

# Michael Schmidt

## Photographs 1965–2014

September 22, 2021 – February 28, 2022

Sabatini Building, Floor 3



**MUSEO NACIONAL  
CENTRO DE ARTE  
REINA SOFIA**



MINISTERIO  
DE CULTURA  
Y DEPORTE

Exhibition organized by Stiftung für Fotografie  
und Medienkunst mit Archiv Michael Schmidt,  
in collaboration with Museo Nacional Centro  
de Arte Reina Sofía

Collaborate:



Cover:  
Untitled, *Ein-heit* [U-ni-ty], 1989–94

## **Thomas Weski**

### In a Process of Perpetual Change

The work of Michael Schmidt (1945–2014), spanning five decades from the mid-1960s onwards, can be read both as the process of finding oneself as an artist and as an illustration of the development of art photography in post-war Germany. At the very beginning, upon discovering photography, Schmidt first joined amateur photography clubs, which he then promptly left because he found their approach and practice superficial. In West Berlin there were just two options at the time: to do an apprenticeship or to study experimental photography as part of a degree. Without the necessary high-school diploma, the option of further institutional study was closed to Schmidt, so he began an intensive phase of self-education, immersing himself with an existential intensity in art, literature and photography to find role models for an artistic exploration of reality. At the time, there was still no infrastructure in Germany for art photography, which, as it turned out, was only able to reconnect with its productive period prior to National Socialism first in the 1970s. Thus, for this period of intensive self-study, Michael Schmidt had to rely first and foremost on photography books and journals, or discussions with kindred spirits.

As he began to work freelance at the beginning of the 1970s, besides commissioned photojournalistic work, he had already designed posters for a few West Berlin adult education centres and indeed given photography courses there. The letterhead he was using at the time listed his wide field of activities – ‘photojournalist, lecturer, advertising photographer, design and lay-out’ – and thus testified to the breadth of his aspirations. Throughout his career Michael Schmidt consistently proved very skilful in convincing decision-makers to support him and his projects.

The first he could win over was the mayor of Kreuzberg for an illustrated book on the district. In shots strongly resembling photojournalism, *Berlin Kreuzberg*, published in 1973, showed the district Schmidt had known so intimately since his birth in 1945 and where he lived until his death in 2014. He presented a tableau of the traditional working-class district and its residents that exuded sympathy and understanding. Pointedly formalistic, the photographs show ordinary everyday life, the inner courtyards not yet gutted and the residential buildings requiring renovation, but also the newly-erected modern buildings and, along with the long-term residents, the new fellow

citizens, the so-called guest workers from Southern Europe, who were now moving into the district's neighbourhoods with their families. The photos were taken with a 35mm camera and, thanks to the employment of wide-angle and long-focus lenses, the reality shown seems stretched or condensed. In the style of the time, Schmidt enlarged his shots in high contrast, achieving an effect that was at once realistic and abstracted, and generally understood to be critical of society. With every photo of this series he takes a position, looking to persuade and also demonstrate that he understands his craft. The gaze of the viewer is guided in these photos; their poles—the black and white that characterises them—symbolise the decisive judgement of the social conditions the photographer is seeking to convey. His first book was so successful that a second edition was published just a year later. Already for the first edition the young photographer had taken on more than just the responsibility for his photos; he also designed the book and wrote some of the texts. This initial undertaking yielded a model that Schmidt would go on to employ regularly in his artistic work, with variations depending on the respective partners: to finance and realise his projects first through public commissions and then later within the framework of arts funding.

At this time Schmidt was already also taking photos revealing a different, more open character, even though their appearance bears the distinctive mark of the contrasts typical of this phase of his work. They refuse to offer anything clear and definitive, avoiding the unambiguousness that essentially makes up the early works, and indicating instead that doubt can reside alongside tangible certainties. One photograph shows a young girl who, her nose having bled, lies outstretched on a table. In the photograph this ordinary situation is turned into a symbol of helplessness and vulnerability. Although the clothes and glasses clearly anchor it in the past, the photograph formulates a universal sense of insecurity. Another photograph shows a young woman raising her arm as if defending herself at the very moment of exposure, so that her own face is covered. Without being able to identify her, questions immediately arise as to the predicament in which she finds herself, and why the tacit agreement between photographer and model was breached here. Less spectacular is the picture of a stream, a few raindrops falling on its quicksilver-like surface, but nonetheless remaining somehow impenetrable and mysterious in its seemingly natural appearance. As different as the motifs are, they are united by their refusal to furnish a readily accessible and quick readability, a characteristic usually associated with photography, and are hence affiliated in their character to art. These photographs already fulfil the aspiration Michael Schmidt would later formulate: that every picture must harbour something unsettling, a tremor.<sup>1</sup> And they show that already at this stage he was able to capture situations in a way that turned his photographs into images going beyond the purely documentary and bearing within them further levels of meaning.

In this phase Michael Schmidt was already following specific methodological approaches he would take up again and develop further in later projects. In

1974 he proposed to the Senator for Labour and Social Affairs in Berlin that he photograph older people, and was given the commission. Under the title *Senioren in Berlin* (Senior Citizens in Berlin), he exhibited the photographs a year later at an unusual location—the connecting passageway at the Möckernbrücke underground station, a heavily-frequented public space. He arranged the prints into groups and mounted them on wooden panels, thus already moving away from the single photograph in its traditional viewing modus. As he was then awarded a commission by another senate department later in the same year, namely to photograph working women, he showed the workday routine of four protagonists under the title *Die berufstätige Frau* (The Working Woman). To emphasise constantly recurring moments and the elapsing of time, he repeated certain motifs with slight variations.<sup>2</sup> He also used this approach for another commission to depict the everyday life of persons with disabilities and chronic illnesses. This series was published in 1982 together with a text by Ernst Klee under the title *Benachteiligt* (Disadvantaged) as a slim volume put out by the responsible senate department.<sup>3</sup> Here Schmidt used the stylistic device of repetition and variation to convey the drab passing of time and the monotony people have to cope with when undergoing treatment and therapy.

