In Passionate Conflict Between Representation and Presentation

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Michael Schmidt was born in 1945 in Berlin, still his home today. By the end of 1995 he will have finished his newest project, ›Einheit‹;[1] something, it should be mentioned, not part of this publication which accompanies his first retrospective. Rather, ›Einheit‹ was conceived as an independent book project. Its title, referring to the most recent important event in German history, the ›fall of the Wall‹, was chosen by a photographer whose work cannot be separated from his personal experience and the perceptible conflict of a divided city.

Michael Schmidt has been working with photography since 1965, mostly in and around Berlin. He grew up in this city, often changing schools as he moved from West to East and back again. He trained to be a policeman and then, fascinated by the camera itself and not, say, by a friend's pictures, began photographing. Like so many other photographers, he is an autodidact. His decision to become involved with the process of photographic image-making arose neither out of a general artistic interest nor out of one specifically photographic. Instead, the camera appeared as a way to meet people at first, and perhaps as a way to get around his parents' choice of profession for him. Within this vague idea of a photographic practice's communicative function, Schmidt searched for two levels of approach: his exploration through imagery of public space was, from the very beginning, closey related to his need for self-assurance, for an environment for dialogue.

In his early years, the VDAV (Association of German Amateur Photographers) offered the autodidact a forum[(a)] where mostly technical problems were raised – a learning process for a photographic beginner not to be underestimated. In 1969, Schmidt found a way to better satisfy his growing desire for an exchange of experience in image-making at the Volkshochschule. After only four years of photographic experimentation, he did not, however, sign up as a student, but began instead by teaching his own courses – at first at the Volkshochschule in Kreuzberg and then in Neukölln. Such a step is not only characteristic of Michael Schmidt's vitality, but also for his affinity to challenge and confrontation. In this context, his notorious, ardent pugnacity also has the function of the autodidact's self-assertiveness. In relation to his photographic development, his provocative style of communicating also points to a willingness to take risks, to potential failure.

Out of his Volkshochschule activities Schmidt later developed an important forum for photographic training in Berlin, a major German city which, in international photography at least, still has not found institutional structures corresponding to its status.

Schmidt's well-established roots – he has been photographing his surroundings for more than thirty years now – have special significance for a definition of his artistic position. The *place* is for him a fundamental point of reference for personal experiences and knowledge and thus becomes the source of the necessary security in relation to public space, to a city, its people and its perceptible history. During the course of his artistic development new approaches arose from this bond, the touchstone of which is his striving for a correlation of subjective perception and objective presentation.

»I could take photographs elsewhere – but I don't know why I should.« *Michael Schmidt, 1989*

Schmidt's photographic work began at the end of the 60's in the streets of Berlin. He made unrelated individual shots, which have in common their observation of everyday life. This was both a search for motifs and experiments in technique, such as portraying movement or using different light conditions. In fact, up to the mid-70's, Schmidt generally modelled his work after contemporary photo-reportage practice. For the photographic autodidact, who at first moved within the circles of the amateur association, this was not comparable with so-called event-photography. Unlike the ex-student Michael Ruetz, who produced an in-depth documenta-

tion of the Berliner APO period,[2] Schmidt, working as a policeman, was not interested in revolutionary students, but rather in socially troubled Kiez, in the Berlin district of Kreuzberg, where he lived.

At the beginning of the 70's Schmidt discovered a means of transferring his fundamental interest in photo-journalism to his personal environs.[b,c] His first book, ›Berlin-Kreuzberg‹, appeared in 1973.[3] Not only did he succeed in convincing the Mayor of Kreuzberg to try another form for its annual ›success report‹; he also received very generous support considering the time, namely a fee of DM 10,000, to produce a publication. In the same year he was given the chance, through his contacts with the SPD district office, to exhibit his ›Ausländische Mitbürger in Kreuzberg‹.[d] Photographs from this project and another series he had started, ›Das Alter‹, were included in ›Berlin-Kreuzberg‹ as individual photographs. The book's introduction was written by Friedrich Voss, a young journalist from the Spandauer Volksblatt, who makes the point that this was the first attempt at »presenting a traditional district of Berlin openly and unembelished.«[4]

