

"The Secrets of the Darkened Chamber": Michael Schmidt's
*Berlin nach 45**

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Looking back on the career of the German photographer Michael Schmidt, it seems increasingly clear that his reputation will rest on the three photo books that form his "Berlin trilogy": *Waffenruhe* (1987), *Ein-Heit* (1996), and *Berlin nach 45* (2005).¹ These three are linked only by Schmidt's obsessive fidelity to Berlin and by a growing interest in history. The tactile grip of much of this work stems from an at times desperate desire to derive experience not from his sensuous encounter with Berlin itself but from a photographed reality. That grip is perhaps most evident in *Waffenruhe*, the work that first attracted international attention to Schmidt.² Until the exhibition and publication of this project, Schmidt had avoided representation of the Berlin Wall with a certain ostentation, a remarkable act of *askesis* for an artist who had lived for periods of time in the 1950s in East Berlin, and whose family had returned to the West before the building of the wall. The saturated, high-contrast images that make up the book—images of the wall and its scarred environs, images of young people whose lives have been deformed and truncated by it—represent a kind of late Expressionism; they speak specifically to the depth of human experience produced by this form of segmentation. In their direct appeal to emotion, these images stand out as radical departures in Schmidt's work as a whole, much of which is characterized by a remarkable ability to suggest an elusive meaning within the full range of the gray scale. It is not an accident that a major retrospective of Schmidt's work at the Haus der Kunst in Munich bore the title *Gray as a Color*.

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1. Michael Schmidt, *Waffenruhe* (Berlin: Dirk Nishen, 1987); *Ein-Heit* (Zurich: Scalo, 1996); *Berlin nach 45* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2005). *89/90* (Cologne: Snoeck, 2010) is a fourth photo book that draws on the visual and organizational strategies of the other three works.

2. Although he is now generally regarded as the most important contemporary German photographer who is not a member of the Becher school—Michael Fried has called him "one of the major artists of our time" ("Michael Schmidt, Haus der Kunst," *Artforum* 49, no. 2 [October 2010])—Schmidt still needs some introduction to American audiences. For a brief biography, see Ute Eskildsen, "Introduction," in *Michael Schmidt: Fotografien seit 1965*, ed. Ute Eskildsen and Michael Schmidt (Essen: Museum Folkwang, 1995), pp. 5–15.

Schmidt's next major project, *Ein-Heit* of 1996, could hardly be more different: Its image sequences consist of a mix of rephotographed, insistently pixelated images with Schmidt's "original" work; both kinds of images are marked by an unrelieved, flat grayness.³ These images fail to register with us as *something experienced*: The reality of the referent has bled away, so that meaning is elusive and uncertain. No single image reveals a personal style or vision, no single image seems to result from a consistent logic, theory, or principle. No single image is memorable. And no single image conveys the importance of the project of which it is a part. This resistance to fixation within the autographical, more than any other feature of Schmidt's work, has rendered him all but inaccessible to the history of photography, which is, after all, constructed as a developing line of individual signatures.

Berlin nach 1945 represents yet another departure for Schmidt, both in terms of the nature of the images and of the nature of their appeal. Rather than the approach to historical questions through the representation of experience or through cognitive reconstruction—the strategies that structure *Waffenruhe* and *Ein-Heit*—*Berlin nach 45* offers a vision of German history that is relentlessly metaphorical. The first difference that strikes the viewer is the tonality of the images. Rather than the harsh contrast of *Waffenruhe* or the dim pixelation of *Ein-Heit*, *Berlin nach 45* offers fifty-five photographs in subtle, shimmering grays. Schmidt took full advantage of his large-format Linhof camera and its 13 x 18 cm negatives, rendering images that differentiate themselves from those that came earlier in both their higher resolution and their use of the full tonal range.⁴ What also becomes immediately apparent is the extent to which the book's title is intentionally misleading. In the first place, the images hardly survey Berlin as a whole: They were all shot within a narrowly circumscribed terrain formerly known as southern Friedrichstadt. Originally a Baroque extension of the city south of Unter den Linden, southern Friedrichstadt was bisected from east to west by the Berlin Wall, which ran along what is now Zimmerstrasse, from 1961 to 1989. Perhaps the dominant feature of the images from *Berlin nach 45* is the preponderance of open spaces. These great swaths—*Schneisen* in German—of largely neglected ground have multiple historical origins. Some predate World War II, while many of them are the result of heavy bombing during the war. South of Zimmerstrasse, the Berlin district of Kreuzberg—where Schmidt has lived for most of his life—was one of the parts of Berlin that suffered the most damage from Allied bombs. But certainly the most charged of these open spaces is the "Mauerschneise" or "Wall swath," the notoriously open space on each side of the Berlin Wall that tore a gaping maw in the middle of Berlin.⁵