In the mid-1970s there were only about fifty institutions throughout the whole of Europe which held photography exhibitions regularly (estimated on the basis of at least one presentation a year). In West Germany, the spectrum of the locations ranged from private show rooms and art societies through to the first specialist photography galleries.<sup>4</sup> As photography was included in the exhibition concept at the Kassel documenta in 1972 and 1977, there was not one single photography collection in one of the museums for twentieth-century art in Germany; the first ones opened at the end of the decade, in the Museum

Ludwig, Cologne, and the Museum Folkwang, Essen. A commercial market for photography was only slowly emerging, with the production of limited editions as executed within the sector of graphic art. The prices for original prints were still extremely low; no photographer could live from the sale of their work.

At the time, Bernd and Hilla Becher were contributing significantly to photography gaining recognition as an art form in West Germany. The reception of their work and its classification mirrors this process of recognition. In a long-term project unprecedented in the history of art and photography, from the end of the 1950s they had arranged black-and-white photographs of half-timber houses and anonymous industrial structures such as shaft towers, smelting furnaces, coal bunkers, factory halls, gasometers and grain silos into so-called typologies, which, on the basis of comparative viewing enable diverse periods and regions to be combined. The couple also came to prominence in the 1960s for their efforts in trying to save the Zollern II pit in Dortmund in the Ruhr, which they documented photographically and indeed successfully prevented its demolition. Awarded numerous prizes, their work was initially understood as an example of monument protection in practice,



*Hinterhöfe im Südosten, Berlin-Kreuzberg*

[Back courtyards in the Southeast, Berlin-Kreuzberg], 1969–73

Untitled, *Ausländische Mitbürger in Kreuzberg*

[Foreign Fellow Citizens in Kreuzberg], 1973–74



*Neubau, Mehringplatz, Berlin-Kreuzberg*  
[Newly constructed building, Mehringplatz, Berlin-Kreuzberg], 1969–73

*Lesesaal, Amerika Gedenkbibliothek, Berlin-Kreuzberg*  
[Reading room, Amerika Gedenkbibliothek, Berlin-Kreuzberg], 1969–73

before, in the 1970s, coming to be regarded as part of Concept Art and then eventually as art photography.

An additional component in this process of recognition was Bernd Becher's teaching. In 1976 he was appointed professor for photography at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Düsseldorf Art Academy) and, with master students like Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth, left an indelible mark on the public perception of photography in the context of the visual arts. At the beginning of the 1990s, an enormous interest in art photography arose on the international art market, laying the basis for the extensive commercial success enjoyed by the so-called Becher or Düsseldorf school. In the wake of this development, it now became possible for photographers to earn a living from the sale of artistic works. At the time of Bernd Becher's appointment, Michael Schmidt was working as a lecturer in photography at various West Berlin Volkshochschulen (adult education centres). He had the idea to set up an institution that was open to anyone interested in photography and to provide training in a multistage course programme. In 1976 he founded the 'Werkstatt für Fotografie' (Workshop for Photography) at the Volkshochschule Kreuzberg.<sup>5</sup> Unique in the field of photography, teaching at this institution of adult education focused on challenging the course participants to take personal photographs directly related to their own lives. The workshop's gallery hosted exhibitions of contemporary photography. Photographers from the US predominated, and it was here that they often had their first exhibition in Germany or indeed Europe. The presentation of their work provided an opportunity to study and discuss an understanding of the documentary that focused on comprehensibility, readability, richness of detail and revealing spatial connections. During the early 1970s in the US, the 'New Topographics'<sup>6</sup> had linked into this tradition from the very beginnings of photography, whereby some of them had already also established colour photography as an artistic means of expression in their precise descriptions of the 'social landscape'.<sup>7</sup>

In this, they were drawing on the idea of a documentary style in photography articulated by the American photographer Walker Evans. Asked at the end of his life whether his photographs are documents,<sup>8</sup> Evans answered that a document is the evidence gathered by police at the scene of a crime; in contrast, his pictures are photographs in a documentary style. The scientific document is not what is meant; instead, a subjective view is expressed documentarily. The concern is not—as with traditional documentary photography—the pictorial duplication of the motif, but the rendering of a personal way of seeing that, in a coherent pictorial invention typical for the photographer, shows the relationship they have to the world. These works are not primarily about illustrating social issues and topics; instead, they reflect these and draw their material from a close investigation of them, while also putting forth an artistic statement. Photography formulates a belief in the artwork as an aesthetic object with its own laws. The representation of reality is always the result of an artistic approach that understands the substantiality



to be found in the photographs to be an authentic construct, an artistically rendered idea of the world.

Michael Schmidt remained faithful to his neighbourhood and developed his photographic method in the following years from project to project. In *Berlin-Wedding* from 1978, commissioned by the local district authority, the photographer divided his work into two chapters: urban landscapes, and people. The precisely set details of architectural views in the first part show very different buildings in their urban context. The shots all seem as if they were taken early on a murky Sunday morning in winter, the streets empty, devoid of life and laid out as if on a dissecting table. The gaps between the buildings, the tentative building redevelopment and the repaired buildings and streets all point to the repercussions of the Second World War and the existential shock still reverberating through the people. The second part comprises portraits of residents from the district, who have carefully arranged themselves at their workplaces and in their domestic situations for the camera. They have settled into the circumstances, and Schmidt shows this retreat into the private realm, and the pride in what they have achieved, as it is expressed in the furnishings of their flats and the familial roles they have taken on.

Both motif groups, urban landscapes and people, seem to present themselves as an indication of how far the photographer had altered his access to reality in comparison to the earlier works. Michael Schmidt was entering uncharted waters artistically with this series, not only with the intentionally deployed grey tones of his prints, but also through the layout of the shots. In contrast to those in his first book, here the photographs no longer guide and influence how the viewer looks at them, but offer a richly diverse array of things to consider. Schmidt's study of contemporary American photography is palpable in his shots of Wedding: he adopts the idea to combine a form of photography that is extremely personal in the choice of themes and motifs, with a manner of depiction that is sober and formally unobtrusive. The images enable a precise reading of the objects rendered in a finely shaded palette of grey tones. The architecture photos were taken while the sky was overcast, whereas for the portraits, photographed indoors, an indirect illumination was used, so that there are no light and shadow effects, everything sinking into a flat, levelling greyness. With the sober colouration of the black-and-white prints, the photographer was distinguishing this series from his earlier works and emphasising its analytical character.