The CDU's reaction – their seeking to have the book withdrawn from the market[5] – seems difficult to understand with hindsight, especially as the ambivalence of the district's presentation is already pointed out in the foreword to the book. While emphasizing the photographer's enlightened, socially critical aims, Friedrich Voss also observes a »tendency towards romantic effulgence and prettification« in his photographs. »They lead the observer to look at Kreuzberg – like the photographer – with a loving eye, rather than with a distanced and critical one.«[6] And in fact in this, the first printed example of his work, the problem appears which would become a permanent conflict in his work, both on the levels of theme and of form – capturing people and surroundings in a context limited to his own environs. In ›Berlin-Kreuzberg‹, this attempt is still quite clearly marked by a photographic/artistic learning process. Irregular arrangement of individual shots and pairs of pictures on the square pages corresponds to still uncertain design intentions. Photos are sometimes on the outer edge of the page, then on the inner one or in the middle. Altogether, the 113 photographs produce a mixture of atmospheric, and in part picturesque illustrations, direct photos in which structures are emphasized, and fragments of situations.

Schmidt's exploration of photography's creative possibilities, which dominated this book, was followed by projects emphasizing themes. Looking back, ›Berlin-Kreuzberg‹, with its tendency towards social critique, must not only be judged in relation to the photographer's politicized surroundings, but also as an attempt at making the photographic process transparent.

After his first two exhibitions – in the ›Berlin Museum‹ and in Kreuzberg City Hall – Michael Schmidt presented his series ›Das Alter‹ at the Möckernbrücke commuter rail station in 1974.[e] The idea of bringing back photographs to the place they were taken – thus presenting them in a public space and not in an institutionalized setting – arose out of the grass-roots movements of the mid-70's. Especially in the Ruhr Area and in Berlin, politically motivated workgroups increasingly used photography as document and evidence. As a forum for this militant photographic practice, the magazine ›Arbeiterfotograf‹ was founded in 1973, recalling the Workers Photography Movement of the 1920's. It was intended to show not only »what you are fighting for and against«; »an honest reproduction of a committed standpoint« was also»guaranteed«.[7]

The social themes which Schmidt concentrated on until the mid-70's do not, however, belong to the tradition of politically active photography. For him, social problems meant the challenge of taking a standpoint, rather than a place for appellative statements. Unlike magazine reporters, Schmidt treated individual experience from the narrow surroundings of his district.

This aspect, together with his talent for getting support for his projects, assured for him, a non-professional, a permanent presentation forum. These local exhibitions also offered opportunities for self-reflection – as expressed, for example, in the posters he designed himself. The one for his women's work project from the Autumn of 1975 uses eight photographs, layed out in pairs – a portrait of a woman next to her workplace – and forming a block.[f] A tableau from this work contains 25 photos of a woman, reconstructing her daily routine. This attempt to reconstruct real time using still photography suggests that Schmidt's approach to photographic imagery had come to concentrate more on the conditions of the image-making process.

Three months later he held his first exhibition at the Springer Gallery in Berlin.[g] Surprisingly, only individual photographs were shown – object photos and detail shots of a precision never before achieved and of exactly balanced composition. After a few publications of his works in newspapers and magazines and an unsatisfactory experience with a publication by the Berlin Press Office, Schmidt seems to have given up the idea of con-

tract photography. It would seem that a phase of reorientation began in 1975, introduced strangely enough in the Springer catalogue by a proponent of photojournalism. Karl Pawek, who would later organize a fourth ›World Exhibition of Photography‹ in 1977, wrote here about the 50's and 60's as the now dead ›great age‹ of Life photography. Characterizing, for this reason, contemporary photographers as »makers«, because »they arrange and manipulate«, he saw in Schmidt's photos »artless reality», as they verified »the aesthetic of factual objects found in our streets, courtyards and woods«.[8]

Looking back, Schmidt's concentration on individual photographs in this exhibition must be seen as an obviously necessary attempt at reconfirming his technical ability. They drew the view towards the quality of the various photographic exposure processes – in the same year Schmidt began working with a large format camera. Moreover, the magazine ›Camera‹ had replaced ›Leica-Fotografie‹ as his source of information, encouraging both his interests in historical photography and contemporary photographic methods.