And it is not just the indication of place that is misleading. The images hardly present Berlin's history after 1945: They were all shot in 1980, capturing a moment

3. For a full reading of *Ein-Heit*, see Michael W. Jennings, "Not Fade Away: The Face of German History in Michael Schmidt's *Ein-Heit*," *October* 106 (Fall 2003), pp. 137–50.

4. Janos Frecot, "Introduction," in Schmidt, *Berlin nach 45*, p. 9.

5. See Frecot, "Introduction," p. 10.

in this part of Berlin that preceded not just the fall of the wall but the rapid commercial development that has since irrevocably altered the face of this area.⁶ Few other areas of Berlin at the time still showed the visible marks of historical devastation so evidently as southern Friedrichstadt. One of the achievements of *Berlin nach 45* is its ability to render the visual evidence of this particular topography in a unique way. It offers a psychogeographic understanding of Berlin tinged with a sense of loss and devastation, an understanding that has become hidden behind the increasingly glittering surfaces of the once and present German capital.

Yet the presentation of a ruined psychogeography only marks this cultural object as German. Schmidt's photo book builds upon and indeed transcends this approach through the use of two pervasive metaphorical systems. The first of these is a very particular kind of theatricality. In *Berlin nach 45*, a remarkable number of the images are structured as if the viewer were looking across a vast open stage toward a proscenium at the rear. Berlin's built environment—both its ruins such as the Anhalter Bahnhof and its recent structures such as the Springer tower—becomes in these images not so much a physical space as a historically evocative stage set, with all the implications for illusoriness that this brings with it. Diderot's "fourth wall," the imaginary wall often thought to separate action on the stage from the potential action of the viewers, is wholly done away with here. As the theatrical metaphors intertwine and reinforce one another, these images suggest to us the essential irreality of both our viewing situation and the ruined landscape under view. These images, in fact, recall nothing so much as Piranesi's *veduti* of the ruins of Rome.⁷ The effect, then, is that the viewer looks at the ruined landscapes not just from the great distance imposed by the *Schneisen*, but as if from a great historical distance, as if these were the ruins of a lost and perhaps irrecoverable world. At the heart of Walter Benjamin's revolutionary rereading of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, or play of mourning, lies a series of claims regarding the emotional tenor of the viewer.⁸ The harrowing events—the actions arising from the savage conflicts of the Thirty Years' War—depicted on the stage of these strange, broken dramas are not so much in and of themselves mournful; they become so only because the spectator brings to the theater an affective constitution appropriate to the tenor of the actions she views. For Benjamin, then, the play of mourning is a *Spiel vor Traurigen*, "a play before those who mourn." It is in this sense that the questions we put to Schmidt's images are not those of the horrors of Berlin's man-altered landscapes as they are represented, but instead questions regarding the consonance of a ruined, and perhaps illusory, world and the mournful receptivity of a displaced, saturnine viewer.

The first image of *Berlin nach 45* announces, emphatically, that this theatricality of the ruined proscenium and the affective constitution of the spectator that

6. Schmidt's title certainly personalizes the book: He was born in 1945, which means that the title also says "My Berlin." I am grateful to David Bellos for this suggestion.