That this was a conscious decision against a zeitgeist favouring strongly contrastive and atmospherically-charged black-and-white prints is underlined by a later remark from Michael Schmidt: 'It was a conscious decision to push the images in a more extreme way into that immeasurable, diffuse grey area, so that black and white virtually no longer exist. As I see it, grey is the colour of differentiation, as weird as that may sound. Black and white are two fixed points to the left and to the right. And I was thinking that the world doesn't define itself in a clear way, but presents itself in a host of nuances. And so I



*Bergstrasse/Lazaruskrankenhaus, Berlin-Wedding*  
[Bergstrasse/Hospital Lazarus, Berlin-Wedding], 1976–78



*Stadtoberinspektor beim Bezirksamt Wedding*  
[Senior city inspector, Wedding district authority], 1976–78

tried to introduce this into my photography. I took it to its ultimate extreme by completely eliminating black and white and thus to a certain extent formulated an antithesis to the one current at the time. With these grey pictures I was reinventing photography for myself.<sup>9</sup>

The March 1979 issue of the Swiss specialist magazine *Camera* was devoted to the Werkstatt für Photographie founded three years before. In a manifesto-like text resonating with his typical resoluteness, Schmidt formulated his understanding of a photography that was to guarantee maximum neutrality: 'I subordinate myself entirely to the objects I photograph. It is only by means of self-portraiture that the significance and meaning of the objects can emerge. I look upon photography as the recorder of the environment.'<sup>10</sup>

In the same year Klaus Honnef, working together with the photographer Wilhelm Schürmann, curated the exhibition *In Deutschland – Aspekte gegenwärtiger Dokumentar fotografie* (In Germany – Aspects of Contemporary Documentary Photography). Held in Bonn, it featured leading West German protagonists of a photography understood as documentary, and included Bernd and Hilla Becher, Heinrich Riebesehl and Michael Schmidt, as well as younger photographers from Berlin and Düsseldorf. In the catalogue Honnef related their works to historical predecessors like Eugène Atget, August Sander and Walker Evans. In his text he introduced the idea of the auteur photographer, which he defined in terms inspired by the auteur filmmaker. As he describes it, the auteur photographer creates 'a photographic reality which while certainly authentic, because it strictly upholds the documentary principles of photography, is however selected, filtered, elaborated, condensed by an individual mind, and is thus aware of its personal way of seeing [...]. Taken as a whole, their images [...] reveal a clear position vis-à-vis reality and sometimes [...] a lasting vision of reality.'<sup>11</sup>

With this understanding of photography Michael Schmidt turned to a new project, photographing the area of the southern Friedrichstadt and the wasteland around the Anhalter Bahnhof in Berlin. This part of the city was marked by the devastation of the Second World War and subsequent rebuilding. He neither exhibited nor published the work, which he later called *Berlin nach 45* (Berlin since 45). It is the only extensive project in the lifework of Michael Schmidt that he undertook without financial support from a commissioning source. Continuing the photographic method of *Berlin-Wedding*, he now used a 13 x 18 cm large-format camera which he operated from a tripod. Although he sought to describe as precisely as possible the urban situations, these shots of deserted cityscapes dipped in silvery light break loose from the pure documentary. In the series selected for the book then first published in 2005 with Ute Eskildsen as editor, we repeatedly encounter variations of the photographed urban constellations, underlining how small and limited the area is in which the photographer moves. They thus provide an analogy to the situation of West Berlin at the time, isolated and constrictive, as one part of a divided city. But the photographs also witness a new artistic





Untitled, *Berlin nach 45* [Berlin since 45], 1980



element in Schmidt's work: many of the shots show firewalls, unbuilt land or other self-contained, flat architectural surfaces, which lend the documentary images an abstract quality. These 'gaps' unfurl a metaphoric effect, evoking the wastelands and empty spaces pockmarking Berlin since the war.<sup>12</sup> They recall the loss caused by the war and thus simultaneously the collective guilt of Germans and its enduring significance.

The work also shows that Michael Schmidt, while continuing to shoot self-contained single photographs, was now placing them in the broader context of a series, instigating a dialogue between them that amounts to a new dimension: 'The interaction between single images creates a new plane. It's true that I work with single images, but they are not conceived to appear as such, but rather that the individual image takes its place in the sequence. It is very important for me that the pictures aren't striking in themselves. They don't tell a story as such. They do provide a narrative structure, but it doesn't reside in the individual image.'<sup>13</sup> His tenet of strictly documentary photography proved to be obsolete with this work; increasingly, he was finding it to be a straitjacket. He therefore cast off the self-imposed rules and began to once again photograph without a tripod. Using a medium-format camera that allowed him to work spontaneously, he commenced a new project, published in 1983 under the title *Berlin-Kreuzberg. Stadtbilder* (Berlin-Kreuzberg. Cityscapes). His photographs of the district still essentially follow a traditional documentary understanding and once again show various parts of Kreuzberg undergoing significant if not turbulent change. Thanks to the radical composition, some of the shots of persons in the nightlife scene, taken with a flash, begin to shift away however from the hitherto followed pictorial conception, heralding a further development in his artistic work. A few photographs from the early 1980s had already indicated this, with Schmidt intuitively breaking the rules considered necessary for a successful shot but with the vocabulary of the form only tentatively developed: 'The fact is that it always seems to be the very pictures which derive from this intuitive plane that bring about renewal in my work.'<sup>14</sup>

Michael Schmidt completed this radical aesthetic shift in his photographic method and the break with the conventions he himself had once propagated a few years later with the work *Waffenruhe* (Ceasefire). In the mid-1980s he had met the theatre director, writer and photographer Einar Schleaf. Together they developed a joint project on the situation in Berlin as a divided city, which was then funded as part of the 750th anniversary of Berlin's founding. Their collaboration was intensive and productive, but not without conflict. Schleaf contributed a new text to photographs by Schmidt and together they came up with the literary title for their project, *Waffenruhe*, which was then presented in 1987 in the Berlinische Galerie.