During this period, Schmidt got to know Gabriele and Helmut Nothhelfer, who were to become important sounding boards. They had studied photography at the ›Lette-Schule‹ and under Otto Steinert at the ›Folkwangschule für Gestaltung‹ in Essen. From 1976, his contacts extended beyond Berlin when Schmidt became a member of the Society of German Photographers (GDL). There he came to know André Gelpke, Heiner Riebeschl and Wilhelm Schürmann, whose interest in contract related photography he shared. For Schmidt, integration in a group of professional photographers meant recognition for his autodidactic background as well as a confrontation with the contrasting employment opportunities of both commercially and artistically oriented practice.[9] »At this time it became clear to me that commerce was incompatible with art – which, for me, basically called into question all artistic demands.«[10]

In his classes at the Volkshochschule in Kreuzberg and Neukölln Schmidt attempted, in his own words, to develop a programme which placed less emphasis on technique than on photography's expressive potential.[11] It was through this that his plan to set up a workshop for photographers matured, something which came to fruition in 1976 with the help of the Kreuzberg Volkshochschule director. »From the beginning we planned to set up an alternative to traditional photographic training centres with this workshop. Entrance is without age and education qualifications. We are generally oriented towards international photography, from classic European to American Avant-Garde, something which unfortunately cannot be said of the majority of German training centres for photography and design.«[12] During the next six years, the workshop developed into a centre of photography. While this was not difficult because of a lack of similar institutions, the workshop also gained a name beyond Berlin, not least because of its exhibition activity.

> »An individual as a personality, that is the most important thing; only through this can photography arise and never conversely.« *Michael Schmidt, 1978*

From 1976 to 1978 Schmidt headed the workshop and gallery, and until 1982 assisted his successor Ulrich Görlich, a former student of his.[(h)] What started with an exhibition in 1976 of German photojournalists who worked for ›Stern‹ was continued from the next year with independent projects by young European and American photographers. From 1978, annual exhibitions were given of the works of students and teachers; quite an achievement for Berlin (unlike the Federal Republic which had a number of places for photographic exhibitions by the 70's).[13]

Altogether, however, the possibilities to exhibit photos in Germany were limited, and thus publication remained, as in the 50's, the desired goal of photographers. »A book is optimal. That's what I'm aiming for. A book in the most general sense, if it's done the way I'd like it to be done: the optimal.«[14]

The photographers Heiner Riebesehl, Wilhelm Schürmann and André Gelpke were able to find publishers for their work from the end of the 70's. After a period of close connections between photographic practice and press work – something towards which, for example, the Steinert students Riebesehl and Gelpke were directed in their studies – a contrasting position arose to contract photography.

In the late 70's, a certain amount of interest on the part of publishers arose for these artistically intendend works in Germany. Unlike the above-mentioned photographers, who could publish already existing projects or retrospectives of their work in book format, Michael Schmidt sought first the funding before starting a book, something made easier by his sticking to a specific locality. In his (successful) proposal for a project on the Berlin district of Wedding in 1976, an objective presentation becomes one of the main aims: »The viewer should let the presented objects have an effect on him, without being distracted by shadows or other moods. For this it is necessary that the viewer be able to distinguish all the photographed objects clearly, unmistakably and in relation to one another.«[15]

»I subordinate myself totally to the objects to be photographed. It's only through an object's self-presentation that you can recognize its sense and purpose.«