7. Susan Stewart suggested this comparison in a conversation with the author.

8. Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, ed. and trans. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2017).



Michael Schmidt. *Untitled*. 1980.

accompanies it is complicated by a second metaphorical system, a system that constructs space in a very different way than does the bare, ruined stage. That image contains a number of elements common to many of the images that follow in *Berlin nach 1945*: a bleak stubble field; a set of firewalls; and a distant prospect of ghostly structures. Yet the rectangular opening formed by the fence and the inside edges of the buildings in the foreground is insistently self-reflexive. This opening forms an *aperture* through which we view not only what is beyond it but, by implication, the entirety of the photograph. The focal plane of the photograph is coterminous with this gap, and its edges organize the shapes and lines within the flatness of the image. Reading this gap as the aperture of a photographic apparatus suggests, then, that the viewer and the viewed alike exist *within* that very photographic apparatus. This metaphorical effect is powerfully reinforced by the frequent presence of firewalls throughout the book. An exposure in several senses of that word, a firewall is exposed or revealed by the destruction and removal of the building it once abutted, and exposed by light as the aperture of the camera allows light to fall on the plate bearing the emulsion, since with this destruction, light illuminates



Schmidt. *Untitled*. 1980.

what was once hidden.⁹ One firewall in particular plays a starring role, recurring both as main motif and as backdrop, and it is certainly significant that, in representing this architectonically exposed structure, Schmidt varies his photographic exposures markedly. *Berlin nach 45* plays repeatedly upon the linguistic field evoked by the swaths in front of the firewalls and the walls themselves that are exposed to the elements. The open spaces are not merely swaths (*Schneisen*) but also clearings (*Lichtungen*) and, in his book, exposures (*Belichtungen*). Taken together, the aperture structure and the exposed firewall suggest that we are both inside and outside the photographic apparatus at the same time.

In the course of his book, then, the figure of the aperture becomes a reminder of the photographicity of the motifs depicted, cautioning the viewer against all-too-easy assumptions about the "reality" of the represented landscape. This is a large part of the book's brilliance: This landscape is never aestheticized; it is allowed to retain its brutality, its emptiness so inimical to human life, its desper-

9. The trope of the firewall (*Brandmauer* in German) occupies an important place in German modernism, beginning with Rainer Maria Rilke's meditation on a firewall suspended in the moment of collapse in his novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910).

ate brokenness.¹⁰ Yet, as the repeated motif of the aperture gradually comes to structure our viewing, we are reminded that this is our space, the space of photographic viewing. And as inhabitants of that space, we are made complicit in the construction of these spaces as these shapes and as these forms. This is nowhere clearer than in the rhythmic recurrence of that initial aperture, marked by its ironic graffiti, "freedom" (*Freiheit*); each of the images is shot from a slightly different position and distance, reminding us that the aperture's orientation also determines our perspective, that is, our standpoint, our historical and political stance toward what we see and the manner in which we construct that seeing. How else can we explain the peculiar, highly ambiguous effect of the one view of the Berlin Wall permitted us in the entire book? That slice of wall is seen through the aperture formed by a wide doorway. Once we are aware of the aperture character of viewing, our sense of at once being in and *making* this view is inescapable.