In the artist book accompanying the exhibition, the photographs and text are autonomous and juxtaposed in a way that accords them equal importance. In contrast to the intentional sobriety of his earlier series, in *Waffenruhe*





Schmidt draws a picture of the still divided city that is subjective and split into facets; the black-and-white photographs of urban landscapes, details of nature and portraits are dense, fragmentary and rich in contrasts. The work group stands for a radical endpoint in his attempt to find a formal photographic correspondence to the political situation of a still divided Berlin and to express its complexity and lack of hope for a viable future through atmospheric images. His photography no longer primarily follows those methods documenting requires, but instead—through surprising pictorial connections—formulates a generation’s dystopian feeling of life shortly before the fall of the Wall. Schmidt develops a world of ruptures and gaps, an underlying sense of a void, giving up any claim of having a commanding overview of things. The interaction with Einar Schleaf’s text creates a harsh and completely distinctive view of the fragility of human existence.

The Austrian curator Christine Frisinghelli has described *Waffenruhe* as the further development of Schmidt’s artistic method and his exploration of his native city: ‘The refracted and fragmented is given constitutional status within the photographer’s conception (as a level of subjective choice) and in the image’s interpretation. In terms of subject matter *Waffenruhe* continues the interpretation, begun in *Berlin-Kreuzberg. Stadtbilder*, of Berlin’s precarious situation and of life in that city, but only in *Waffenruhe* do threat and violation become explicit themes. Almost all images carry implications of the wall; very few moments offer escape from the permanent allusion to the fact of its incomprehensible existence.’<sup>15</sup>

At the time unpublished,<sup>16</sup> Schleaf’s text is about a man whose wife has left him, and who is now living together with his daughter’s rabbit in the empty family house. Designing the layout, Schmidt intentionally sets the typography of the oppressive text in a way that is awkward, slowing down its reading, impeding it, even, thus creating an analogy to his pictorial language in which blocked views dominate. The publication has a blank fold-out that, when closed, directs the view of the reader to the right-hand page. A flash shot shows the inner side of a wrist. A scar is visible, running across the whole wrist. The physiognomy of the hand obviously belongs to a young person who has attempted suicide. When the viewer opens the foldout, a photograph of a blooming bush close to the Berlin Wall appears on the left-hand side, taken close up and with a flashbulb, which against the foil of this historical site with its victims can be read as a sign of hope and confidence. The inner side of the fold-out remains blank in contrast, and this empty space injects an enormous emotional charge into the book at this juncture.

Including such an artistic gesture adds significantly to production costs and is therefore not only an expression of the range of possibilities Michael Schmidt had succeeded in gaining from the publisher, but also a testament to how the photographer considered himself to be a holistic author of his work. As he had previously with *Berlin-Wedding*, he designed the book, decided on the format, sequence of the photographs, typography and placement of the text,



selected the cover illustration, specified the type and binding of the paper and the print—and then monitored the entire process. With such an assumption of responsibility for all these aspects, it is clear that we may speak of an artist book in the genre of photography.

One key aspect of this all-embracing authorial understanding is the presentation of the photographs based on artistic ideas. This includes the development of the photographs, the size and type of the prints, their presentation in self-devised frames, the specification of the sequencing and the placing of the works in the respective space, and the possible use of texts. Schmidt no longer showed his works as a series of single photographs arranged in a row; instead, he saw them as elements of different pictorial combinations, giving them different positions and creating various constellations on the exhibition wall, an approach that allowed him to then concretely refer to the respective presentation site. It was thus only logical that he changed the arrangement of this network of relationships for every exhibition and was continually examining changing combinations for their potential to generate new subjects out of their interaction or to intensify atmospheres and moods. The sense that the old certainties of life were evaporating, the existential trepidation and the growing alienation were bolstered by the tonality of leaden gravity he lent his photographs. A psychological profile emerges of a divided city and its residents, unaware of the political process about to be set in motion that would lead to the fall of the Wall and the reunification of Germany. In hindsight, *Waffenruhe* seems to indicate that something momentous was in the offing, a change of epochal dimensions, and perhaps this is why the work is once again relevant today, at a time when similarly far-reaching political upheaval appears inevitable.

From this moment of his career onwards, Michael Schmidt spoke of book and exhibition projects, presenting the work groups in a very individual way. He developed the respective photographic method from an initial idea about the subject matter, whereby change seemed almost inevitable as the practical work proceeded: 'I can't even remember a time when this process of trial and error hasn't been a prerequisite for a new project. I once called myself a "blind alley" photographer, that means that I stroll straight into a cul-de-sac and can't find a way out. Then I come to terms with this as a sort of condition and at some point later on, I'm back on the outside again. That is to say, failure or making mistakes is an integral part of my way of working.'<sup>17</sup> Once he had found the photographic approach to reality that seemed to fit the subject, he then began an intensive phase of shooting the material. The next step was the editing using work prints, further refining the structure and character of the project. In a long process he selected the works and then finally decided on the form of their publication and presentation.

With reunification Michael Schmidt broke away from Berlin as the subject of his artistic work. At the end of the 1980s he was still photographing the visual phenomena accompanying the political process, but his interest in

artistically exploring his native city then began to wane.<sup>18</sup> By this time he had already started to photograph nature. Most of the photographs were taken in Wendland, a rural border region in West Germany, directly on the Elbe, where together with his wife Karin he had bought a weekend cottage in the mid-1970s. The material is characterised by the photographic vocabulary typical of this phase in his career—excerpt-like details, the use of sharp and soft focuses, and objects which block or distort the view. Merely stating how things are, they possess nothing that could be spun out into a narrative. The subjective panorama of a cultural landscape first unfolds in a book or as a series hung on a wall. The directness of the photographic approach to the subject is unexpected and unsentimentally shows the state of contemporary nature. Schmidt understands it as a limited natural resource, with enormous forces at work and undergoing constant change. As previously in *Berlin nach 45*, he did not complete this project at the time, only publishing it much later. That he was still working on *Natur* (Nature), which appeared shortly before his death in 2014, while in hospital underlines how important the landscape of this geographical region and nature itself were to him.