Michael Schmidt, 1978

›Berlin-Wedding‹ appeared in 1978.[6] It is divided into the chapters ›Urban Landscapes‹ (31 photos) and ›People‹ (28 photos). Both this division and the portraits of people – organized in pairs, juxtaposing private life and work – suggest that a simultaneous concentration on people and the city no longer appeared sensible to Schmidt. An attempt to integrate architecture and people in a single observation, as is documented in his first book, was superseded by an approach first hinted at in his series ›Die Berufstätige Frau‹. While the latter's photo sequences still sought an objectivity analogous to real time, the portrait chapter in the ›Wedding‹ book points to an intervention by the photographer confirming social reality.

The perspectives of the district's houses and streets which Schmidt captured with a large formant camera lead us, on the other hand, to the general context of our daily experience – comparisons to West German cities – especially in the Ruhr Area – quickly come to mind. In his tour he always pauses, with the surety of local knowledge, at those places which do not reflect our ideas of urban concentration. The focus is on the uniqueness of his district – with its new standard architecture, still-standing provisional *post-war huts*, cemented-over recreational areas – and again and again the eye runs across the ›fallow‹ land, the empty lots, the not yet built-up areas of the city. These fragments of an architectural construct, without people and under grey skies, do not together form a picture of a city; instead they show public space as a projection screen of memories. In this book, people do not apppear as active potential of urban life, but are rather submitted to a classifying observation, divided into work and leisure. The people who pose here in their flats or at work – and because of the large format camera they can do nothing but pose – are thus subject to a process of double self-presentation: their portrayal and its subsumption in an arrangement of personal objects. The carefully preserved spatial distance between the photographer and his subject, which aims at a comparability of person and situation, corresponds to a sociological interest.

Michael Schmidt was not able to maintain the formal severity which favoured a comparative descriptive function for photography for long. His intensive study of the works of the photographers August Sander and Paul Strand had strengthened his idea of a mutually dependent presentation of people and their environment, but at the same time it also shook his confidence a bit. In the same year ›Berlin – Stadtlandschaften und Menschen‹ appeared. With this project, initiated by a publisher, Schmidt was able, for the first time, to document that his work in the period 1972 – 1976 did not only just relate to a specific district. A comparison of the two books from 1978 shows that the systematic procedure he had just tested was immediately called into question. At least in the portrait section of his ›Berlin‹ book, the setting of people at work and in private within a locally limited environment is discarded again. Communication with people is brought back to the streets, the terrain of his early observation of objects.

In the context of his central aim, the visualization of relationships, one can recognize throughout Schmidt's procedure an almost compulsive search for references to previous pictorial experience, whereby he does not shy away from bringing this process out in the open.

In his ›Berlin‹ book, two forms of presenting people come together. Apart from a rather casual observation of groups of people or pairs there are a few pictures in which one figure is isolated from the action. It is especially these photographs, where this moment can be recognized as a conscious confrontation in the expression of the person portrayed, that demonstrate Schmidt's changed approach. This change was due as well to his discussions with the photographers Gabriele and Helmut Nothhelfer, who were also concentrating on people in public surroundings at this time and who had taken a decidedly people-oriented position: »Lack of contact and the desire to please, hardened family structures and a curious lack of understanding, the wish for individuality and the attempt to maintain a pose, these they communicate to us in facial expressions, gestures and dress.«[16(j,k)] For Schmidt, on the other hand, presenting people always stood in relation to his parallel work on the»unequal object», the urban framework. His aim of objectivity in a photographic practice as a humanistically defined author made impossible a concentration on only one of the two motif-worlds.

»Photography has been developed so that reality, precise down to the last detail – can be presented...For me it is the only adequate means of authentically presenting our times as a document.«

Michael Schmidt, 1979

This statement deceives with its certainty. The description of his method – part of his exposé for his ›Wedding‹ book in 1976 – was followed by the questioning of this position, to which Schmidt searched for photographic answers.

