Lewis Baltz, 1988

NOTES ON *WAFFENRUHE*

A republic of images. It is early March 1988 and everyone who has ever had the intention to photograph Berlin has probably done this by now. In the last seven or eight years, the city has become established as a place for serious photographic work and it has attracted numerous interesting artists from Germany and abroad. And for a good reason: Apart from New York and its legend of ambition and success endlessly reproducing itself, Berlin is the last mythic city of the occident. If Berlin had not already existed, Calvino would have invented it.

London, Paris, Rome, have a history, but Berlin has a past. It is the Sodom of our century, destroyed for its sins and left like that as a dark memorial. Since the 1920s, Berlin has been a city approached through images: Döblin, Pabst, Isherwood; the vicious shrine of Nazism; the Year Zero; the Airlift, John Kennedy and the spies who came from the cold; the generation of '68, the stylized desperation of the punk underground and angles you can touch, these are some of the images making the myth. Myths, however, do not only lend events a human dimension, they are also manufactured to mystify experiences. Mythic images are perhaps those you have to be most suspicious of. Yet the idea of a post-apocalyptic city captivates the contemporary spirit and images of it spring like mushrooms again. Berlin will soon be as flooded with pictures as New York and Paris and the images of the city will have lost all their power, except to reflect and remind of each other.

The best photographer of Wartenburgstraße. Michael Schmidt was born in Berlin in 1945 and has photographed the city for nearly twenty years. Schmidt's work maintains a dialectic relation to Berlin; his photographs and the city explain each other. Of the thousand pictures populating Berlin, many of the most memorable are those by Schmidt. Schmidt continues to photograph Berlin and the viewer continues to see Berlin with his eyes. But now something new happens: Photographer and viewer see Berlin as if it was for the first time.

Schmidt is an artist of protean intellectual energies. Furthermore, he is an artist of the fragment, of complexity, of contradiction. His work is consistent and versatile. In *Waffenruhe* he is also passionate, which makes this collection of photographs his most intense and poignant to date. Not only does this mean that Schmidt is a better artist now, but also that he has become an entirely different artist. He has – except for the most rudimentary – cut all ties with the traditional documentary style and replaced it by an aesthetic of immediate experience. There is no confusion, no hide and seek in *Waffenruhe.* Schmidt's work is full of self-confidence and authority now.

Questions of space and time. The protagonist of *Waffenruhe* is the Berlin Wall or more precisely the city limits and some of the things happening within them. A fifth of the photographs show the Wall; another fifth alludes to its presence; almost all imply its existence. The Wall is Berlin's dark symbol of itself, the most representative landmark of the city, a kind of sinister Eiffel Tower. However, as the Eiffel Tower somehow "naturalizes" Paris (Barthes), the Wall reinforces Berlin's artificiality and elusiveness.[1] The Wall is Europe's most atrocious landmark, yet it is

also the one where use value and symbolic value are most closely linked. Michael Schmidt lives in Wartenburgstraße, near the Wall. Everyone lives more or less near the Wall in Berlin.

The photographs in *Waffenruhe* have probably been taken over the course of a year, maybe even several years, but with the exception of just a few pictures, they all convey the feeling of a certain specific season when a severe winter makes way for spring. This feeling stems from the iconography of the images, but it also is a quality of their color and temperature. Yet as these photographs are black and white and do not have a specific temperature, this is either a paradox or a misconception of the critic.

Non-light. It is noticeable that a considerable part of German art photography of the last twenty years, since the Bechers, that is, avoids the effects of direct lighting. This might be a reaction to the kitschy, garish light and shadow constructions of the time of the Bauhaus. But in this case, there might be an ambitious statement behind it: that German post-war photography is more conceptual and oriented more towards the Platonic spiritual heights where pure forms and entities reign over the false and transient world of appearances. Be it as it may, photographs in such dark, lightless tones always seem more serious, disciplined and, in a certain stereotypical sense, more German. Some of the images in *Waffenruhe* have this cerebral gray, but Schmidt turns this convention on its head. When Schmidt takes away the light from an image, there remains a kind of gray so absolute that it radiates perversely, an inversion of photographic beauty, but beautiful nonetheless.

If you have no chance, take it. It was by no means inevitable that German photography would attain the same maturity as German painting or film. Indeed, it was most doubtful. In the last two years, however, it has become apparent that German photography has reached a fully developed autonomous state. *Waffenruhe* is part of the evidence for it.

A Norwegian photographer friend of mine said *Waffenruhe* was the most important photobook by a contemporary European photographer. This is impossible to prove or disprove, but it is an opinion worth taking seriously. *Waffenruhe* does not resemble anything that preceded it. The most striking quality of the book is its intensity. Schmidt's images and their sequence have a rigor that makes them hard to look at and impossible to wipe off the table. In his earlier works Schmidt had documented the social artifacts of contemporary Berlin; with *Waffenruhe* he created an autonomous work, a new cultural artifact standing for itself, something whose existence changes the world it records. If we ask *Waffenruhe* the same question we asked Schmidt's earlier works: "Does Berlin really look like that?" The most appropriate answer would be: "Yes, it does now."

[1] Editor's note: On Roland Barthes and the naturalization of myth, see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, first English edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972).

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The Deaths in Newport

In 1988 I was living in Milan, in my wife's house, witnessing and participating in the deterioration of my third marriage. We had moved to Milan from Paris that winter, giving up an apartment near Denfert-Rochereau that we had shared for two years. My wife had lived in Paris, off and on, since 1979 and loved the city. I detested Paris, or believed that I did. She hated Milan, where she had grown up, and felt that returning was an admission of defeat.

Reluctant to exchange Paris for Milan, she insisted that we try another city; her choice was Los Angeles where she had a number of friends and had visited often on architectural assignments. I had been raised in Southern California and I had many of the same feelings about LA that she did about Milan; there was a certain symmetry in the exchange. Los Angeles held none of the glamour for me that it did for her, but if I loathed LA at least I understood it only too well and felt an alienation different from that which I had experienced living as a foreigner in Paris. I found a position as Visiting Artist at a university there; we rented an apartment in Westwood. I reestablished contact with my analyst in Berkeley – by telephone – and I began to look for a project that would keep me in LA.

My wife had received an assignment from an Italian architecture magazine to photograph some of the new buildings at the University of California, Irvine and I went along for the ride. Newport Beach, adjacent to the Irvine campus, had been my hometown but I hadn't been back in years. I had spent a classically miserable youth there, and had never been especially eager to return.