A similarly delayed publication was also the fate of the small series of self-portraits Michael Schmidt had sporadically taken for a time from the mid-1980s onwards and first presented in 1998. As with every photographic self-portrait, which unlike a painted portrait is not created on the basis of a number of observations, as a viewer one has the feeling of being the eyewitness of a staged enactment for the camera that occasionally lacks ultimate credibility. The hope that this speculated effect could nevertheless come off is to be found in the shot that shows the artist with a pistol, albeit remaining in a non-threatening pose. Similar are the photographs which show grotesque moments of self-expression, such as the sight of his stuck-out tongue, or the candid view of his exposed penis. Here, despair and suffering appear to find a formal correspondence in a series of pictorial self-inquiries defined by their radicalness. The shot that seems the least calculated shows Schmidt apparently waiting for the camera shutter to release. In this process every semblance of self-staging has fallen away and he seems completely himself. Heinz Liesbrock has remarked on the existential background to the self-portraits: ‘The question posed here is not the rather conventional “who am I?” but the more fundamental one: “what does it even mean that I am?”’<sup>19</sup>

When Ute Eskildsen staged a large retrospective exhibition in Essen’s Museum Folkwang in 1995, Michael Schmidt took the opportunity to re-examine his work. He discovered his archive to be a source for current interpretations of older photographs and produced new prints for the exhibition. This approach showed that Schmidt did not consider his early work to be closed and completed, but rather to be a new starting point: ‘The archive often enables me to redefine myself for a new work.’<sup>20</sup> His archive thus became increasingly important and he returned to it regularly over the course of his artistic work, producing works from what he reencountered. This resorting to and accessing of an already existing stock of work with the goal to create something new is also



Untitled, *Natur* [Nature], 1989/2014

characteristic of the various, individually site-related installations of his work groups, which he now installed in exhibitions with a systematic consequence. Here he understood the pictures of a work group to be elements and material that he activated in highly diverse ways through the respective individual arrangement, producing a plurality of meaning.

Following his participation in a photography project<sup>21</sup> of the Siemens Kulturprogramm (Siemens Cultural Programme), he was able to win over its initiator as a patron for several years. At the beginning of the 1990s he commenced work on a new project that examined the political situation of the time and specifically focused on the repercussions of reunification. He travelled through the new federal states and used the infrastructure of the company, which had meanwhile re-established a presence in eastern Germany, to gain access to various firms and manufacturing plants.

He photographed portraits, architectural views and still lifes. All of them are in upright format and black-and-white, and although they are conceived as individual images, in contrast to the motifs from *Waffenruhe* they no longer contain a narrative moment, their potential first unfurling when combined with other photographs. Created in a specific historical situation characterised by a general sense of euphoria, the work group is expressly political, precisely because the artist counters this euphoria with a sober diagnosis. It deals with the history and universal inclination towards symbolism evident in the political social systems that had dominated Germany over the course of the twentieth century: National Socialism, communism and democracy. Facing this overarching nexus, Michael Schmidt enquires into the fateful role of the individual in a community and what side was or could be taken.

The completed work group comprises 163 black-and-white photographs and combines photographs by Schmidt with shots of various photographic material serving as a starting point. Already in *Waffenruhe* Schmidt had understood existing photographs as a potential motif (the photographic document of a man lying on the ground, shot in 1962 by GDR border guards while attempting to cross the inner-German border and reach Kreuzberg in West Berlin; he died shortly afterwards) and turned them into the subject of his own photograph. The print-specific halftoning of this material points back to this media source. Due to the close-up view used for these motifs, the halftoning features more prominently, creating a situation in which some works need spatial distance for the viewer to be able to loosen them from the abstraction and decipher them. The strong emphasis on cut-out or cropped details is another device Schmidt employs to detach the images from their context and lend them a new meaning.<sup>22</sup> Unlike appropriation artists, however, who adopt images from other sources to create new works by placing the found material in individual arrangements, Schmidt understood published photography to be a part of reality itself and hence an equally legitimate occasion for a photograph as a person or a collection of buildings. He developed this approach further in *Ein-heit* (also published under the English title of *U-ni-ty*). Making up around a

third of the work group, his photographs of photographs show, besides directly descriptive shots of the already existing material, part of which contains his own earlier work, a number of others that strongly resemble cut-outs, are occasionally reversed, mirrored in the book on successive pages and indeed intentionally kept grainy and blurry.<sup>23</sup> Schmidt has altered the message of the source images, stripping them of their definitiveness and broadening the scope of their readability: 'For example, if I am arranging a double page spread, it is important for me that one plus one equals three. A third, invisible image has got to impose itself in between.'<sup>24</sup> He also drew on the strategy of the repetition and variation of motifs employed in some earlier works. Arranged in this manner, the photographs form the grammar of a unique visual language. At first this eludes the viewer, used to the customary reception of photographic images; but it is precisely this refusal to furnish a readily accessible reading that enables the viewer to undertake their own associative approach.

With a few exceptions, Schmidt had the photographs reproduced on the right-hand page, leaving almost all of the left-hand pages blank. There is no picture title or information. When one leafs through the book, the effect of an accumulation of motifs arises, condensing into a conception of history that, on the basis of the past, directs questions of the present into the future. That Schmidt refused to consider history to be a definitive and completed 'story' is underlined by a statement he gave on this work group: 'With *U-ni-ty* I was essentially concerned with the idea that history has to be kept alive in the form of continued observation of the present.'<sup>25</sup> At the exhibitions, he presented the work group in changing arrangements, often as a band running around the respective space; the works were hung extremely close together, so that a dense and oppressive impression was conveyed. At other times Schmidt chose a tableau as the presentation form and developed the display that he had used at a few early exhibitions.