In this period, which he devoted to greater study of the works of other photographers, he produced apx. 10 collages on the subject of photography. Two of these works, in which he puts together commercial photos and standardized fashion photos from department store catalogues into tableaus, have the very contrary titles: ›In Remembrance of Diane Arbus‹[l] and ›Manufacturer of Anonymous Documentary Photography‹. Both these commentaries, like another lost work which referred to the photographs of Bernd and Hilla Becher, place Schmidt's self-confident statement in a new light. With these collages, unlike his artistic work aimed towards applied photography, and with other photographic experiments,[m] Schmidt was reacting to a double challenge: to developments and concepts in international photography and to debates on photography's traditional methods and applications. In this phase of insecurity Schmidt found no contact to the theoretical-conceptional work of media artists, but rather to traditional photographers, such as, for example, a group of new American documentarists.

In 1978, a selection from the American exhibition ›New Topographics‹ was presented in the ›Werkstatt für Photographie‹, with works of Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke and Stephen Shore. Organized in Rochester, USA, by William Jenkins, this exhibition was the first survey of the topographically oriented new photographers. Jenkins characterized their central idea thus: »...it is simply to postulate, at least for the time being, what it means to make a documentary photograph.«[17] Both the group exhibition and individual presentations by John R. Gossage, Robert Adams, Stephen Shore and Lewis Baltz in the ›Werkstatt für Photographie‹ had a great influence on the works of its students and teachers.[n,o] What connected the American photographers at the time, in spite of individual vocabulary of form, was the renewal of a documentary practice, which Lewis Baltz defined thus: »The ideal photographic document would appear to be without author or art. Yet of course photographs, despite their verisimilitude, are abstractions; their information is selective and incomplete.«[18] Their interest lay in the questioning of a photographic method which since the 30's had developed itself more and more into an illustration of an opinion-oriented description of reality.

In dealing with the American neo-documentarists, whose pictures aimed more at a confirmation and extension of one's own perceptibility than a deepening of the work's contents, Schmidt developed a new interest in a continuation of his urban photographs. After a rather more private series on interiors, in which he isolated both objects in a flat as fragments and people from their individual environment, in 1980 he associated once again with the public space.

The project ›Berlin nach 1945‹ consists of 32 photographs and has not yet been published or exhibited. It was followed in 1981 by the series ›Stadtlandschaften‹, shown in the Museum Folkwang in the same year. Both series concentrate on Berlin's general urban structure, overlooking the people living there. This view of the city as framework was clearly influenced by his study of American topographic documentarists, and probably also by the debate on documentary photography's value as art.[19]

Klaus Honnef saw the subjective moment in German documentary photography in its intention »to make objects speak...It is always a certain aspect of reality presented as uninfluenced as possible through the organization of the picture, an aspect, yet, which has been singled out and established in the phenomenological appearance of reality through the interest and way of seeing of the photographers.«[20] This general definition refers to a photographic practice which Honnef gave the name authorship-photography in 1979. In analogy to *independent* film-makers, Honnef held the view that: »Whether a photographer is an authorship-photographer or not, cannot be answered with an individual photograph. Only the sum of a photographic work shows in how far a photographer's images are characterized by a certain attitude towards reality, to be recognized in an individual way of seeing.«[21] His raising of the serial and thematic connection as criterion of an attitude refers to a photographic practice developed in Germany toward the end of the 70's, which connected precise photographic reproduction quality with an interest in a serial form emphasizing structure.

