the East German State

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Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

Behind the Iron Curtain, a generation of poets, artists, musicians, and performers turned their backs on the promise of “really existing socialism” and official culture in the East German state. In back-courtyard apartments, private studios, and workshops, they created a space for free creative expression that (they hoped) might elude the dictates, police, and policy-makers of the Communist regime, which they viewed as a dead end for culture, or—in the prescient metaphor of the poet “Matthias” Baader Holst—a sinking ship.

In this new exhibition, Fun on the Titanic explores the creative diversity and exuberant performativity of culture nurtured behind closed doors by the East German underground of the 1980s. Rare and colorful, the self-published ’zines and artist’s books on display from Beinecke’s collection tell a story of persistent resolve, resourcefulness, and mischievous youthful determination—punctuated by betrayals, arrests, voluntary exile, and even suicide—all in the name of a lost generation and its yearning to have fun in the final days of a totalitarian state.

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