*U-ni-ty* premiered at The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1996, where it was the first solo exhibition featuring a German photographer in decades. Michael W. Jennings described it as 'the most important study yet undertaken of German lives lived under the weight of German history; as such, it is a fitting counterpart at century's end to that first great portrait of a nation in the form of a photo essay, Sander's *Face of Our Time*'.<sup>26</sup> At the subsequent station at the Sprengel Museum Hannover, Schmidt met Dietrich H. Hoppenstedt, who a few years later would become President of the Sparkassen- und Giroverband (German Savings Bank Association) in Berlin. A close friendship developed between them, and Hoppenstedt supported Schmidt's work from this time onward in a number of ways. In 1999 a foundation with an archive was set up, the Stiftung für Fotografie und Medienkunst mit Archiv Michael Schmidt (Foundation for Photography and Media Art with the Michael Schmidt Archive).<sup>27</sup> The trustors were Michael Schmidt, the Deutscher Sparkassen- und Giroverband e. V. and the Norddeutsche Landesbank Girozentrale.







Untitled, *Ein-heit* [U-ni-ty], 1989–94

In 1998 Schmidt commenced photographing a contribution for the exhibition *How You Look at It – Fotografien des 20 Jahrhunderts* (Photographs of the 20th Century), staged two years later as part of the EXPO 2000 at the Sprengel Museum Hannover. In the end he concentrated on portraits and body photographs of women from a younger generation, both clothed and unclothed. Schmidt found that their self-confidence expressed itself increasingly in a different understanding of a physical presence. The photographs address how socially-mediated norms and ideals eradicate individuality, evident in the choice of the outer clothing and underwear through to the shaping of the body and its intimate areas, inscribing itself, literally, in the physique and as embodied impressions, scars and self-harm, complementing their attitude and gestures. That he understood these phenomena to be a defining collective experience of a generation was shown in how the work group was presented in exhibitions, namely as a block or tableau, thus emphasising what the women shared in common rather than the individual. It is only upon closer inspection that this work group reveals itself to be a political work, adding a further aspect to Schmidt's preceding exploration of the role of the individual in society.

By now Michael Schmidt was no longer photographing in Berlin and had begun to become interested in the provinces, approaching them as places able to provide a basis for identity yet also so interchangeable. He bought a caravan and together with his wife Karin embarked on sixteen journeys through the whole of Germany. Published in 2005, the artist book entitled *Irgendwo* (Somewhere) features shots taken in rural areas and small towns as well as photographs of their residents. The series represents an exception in his oeuvre, for Schmidt resorts here to a previous practice. Conveying a traditional impression, many of the photographs recall the pictorial conception of the early 1980s. And yet, it seems as if this reassurance was needed to be able to open up to and take on a large, complex theme just a little later, a theme related to the impressions gathered while 'on the road' and his interest in food and drink that had been developing for a number of years—and an interest that coincided with a growing preoccupation with the theme in German society. *Lebensmittel* (Foodstuff) has a special place in Michael Schmidt's artistic work. It is the last expansive series he photographed during his lifetime that he then presented in different, self-arranged exhibitions and published in an artist book that he designed himself. Along with the works published in 1987 and 1996, *Waffenruhe* and *U-ni-ty* respectively, *Lebensmittel* is one of the three important work groups principally shaping the public perception of Michael Schmidt's artistic work.

He described an initial idea for the project in a letter to Dietrich H. Hoppenstedt from 2004: 'the idea hovered into my mind to portray the city and country as still lifes, in other words to carry traces back into the atelier, but not in the conventional sense; it is the essence of things—and not their arrangement—that interests me.'<sup>28</sup> Work on *Lebensmittel* lasted from 2006 to 2010, with Schmidt photographing in—besides Germany—Austria,



Untitled, *Irgendwo* [Somewhere], 2001–04



the Netherlands, Norway, Italy and Spain. He visited numerous factories producing sausage, baked goods and cheese, fish farms, fruit and vegetable plantations, feedlots and slaughterhouses, greenhouses, olive oil plantations and insect farms as well as food-processing operations. The series is made up of 177 photographs in all, and for the first time in his work Michael Schmidt employs colour photography alongside black-and-white shots. This approach allows him to combine their different readings, anchored in the psychology of perception: the black-and-white photographs point to the past, the colour ones emphasise the future. The images remain untitled and no place is named, so the viewer is unable to make any geographical connection. Schmidt expands on the method developed in *U-ni-ty* with a number of irritating works which are comprised of two swapped-over halves and the apparent duplications, repetitions and variations of motifs, in this way shaking the viewer's belief in the documentary power of photography and the conclusive efficacy of the single image.

The overall picture he describes of contemporary methods for producing food is not directly accusatory, but rather poses more questions than it gives answers. It is often unclear which food is the subject of a photograph. The origin of food, something consumers once still knew, a definitive designation and an easily relatable seasonal availability of products—these have all vanished, obscured beneath a complex web, the products no longer individual, relatable and regional, but marked by standardisation, unfamiliarity and internationalisation.

On various levels Schmidt's photographs may be understood as metaphors for phenomena in the context of contemporary food production: the intentional withholding of information and the related inability to identify the depicted food corresponds to how consumers are left in the dark as to the mass industrial production of foodstuffs. The haunting shots of livestock animals, shown as individuals, contrast starkly to how their existence, their stalls and their slaughter have all been moved to fringe geographic zones and multipurpose disposable structures, effectively pushing them out of the public's mind. The monochromic green, suggestively artificial colouring of some motifs indicates the enhancement of foodstuffs, with preservatives, colouring agents and flavouring all added. The repetition of certain motifs reflects the mass character of goods which have lost their individual character. Like no other photographer before him, Schmidt shows the portioning of ready foodstuff, their labelling and packaging, to be the fully anonymised and standardised result of a process of industrial production.