Looking back, not only the works of Michael Schmidt seem to show that the formal influence of American photography had overtaken the moral impetus of authorship-photography. The American works do direct the view towards a changing environment, but as a specific state and not as a place pointing to social relations. The documentary method is not characterized by the idea of a *proper* world, concentrating instead on the phenomenology of appearence. In talking about the landscape photos of Robert Adams, the American curator John Szarkowski also goes in this direction.»Its moral is that the landscape is, for us, the place we live. If we have used it badly, we cannot therefore scorn it, without scorning ourselves.«[22]

The influence of Robert Adams can be seen in Schmidt's grey urban landscapes of 1981. The perspectives and constellations of objects with which Adams

sought to capture the expanse of the American west were transferred to the environment of a European major city.[p,q] Schmidt's photos have lost on contrast, the diffuse grey of the prints dominates the photos. Buildings appear as backdrop on the horizon, as the image's border, within which urban space stretches into emptyness. ›Fallow‹ land has erased the history of traditional squares and serve mostly as areals for transport. The special attention paid to empty space, still recognizable traces of the war such as the ruins, as well as concrete architecture, introduced a historical moment in Schmidt's work. Related to this was a thematic reorientation from 1980 on, reflected in a concentration on Berlin as a consciously historical place, also in the sense of his own experience.

When Schmidt says »I need my pictures as a confirmation of that which I have experienced, that is in another form than I experienced it«, he is saying that »I change myself, in the final analysis, through every-day life and then create that which showed itself as a failure in every-day life in the form of liberation and the production of a harmony.«[23] What is referred to here is certainly not that every-day life which we all face but rather the process from which Schmidt developed his photographs. His notorious energy and simultaneously his fear of possible isolation drove him into a continuous re-experiencing of his familiar environment – a practice which at the same time prevented a thorough handling of individual themes such as, for example, a systematic examination of Berlin's architectural history. Thus, it is not surprising that he produced another book on Kreuzberg in 1984.

During the *solitary* work on his urban planning projects ›Berlin nach 1945‹ and ›Stadtbilder‹, Schmidt had continued to photograph in his district and to seek contact with the people there. It is interesting to note that Schmidt, in his book ›Berlin-Kreuzberg. Stadtbilder‹ from 1984 – again supported by the local government – fell back both for motif and concept on his first book on the district. Dovetailing portraits, snapshots, architectural and detail photos, this publication can be seen as a reconfirming recapitulation of his own photographic development. Remarkable is not only the dominance of people, but also their way of presentation, arising less from their social environment than from their individual appearance. The portraits in this book, convincing in their precise recording of individual figures, were isolated by Schmidt from their given situation, using a variety of formal means. After a phase of retreating to ›private portraits‹ (1976-81), his ›Kreuzberg‹ book underlines Schmidt's newly won interest in his surroundings, and especially in the situation of the younger generation.

> »I need my photos as a confirmation of that which I have experienced...« *Michael Schmidt, 1992*

During the work on the ›Kreuzberg‹ project, Schmidt was also working on a more widely drawn theme, though one still defined by the city. From the beginning of the 80's he had been continually photographing the Berlin Wall, although for a long time he had been unable to find an adequate way of presenting its historical and political meaning. »Only since the experience of a number of stays in the DDR between 1982 and 1984 – when I was working there on an exhibition of local photographers – did I develop another feeling for the project.«[24] Three years later his book ›Waffenruhe‹ appeared, which gained him international acclaim. With this project, Schmidt finally laid to rest an objective presentation in favour of an emotionally stressed perception of reality. The American photographer Lewis Baltz described the unique quality of this work thus: »The book's most striking quality is its intensity. There is a relentlessness to Schmidt's images and sequencing that makes ›Waffenruhe‹ exhausting to view and impossible to dismiss....he has created an autonomous work, a new cultural artifact in and of itself, something whose presence transforms the world that it records.«[25]