Schmidt plays here on one of the oldest tropes in the theory and practice of photography—a trope, moreover, that arose in the context of the first important photo book, William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature*.¹¹ Talbot's remarkable book was published in six unbound installments between 1844 and 1846. Each copy included tipped-in calotypes accompanied by text. When the project was stopped in 1846, twenty-four plates had been included. Most of Talbot's texts describe the accompanying photograph and what it represents; some contain information on the making of the image and its plate. The opening sequence in Part Two, containing plates six through eight, is especially interesting for our purposes. It begins with one of Talbot's iconic images, called *The Open Door* in *The Pencil of Nature* and sometimes exhibited later as *Soliloquy of the Broom*. Talbot's comments suggest that the plate is included in order to reveal the artistic potential of the new medium: "The chief object of the present work is to place on record some of the early beginnings of a new art, before the period, which we trust is approaching, of its being brought to maturity by the aid of British talent."¹² The image that follows, titled *Leaf of a Plant*, is what Talbot calls a "photogenic drawing" and we would now call a photogram. Produced by exposing chemically treated paper directly to light, the image is clearly intended to furnish the viewer with evidence of nature's pencil's working most directly, the most literal *photo graphein*, a writing with light. This is followed by yet another iconic image, *A Scene in a Library*, shot in Talbot's ancestral home, Laycock Abbey in Wiltshire. If in the first image the viewer's gaze is invited through the transparent window of the image's

10. Michael Fried offers a very different view based on a reading of 89/90. He finds instead an "aesthetic elation based on nothing more than one's turning of the pages from beginning to end." Fried, "Gray Scale," *Artforum* 51, no. 1 (September 2012), p. 289.

11. The standard reference work on Talbot remains Larry Schaaf, *The Photographic Art of William Henry Fox Talbot* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). For critical studies of *The Pencil of Nature*, see esp. Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library: Reading the Photograph in the Book, 1843–1875* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), and Hubertus von Amelnunx, *Die aufgehobene Zeit: Die Erfindung der Photographie durch William Henry Fox Talbot* (Berlin: Dirk Nishen, 1988).

12. William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1844–1846), n.p.

borders and into the darkened space behind the open door, and then, in the second, invited to linger over the filigreed surface of the leaf, that gaze is blocked by the opacity of the wall of books in the third; it is peculiarly difficult to take in the entire image, as we are forced to deal with it visually by examining a series of sequential segments as our eye moves across the surface of the photograph. This makes Talbot's text—one of the most peculiar in the entire history of writing about photography—all the more surprising:

Among the many novel ideas which the discovery of Photography has suggested, is the following rather curious experiment or speculation. I have never tried it, indeed, nor am I aware that any one else has either tried or proposed it, yet I think it is one which, if properly managed, must inevitably succeed.

When a ray of solar light is refracted by a prism and thrown upon a screen, it forms there the very beautiful coloured band known by the name of the solar spectrum.

Experimenters have found that if this spectrum is thrown upon a sheet of sensitive paper, the violet end of it produces the principal effect; and, what is truly remarkable, a similar effect is produced by certain invisible rays which lie beyond the violet, and beyond the limits of the spectrum, and whose existence is only revealed to us by this action which they exert.

Now, I would propose to separate these invisible rays from the rest, by suffering them to pass into an adjoining apartment through an aperture in a wall or screen of partition. This apartment would thus become filled (we must not call it illuminated) with invisible rays, which might be scattered in all directions by a convex lens placed behind the aperture. If there were a number of persons in the room, no one would see the other: and yet nevertheless if a camera were so placed as to point in the direction in which any one were standing, it would take his portrait, and reveal his actions.

For, to use a metaphor we have already employed, the eye of the camera would see plainly where the human eye would find nothing but darkness.

Alas! that this speculation is somewhat too refined to be introduced with effect into a modern novel or romance; for what a *dénouement* we should have, if we could suppose the secrets of the darkened chamber to be revealed by the testimony of the imprinted paper.