Another key dimension in *Lebensmittel* is how Michael Schmidt pays his respects to the history of art and photography. Schmidt follows the famous *Gleaners* by Jean-François Millet from 1857, whose facial features are intentionally left vague to emphasise the universality of their plight and neediness, facilitating an identification with them; following suit, Schmidt shows the seasonal harvesters performing their physically arduous work in a

rear view. And Édouard Manet's famous still life from 1880 showing a bunch of asparagus on green leaves and held together by withe, ready to be presented at a market by a farmer, is contrasted to contemporary packaging and transport materials made of plastic. Taken in close-up and exuding elegance, some of the studio shots of fruit and vegetables recall the perfected formality of Edward Weston's black-and-white *Pepper No. 30* from 1930. Unlike the American photographer, however, who paid homage to the natural form of the fruit, Schmidt shows his specimen to be a manufactured contemporary product packaged for transportation.<sup>29</sup>

How much the perspective on food has changed is revealed by considering the portfolio *Lebensmittelindustrie* (Food Industry) that El Lissitzky compiled in collaboration with his wife Sophie Küppers in 1936. Comprising fifty-eight lithographs, some of them in colour, the portfolio was commissioned by the central USSR government and distributed to public libraries as part of a political instruction campaign. The motifs illustrate the transition from traditional agriculture to the use of technology in producing food: large-scale livestock farming, the introduction of hygienic standards and automated mechanical production ensure that the basic needs of the population are met and they are celebrated as lasting achievements of the Russian Revolution. Manufacturing and working conditions in the food industry—like the food itself—are also greatly idealised in the propaganda. Seven decades later, Michael Schmidt provides a different perspective, criticising the perverse excesses of an economic system that simultaneously produces enormous surpluses of goods and is yet riddled by permanent crises, and is—although feasible—simply incapable of feeding the global population. And unlike preceding generations, people have meanwhile experienced any number of crises and scandals, for example BSE, that have demonstrated the limits of economic growth in the agricultural sector. It is precisely this experience and the resultant loss of faith in continuous progress that finds expression in Schmidt's photographs of foodstuffs, which, in their appearance, are depicted as strangely vulnerable, maltreated, and fragile, yet dignified. With *Lebensmittel* Michael Schmidt contributes decisively to the discourse on the most valuable resource of humanity.

Michael Schmidt was surprised and at the same time gratified that *Lebensmittel* was considered to be his third outstanding and seminal contribution to contemporary photography. At this point in time he was able to look back at a successful artistic career. He had exhibited in major national and international museums, while his work was featured in the most important public collections and art biennales. It is characteristic for his oeuvre that he changed and further developed his photographic method with every work over almost five decades of artistic endeavour. This explains why no repetition is evident in his work; there is no single compositional principle that, once successfully developed, was then resorted to time and again. Rather, each work group is the unique expression of a struggle, which took on existential importance, to find the right expression and relationship between form and content.

While he expounded and practised a firmly documentary idea of photography at the beginning of his career, which was to generate authenticity through the transparency of its means, from the mid-1980s onwards his work is characterised by an essentially personal approach. With the exhibition project and artist's book *Waffenruhe*, presented and published in 1987, he introduced a subjectivised perspective to his work. In the atmospherically intense psychological profile of his native city, he was formulating a premonition of the impending historical upheaval. The work group also stands for the final liberation from the self-imposed artistic rules. After reunification he left Berlin behind as his world of motifs, expanded the scope of his subjects and themes, and developed his photographic approach further with each new work. There are only a few other photographers besides Schmidt whose oeuvres are comprised of a similarly impressive succession of self-contained work groups. But he not only found an individual photographic inlet to reality for each of them; he also lent each of them (with the exception of *Lebensmittel*) a specific tone with the grey valences deliberately created in his monochrome prints. He willingly exploited the psychological potential inherent to perceiving black-and-white photography for his artistic goals, accepting how this limited the photographic technique he could employ, and turned it into a productive component of his work. No photographer has explored and tapped this potential to the same extent as Michael Schmidt.

His direct manner, driven by his interest to engage in subject-related and personal discussions, not only brought him friends, it was also a testimony to his serious and passionate commitment. He could be charming and persuasive, but also abrupt or unwelcoming. His straight talking, in Berlin dialect, occasionally left his conversation partner feeling hurt, and often enough this did not remain one-sided. He vehemently defended the views he held and sought to assert at a particular time, and it is no surprise that he was a great boxing fan. Although a born fighter, he went through phases of self-doubt. For many younger photographers he was a role model with his commitment to continuous innovation, his fight for artistic independence and his photographic method. Moreover, to many he was also a good friend who was generous, and who often without their knowing championed their work and arranged contacts.

The development of his work runs parallel to the recognition of photography as a form of artistic expression, its definitive establishment in institutional settings and acceptance on the art market. It is a striking example of how the documentary in photography and the visual arts increasingly became a topic of intellectual and artistic interest, leading to a more complex understanding of its intricacies. With his seemingly limitless artistic aspiration, Schmidt was one of the first photographers in Germany to convert his understanding of the auteur into a series of publications and exhibitions. His work is characterised by an unmistakable rigour that finds expression in both the unrelenting search for new forms and the identifying of themes that address the decisive questions of the present age: the role of the individual in society, the power exerted by political systems and the influence of how they are represented, the meaning