And in fact ›Waffenruhe‹ marks an extreme break in Schmidt's work. Up to this point he had been basically working on the relation of object and representation, a balance of objectivity and individual perception. Now, his radicalized insistence on making transparent his individual relation to reality achieved a corresponding subjective form of expression. ›Waffenruhe‹, seen in view of both form and theme, is his most personal project. Schmidt's brother was held for over nine years in the infamous DDR prison Bautzen, and his father too had spent time in gaol. Shortly after the war, the family had moved from the West to the East, only to flee again to West-Berlin in 1955. For Schmidt the Wall not only meant separation, but also individual loss. In working this theme he found for the first time a tangible association to his own history. This prodding of memories was obviously decisive for the development of a quite personal form of expression – one not fearing pathos. Thus, in ten of the forty published photographs the Wall is clearly identifiable as the object of presentation. However, it would be mistaken to base a description of the photographs on this object, as Reinhard Matz remarked in his review of the book: »There are things which hardly

deserve the name object, as they are so quickly overlooked in day-to-day life, and their exact definition would be meaningless. Michael Schmidt has managed, however, to create expressive images from the most meaningless and trivial things.«[26] Schmidt himself sees his project, consisting of 95 images,»as the endpoint of photography in my view – ›Waffenruhe‹ was subjectively the desire for my own image world and beyond that for the defence of the individual.«

»Endpoint of photography« speaks less to the oft-mentioned painting-like quality of these pictures, although painting – as a fundamental questioning of photographic-artistic work – had special significance for Schmidt at the time. Indeed, one of his artist friends, the painter Dieter Hacker, raised the question of why Schmidt had chosen photography as his medium:»Because such an energetic person as he could build cathedrals, write operas or at least paint pictures. But something holds him back. What that is, I think, is his humanism. Thus, it is not by chance that he chose photography as his medium, as photography, even art photography, is more closely bound to reality than other artistic media.«[27] In his project › Waffenruhe‘, for the first time, Schmidt was able to translate photographically respect for perceptable reality – directed towards people – via the experiment of emphasizing subjective perception, without regard to exact description.

His rejection of an understanding of documentary photography which had been coupled up to then to a representative function had a great influence on young German and European photographers. Schmidt‘s teaching contract at the Universität-Gesamthochschule in Essen 1979/80, resulting in extensive contacts with the students, influenced not only the development of photographers studying there such as Gosbert Adler, Volker Heinze and Joachim Brohm, but also the work of the British photographer Paul Graham and the journalistic photography of Dirk Reinartz and Axel Grünewald.[28]

As a means of distancing himself from what was seen as a historical artistic movement, initiated by Otto Steinert as ›subjektive fotografie‹ in the 50‘s in Germany, Michael Schmidt placed the term subjective in question with ›Waffenruhe‹ in 1987. Schmidt‘s demands on subjective authorship did not, however, aim at an alienating intervention but at a direct communication of his individual perception as the starting point of an additive pictorial work. Because of this there was no linear presentation form for this project.[r] In the given exhibition space, the pictures were hung in blocks, in juxtaposition and as triptychs. Looking back, he sees his adherence to the emotional binding of means of expression in the photographic process as a »conflict arising from desperation«: »It slowly became clear to me that the ›Waffenruhe‹ project was both a process of isolation and one of work against photography.«[29]

And in fact, the forty published photographs from ›Waffenruhe‹ find no parallel in international photography. Neither the above-mentioned American documentarists nor Schmidt‘s fellow proponents of a renewal of documentary photography in Germany formulated an individual position of comparable honesty and vulnerability in their wrestling with the representative nature of photography.

> »You have to destroy the world to put it back together again...or, it destroys itself before your eyes, because you have become disillusioned.« *Michael Schmidt, 1992*

Because of his search for a synthesis of the presentation of people and objects, Schmidt‘s work paid increasing attention to the concrete forms of given objects from 1987. As in the period before ›Berlin nach 1945‘, his work after ›Waffenruhe‹ was oriented again towards his surroundings. The portraits of friends – presented in an exhibition in the Galerie Springer in 1990 together with his city pictures from 1976 to 1984 – which arose in this context, already point to another approach to the genre of portrait photography; something more clearly formulated in the project supported by the Siemens Culture Programme (through which 18 German photographers were supported).

In this, time is declared to be the decisive condition of the photographic process. However, the *decisive moment* is no longer understood in the sense of Cartier-Bresson‘s crystallization of a situation, but rather as the possibility of a process of exploration of individual means of expression. The gaze of the women who Schmidt photographed at their workplace is fixed. It is directed at something which the viewer cannot see, but the reflex of the daily mechanical work process is written into it.[s] Schmidt‘s eye for the reality of a given situation and for the subjective reaction, sharpened during the ›Waffenruhe‹ project, leads the viewer in this case to pause, to a slow absorbtion of a consciously excerpt-like, large format *picture of an instance.* The portraits and architectural images which Schmidt produced between 1989 and 1991 illustrate a new attempt at creating an image-object, which goes beyond the establishment of the given. In this context, both Lee Friedlander‘s[t] portraits of computer operators oriented along the line of sight, and Robert Adams‘ sculptural portraits, removed from their situation, should be mentioned.[30] After a

phase of being very oriented to the image, Schmidt found, interestingly enough, a new approach to the representational nature of the medium through the photographic process' condition of time. This new beginning, based on a displacement in the work process, was called by Ulrich Bischoff »delayed lines in photography«.[31] What is meant is a »slow re-drawing« of a moment instead of a »quick sketch«, where »the eye of the viewer has time to capture the depths and thus carefully circle the centre of the picture.«[32]

And in fact, Schmidt developed a new method for the process of forming an image which placed more emphasis on structures and the relations of objects in the given space in the foreground. Both the large format pictures with their darkened architectural details as well as the very intentionally fragmented pictures of people are consciously brought into the image as format-filling plane. In this sense, Schmidt's differing themes became comparable as images. In his pictures from the 90's, the individual and the city, the central motifs of his work, refer less to the social context of the figures presented or spatial relations of architecture. Instead, they now find their equivalent as image on a level of expression. Within the conflict between ephemeral and permanent, Schmidt succeeded in converting the locally bound, temporal moment into the fragmentation of his subjects. An isolated element of the motif *conquers* the temporally conditioned photographic space. A heavily fragmented presence of objects, which almost suppresses a presumed second level of imagery hinted at, gives these pictures a suggestive effect. Only with a comparative view of the photographs of people and architecture is this suggestion qualified as an image-forming process. It is directed not towards a description of the real situation which aims at recognition, but rather towards the process of forming an image as a mode of description.

»The camera, which is said to be the embodiment of the renaissance sence of space, an apparatus for realizing the central, frontal view, has proved itself as a suitable means for refraction.«[33] The term refraction, which Frieda Grafe develops as the reversal of old (visual) positions using the example of Silke Grossmann's photography, gains a further connotation in view of Michael Schmidt's work. His scepticism about photography's alleged representative quality has always been closely connected with the transparence of his own approach. In this sense his locally-bound nature, mentioned at the beginning, means a guaranteed terrain on which an open working method, calling into question his own individual experience, can be based. »Is it not possible to imagine a photography which, starting from one standpoint, throws a focussed glance at that which is foreign in the actual present?«[34] This question, which Herta Wolf raises in view of a current documentation project, can also be seen as a fundamental question in Michael Schmidt's work.

In view of its referential character, Schmidt sees the conditions of the photographic image-making process not as a limitation of creative possibilities, but as a permanent artistic challenge. He understands existing reality as a complex starting point for an impassioned search for a position, and moreover as the chance for a process-dependent revision of established positions. For him, photography as artistic practice means the formulation of historically grounded experiences of reality which can only be newly defined through a subjective approach. Within the framework of traditional post-war photography, Schmidt developed an independent work from this position.

Today – still thematically, but in cycles conceived globally – Schmidt is working more consciously than earlier on photographic single images, which at best capture an aspect of the complex relation between author and object. His work in progress, ›Einheit‹, will doubtlessly call into question once again his past work, and thus form the starting point for another discussion on Michael Schmidt's photography.

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