What are we to make of this bizarre little text, an absolute anomaly in Talbot's otherwise singularly prosaic writing? Obviously enough, Talbot is suggesting, at least in the course of his "curious experiment or speculation," that we are at

once inside the photographic apparatus *and* the object of its representation, both the subject *and* the object in the regime of representation. Despite its placement, this text cannot possibly be a commentary on *A Scene in a Library*. The viewing position there is too distinct, the books on their shelves too little like any apartment or chamber we can imagine. It *does*, however, furnish us with an intriguing alternative reading of *The Open Door*—a reading that literally turns our world inside out. In this reading, we are somehow already in the space of photographic representation, even as we look *into* the darkened chamber—that space from which the image itself must nonetheless somehow emanate. This sense that we are *inside* the *apparatus* even while viewing its product is hardly an isolated aspect of Talbot's work. It is perhaps nowhere stronger than in one of his earliest images, *Latticed Window* from 1835. The viewer seems to be peering *out* from the device, trying to discern the outlines of an "external world" that nonetheless remains murky and imperceptible. The image itself, representing a latticed window (as the elaborate caption tells us), is, in a manner wholly consonant with this reading, more a negative than a positive image. Inside and outside are hopelessly conflated, time rendered enigmatic (is it night or day?). This is surely the denouement that Talbot's little text sought to describe: The "secrets of the darkened chamber," the understanding of our existence within a photographic space or device, are indeed revealed by "the testimony of the imprinted paper."

If we now return to Talbot's text, we are reminded that the camera placed with us in the apartment filled with invisible rays does not only "take our portrait"; it is also endowed with the capacity to discern our moral agency as it "reveals" our "actions." Talbot offers us a memorable formulation: "The eye of the camera would see plainly where the human eye would find nothing but darkness." This phrase is of course "memorable" in the sense that we remember that it anticipates one of Walter Benjamin's most famous, if least understood, claims: "Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. . . . It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis."¹³ Talbot's original formulation is attached to the idea of an all-encompassing photographic apparatus. And that very notion is at the heart of Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Part of the difficulty of this essay stems from the fact that Benjamin uses the term *apparatus* in two distinct ways without clearly differentiating them. The first meaning, which we might think of as the "lower case" or "basic" apparatus, is the sum of the equipment necessary to produce and reproduce films; the second meaning, which we might think of as the "upper case" or "extended" apparatus, designates a conceptual and immaterial—yet absolutely objective—arrangement that serves to position the subject as a point of view. For Benjamin, this latter apparatus is nothing more and nothing less than

13. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 117. Cited hereafter as "Artwork."

the phantasmagoria that defines life under modern urban capitalism. Derived by Benjamin—and Adorno—from the word for an eighteenth-century optical device, a kind of pre-cinematic Plato's cave, phantasmagoria is conceived by the writer as an objective, though largely passive, condition of modern life: We live under phantasmagoria as under a second nature, in which everything is illusory, yet we take it to be real and inevitable, with distorting and denaturing consequences for the human subject. In the Artwork essay, though, the term *apparatus*, while coterminous with *phantasmagoria*, is largely coextensive with what Deleuze, expanding on Foucault in the *History of Sexuality*, would call the *dispositif*—an assemblage of heterogeneous mechanisms that "capture" and "transform" living beings into subjects, in the process of which the "dimension of power" plays a crucial role.¹⁴ This is clearly what Benjamin intends in a sentence such as this: "The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily" (Artwork, p. 108). The essay is, then, a demonstration of how this apparatus might be refunctionalized and appropriated for humane ends—or, as Benjamin puts it, for resistance to fascist aestheticization. Freedom from what Benjamin calls "enslavement to the apparatus" can come only when a reformed humanity comes to terms with the new productive forces present but unexploited in technology. Benjamin envisions such a process in one sentence in the essay, a sentence in which apparatus moves from its "extended" meaning through its basic meaning and arrives, after a dialectical process, at a kind of sublated and potentiated form of the apparatus that can now be turned to human purposes: "For the majority of city dwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting *his* humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph" (Artwork, p. 111). Much as Aristotle's spectator experiences catharsis through the fall of the hero on the stage, Benjamin's spectator experiences and participates in the actor's triumph against the lower-case apparatus on the screen as a figurative model for resistance to the upper-case apparatus—a device for the reproduction of images of control—within which she lives. In Miriam Hansen's wonderful phrase, Benjamin's utopian vision reconceives the apparatus within which we exist as a "room for play," drawing on one of the most famous passages in the essay: "The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus. Film achieves this goal not only in terms of man's presentation of himself to the camera but also in terms of his representation of his environment by means of this apparatus. On the one hand, film furthers insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera;

14. Gilles Deleuze, "Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?," in *Michel Foucault philosophe: Rencontre internationale Paris 9, 10, 11 janvier 1988* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), pp. 185–95.