of history, the influence of social norms, and the elementary significance of food and nature. In his visual essays Schmidt always explores the conditions and relations shaping people—this is the guiding thread running through his work. Moreover, this is always undertaken constructively, fulfilling the demanding paradox of combining criticism and assurance in a single work, while also activating the viewer to be a partner of equal standing and enabling them to formulate an individual interpretation of the photographs. Michael Schmidt's comprehensive, complex and important life's work can leave us in no doubt that he was one of the great photographers and important artists of the contemporary age: 'I find myself in a process of perpetual change. This is the only chance I have to safeguard my fundamental position. My whole work consists of my attempt to redefine myself. It's a life principle, which is simultaneously an artistic principle.'<sup>30</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Kolja Reichert, 'Jedes Bild muss eine Erschütterung in sich bergen. Zum Tod des großen Berliner Fotografen Michael Schmidt', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 26 May 2014, p. 19.
- 2 Ute Eskildsen showed these works in her exhibition *Absage an das Einzelbild. Erfahrungen mit Bildfolgen in der Fotografie der 70er-Jahre* at the Museum Folkwang Essen in 1980. The exhibition ran from 12 December 1980 to 18 January 1981.
- 3 Michael Schmidt (photographs) and Ernst Klee (text), *Benachteiligt* (Berlin: Senator für Gesundheit, Soziales und Familie, 1982).
- 4 Cf. *Photogalerien in Europa – Bilanz einer Umfrage*, Galerie Spectrum, Hanover 1975. The survey was conducted by Heinrich Riebesehl.
- 5 Cf. Florian Ebner, Felix Hoffmann, Inka Schube and Thomas Weski, eds., *Werkstatt für Photographie 1976–1986* (Cologne, 2016), published on the occasion of the three-part exhibition project *Werkstatt für Photographie 1976–1986: Das rebellische Bild*, Museum Folkwang, Essen; *Kreuzberg – Amerika*, C/O Berlin; *Und plötzlich diese Weite*, Sprengel Museum Hannover.
- 6 *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, with photographs by Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Shore and Henry Wessel Jr., curated by William Jenkins, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, 1975.
- 7 Cf. *Toward a Social Landscape*, with photographs by Danny Lyon, Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand, curated by Nathan Lyons, International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, 1966.
- 8 Leslie Katz, 'Interview with Walker Evans', *Art in America* (March/April 1971), reprinted in Walker Evans, *Incognito* (New York, 1995), p. 18.
- 9 "Photography is a bastardized form of art," Michael Schmidt interviewed by Dietmar Elger', in Michael Schmidt, *Irgendwo* (Cologne, 2005), p. 131.
- 10 Michael Schmidt, 'Thoughts about my way of working', *Camera*, no. 3 (March 1979), p. 4.
- 11 Klaus Honnef, 'Es kommt der Autorenfotograf', in *In Deutschland – Aspekte gegenwärtiger Dokumentarfotografie* (Cologne and Bonn, 1979). Held from 23 June to 29 July 1979 in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum Bonn, and curated by Klaus Honnef and Wilhelm Schürmann, the exhibition featured works by Johannes Bönsel, Ulrich Görlich, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Hans-Martin Küsters, Wilmar Koenig, Martin Manz, Hartmut Neubauer, Heinrich Riebesehl, Tata Ronkholz, Thomas Struth, Michael Schmidt and Wilhelm Schürmann.
- 12 Cf. Donna West Brett, 'After the Fact, Late Photography and Unconscious Places – The Void of the City', in idem., *Photography and Place: Seeing and Not Seeing Germany After 1945* (New York, 2016), pp. 88–89.
- 13 Schmidt/Elger 2005 (as in n. 9), p. 129.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Christine Frisinghelli, 'U-ni-ty: On Michael Schmidt's Book Projects', *Camera Austria*, no. 54 (1996), p. 4.
- 16 An extended version was published in Einar Schleaf, *Zigaretten* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998). The corresponding passage matches chapters 1 and 2, pp. 7–50.
- 17 Schmidt/Elger 2005 (as in n. 9), p. 130.
- 18 Michael Schmidt, *89/90*, with the text 'About Schmidt' by Chris Dercon (Cologne, 2010).

- 19 Heinz Liesbrock, 'Re-vision', in Heinz Liesbrock, ed., *Michael Schmidt. Landschaft – Waffenruhe – Selbst – Menschenbilder (Ausschnitte)* (exh. cat. Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1999), p. 139.
- 20 Schmidt/Elger 2005 (as in n. 9), p. 132.
- 21 Thomas Weski, ed., assisted by Stefan Iglhaut, *Siemens Fotoprojekt 1987–1992* (Berlin, 1993).
- 22 The extent to which the open pictorial character can lead to speculation is shown by Michael W. Jennings's erroneous designation of the subject in a Schmidt photograph that is markedly in this cut-out style: whereas Schmidt has photographed the press photograph of an East German FDJ delegation, Jennings claims that they are members of the Commune 1 in West Berlin. Michael W. Jennings, 'Not Fade Away: The Face of German History in Michael Schmidt's *Einheit*', *October* 106 (Fall 2003), p. 148.
- 23 Presented for the first time in 1998, in *Menschenbilder (Ausschnitte)* Schmidt took earlier shots of persons from his archive and starkly cut them in various ways, thus altering their format, character and message. As previously in *Waffenruhe*, occasionally he included the black negative border in his composition. With their attention drawn to the media origin of the image, the viewer now no longer equated the subject with its representation. Cf. Liesbrock 1999 (as in n. 19).
- 24 Schmidt/Elger 2005 (as in n. 9), p. 131.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
- 26 Jennings 2003 (as in n. 22), p. 150.
- 27 For more information, see: [www.archivmichaelschmidt.de](http://www.archivmichaelschmidt.de) (accessed 8 October 2019).
- 28 Letter by Michael Schmidt to Dietrich H. Hoppenstedt, dated 17 October 2004.
- 29 Cf. Joachim Brohm, 'Michael Schmidt: Lebensmittel', *Camera Austria*, no. 118 (2012), pp. 90–91.
- 30 Schmidt/Elger 2005 (as in n. 9), p. 135.

## Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

### Main venue

**Sabatini Building**  
Santa Isabel, 52

**Nouvel Building**  
Ronda de Atocha s/n  
28012 Madrid

Tel: (+34) 91 774 10 00

[www.museoreinasofia.es](http://www.museoreinasofia.es)

### Opening hours

Monday to Saturday  
and public holidays  
from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Sundays  
from 10 a.m. to 2.30 p.m.

Closed on Tuesdays

Exhibition rooms in all venues  
will be cleared 15 minutes  
before closing time

### Images

© Foundation for Photography and  
Media Art with the Michael Schmidt  
Archive, 2021.

NIPO: 828-21-004-4

Education program developed  
with the sponsorship of:

