

MUNICH

## Michael Schmidt

HAUS DER KUNST

It is hard to imagine a tougher venue for a photography show than Munich's Haus der Kunst, with its vast, uninflected spaces and general pathlessness, but the recent survey exhibition by the Berlin photographer Michael Schmidt met the challenge triumphantly. Curated by Thomas Weski and titled "*Grau als Farbe*" (Gray as Color), it comprised nearly four hundred black-and-white photographs grouped, for the most part, to reflect the previous coming together of many (though by no means all) of them in the brilliant and original photo books *Berlin Wedding* (1978), *Waffenruhe* (Ceasefire, 1987), *Ein-heit* (Un-ity, 1996), *Frauen* (Women, 2000), *Berlin nach 45* (Berlin After 45, 2005), *Irgendwo* (Somewhere, 2005), and, most recently *89/90* (2010). As a countermovement, juxtapositions of individual works from different series also played fast and loose with chronological succession, so as to make the cumulative effect less of a retrospective than of a single comprehensive composition in both space and time. The most difficult location of all, the large central hall, was given over to the 118 images of *Ein-heit*, Schmidt's uncompromising exploration of modern German history in the wake of the collapse of the GDR, and it was remarkable to see how effectively all those smallish, unyielding, tightly framed images worked together outside the pages of a book: Here, the rhythm of their mutual interrelationship was different, no longer based on the facing-pages, left-right paradigm, but the absence of blank intervals made one even more conscious than before of the repetition of image types and even of individual images across the ensemble's "inner" expanse.

Simply put, Schmidt emerges from the exhibition not only as an outstanding photographer but as one of the major artists of our time. It may well be that he is only starting to receive his full due, and it may be, too, that an important condition of this new visibility is that one now views his achievement against the background of that of certain better-known contemporaries—Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Demand, Candida Höfer, Rineke Dijkstra, et al.: the masters of what Jean-François Chevrier has called the "tableau form," that dominant paradigm for ambitious art photography since roughly 1980. Schmidt, it is clear, is another sort of photographer altogether, one whose activity does not coalesce in a relatively few monumental and definitive single images but rather involves taking numerous photographs of related everyday, nondescript-seeming motifs (motifs of no outstanding "visual" interest, often ones that allow no imaginative entry into the picture world for all its marked historicalness) and working with these, sometimes long after they were shot, either to group and order them in intensely

"musical" (and also, to my mind, intensely poetic) sequences or to print individual pictures at a larger-than-usual scale, simultaneously adjusting the range of values—typically heightening the contrasts—so as to give the resulting works a truly magisterial allure. To take just one example from the present exhibition, one photograph from the series "*Stadtbilder*" (City Pictures), 1982/2009, depicts a run down courtyard with a dirt floor and a small garden area (no plants, but dark earth) to the right. The stuccoed buildings that frame the courtyard are light in color, with pockmarked, maybe shrapnel-scarred walls; in the right foreground we see the corner of another building, with stone decorations, and the end of a metal banister. Rising at a slight right-to-left angle from the courtyard floor toward the middle of the print is a sturdy tree with lopped branches, which we intuit has seen a lot. The handling of lights and darks is masterly; the photograph as a whole is almost unbearably beautiful.

—Michael Fried

Michael Schmidt, untitled, 1982/2009, gelatin silver print, 35 x 41 1/4". From the series "*Stadtbilder*" (City Pictures), 1982-94/2009.