Schmidt. *Untitled*. 1980.

on the other hand, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action/room for play [*Spielraum*]" (Artwork, p. 117).¹⁵

In my brief excursus into the land of Talbot and Benjamin, I have tried to stay true to their meanings, which for both of them have much to do with the position and especially the constitution of the subject within a system of representation. Yet Michael Schmidt's cityscapes would seem to be inappropriate objects upon which to project this theory: There is, strictly speaking, no representation of a human subject in fifty-four of the fifty-five images in *Berlin nach 45*.¹⁶ The one appearance by the human subject on the Berlin stage is itself highly ironic: Two blurred figures move across the one representation of Checkpoint Charlie in the entire sequence—suggesting that human presence and movement beyond the swaths and firewalls comes at the cost of surveillance and ideological control.

The very insistence on the photographicity of these images itself inscribes, though, a subject position within them: The metaphorical construction of the images, first as a theatrical illusion and then as representations of and at the same time in a photographic device, draws the viewer into the photographic space. If we enter into the metaphor, we cannot remain outside these depicted spaces as dispassionate or analytical viewers. We are the viewers and the producers of these images: We exist within the darkened chamber where the scarred and broken body of Berlin also lies. The darkened chamber—the camera obscura—thus constitutes an aesthetic space founded upon the assumption of a consonance between production and reception, a consonance that breaks down the wall between photographer, object, and viewer.

15. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room for Play," in *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

16. Michael Fried takes this "personlessness" to be a central feature of 88/90 as well. Fried, "Gray Scale," p. 289.



Schmidt. *Untitled*. 1980.

The question, then, is whether the open, rutted swaths and scarred, exposed firewalls in these images offer to the complicit viewer any hint of a utopian latency.¹⁷ These images have no discernible politics: It remains unclear which ideological system has produced which scars, which anomies, which dysfunctions in this part of Berlin—and there are many candidates: Nazism; English, Soviet, and American bombs; the government of the German Democratic Republic; capital. As Heinz Liesbrock has pointed out, Schmidt absolutely refuses to dissolve historical experience in its individual, tactile moment into the larger, hegemonic trajectories of history, ideology, or politics.¹⁸ The complex temporality that enfolds the book suggests this, if nothing more: Its inception is marked with the date 1945, the year of Schmidt's birth and the effective birth year of the two Germanys; its images were recorded and it was conceived as a coherent project in 1980, a moment at which an undivided Berlin still seemed unimaginable; and it was published only in 2005, in the "new," glittering Berlin. In *Berlin nach 1945*, German history is neither merely a general referent nor a totalizing structure: It is the very form of the images. Yet that resistance to totalization and closure also ensures that Berlin emerges here as a deeply ambiguous space. It is not merely, in other words, a definitively broken body, but a space that is at once enclosed and infinitely open, overcrowded and empty. As a photographic space, it is hollowed by technology and, perhaps, the potential site of its emancipated revival.

17. On this point, see Mareike Stoll's remarks on *Berlin nach 45* in "Menschenleer: Der Tat-Ort in Benjamins Schriften zur Photographie," in *Walter Benjamins Anthropologisches Denken*, ed. Carolin Duttlinger, Ben Morgan, and Anthony Phelan (Freiburg: Rombach, 2012).

18. Heinz Liesbrock, "Re-vision," in Michael Schmidt, *Landschaft, Waffenruhe, Selbst. Menschenbilder (Ausschnitte)* (Münster, Germany: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1999), p. 131.