

Michael Schmidt ranks among the most important of post-war German photographers. In 1996, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York premiered his *EIN-HEIT* [U-NI-TY] series, it was the museum's first solo exhibition of a German photographer in decades. In 2014, shortly before he passed away, Schmidt was the recipient of the prestigious Prix Pictet. His work is represented in national and international collections, and has been featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions.

Schmidt's first photobook, *Berlin-Kreuzberg* (1973), was a quasi-photojournalistic record of Kreuzberg, the district which he had known since his birth, in 1945, and where he had lived his whole life. Not long after Schmidt had set himself up as a freelance photographer, the borough of Kreuzberg commissioned him to produce a photobook documenting the life of the community. Making full use of the artistic license afforded to him, Schmidt produced an empathic, insightful portrait of this traditional, working-class district and its denizens, with images depicting the rhythms of daily life in Kreuzberg. Schmidt then enlarged the photographs in his darkroom in the style of the period; namely, with strong contrasts in order to create an effect that was both realistic and yet abstracted, and distinctly sociocritical. In every photograph in the series, Schmidt takes a stand, determined to make his case, while also aiming to prove that, though self-taught, he was a photographer in full command of his craft.

For photographers accustomed to reacting to anything novel or exotic, nothing presents a greater challenge than to consistently create new images of familiar surroundings. Schmidt remained true to his roots and, as the years progressed, continued to advance his photographic method with each successive project. In his book *Berlin-Wedding* (1979), which was realised in collaboration with the Wedding borough council, there are no longer any apparently spontaneous street shots. The book is divided into two sections: one dedicated to streetscapes, the other to residents of Wedding. The precisely composed architectural studies in the first part frame different types of buildings overlooking an urban landscape punctuated by empty lots. The second section consists of portraits of neighbourhood residents, posed for the camera in carefully arranged groups either in their domestic or workplace surroundings. Both the buildings and the people present themselves directly to the viewer—such is the extent to which the photographer has formally withdrawn from the proceedings.

By this point, Schmidt was using medium- or large-format cameras mounted on a tripod. The ensuing large-format negatives produced prints with detailed, faithful representations of the subject matter, allowing the viewer to engage in a fine-grained reading of objects depicted by means of a gradational palette of grey tones; a palette which, in no longer including either black or white, became an analogy for complex realities. The unremittingly flat tonality of the prints from this phase of Schmidt's career should thus also be read as a sign of artistic defiance and self-assertion.

In 1976, Schmidt founded the Werkstatt für Photographie [Workshop for Photography] at the Volkshochschule, or adult education centre, in Kreuzberg. In this innovative photography course for adults, the primary educational aim was to have participants take 'personal' pictures that related to their own lives and daily routines. Meanwhile, the gallery attached to the workshop presented exhibitions of work by contemporary photographers. The dominant figures here were Americans, whose work had in many cases

never before been shown in Germany, or even in Europe. Their presentations offered course participants a chance to engage with a very particular understanding of documentary work, in which an individual view of reality is conveyed in the form of a photographic document.

Michael Schmidt followed a project-based approach in his practice. He developed idiosyncratic formats for presenting his photographs in exhibitions and in books. While his publications, which are mostly out of print, could best be described as artist's books in the field of photography, his exhibitions consisted of wall installations of grid-like thematic clusters, which were specifically tailored to a given venue's spatial conditions. He began working with this kind of display in 1987, when for an exhibition of his *WAFFENRUHE* [Ceasefire] series he arranged his photographs into diptychs, triptychs, and tableaux, using entire gallery walls as dynamic image fields—a format of presentation which was subsequently adopted by other photographers. Schmidt created similar constellations of pictorial relationships and interactions in his books.

*WAFFENRUHE* demonstrated the evolving conception and use of the medium as a tool for subjective expression—even in the documentary field. In this body of work, with its flash-lit close-ups and starkly contrastive images of urban wasteland, desolate stretches of the Berlin Wall, and disaffected youths, Schmidt formulated a dystopian psychogram of the 'No Future' generation and a divided city cleaved by the Cold War. *WAFFENRUHE* serves as a climax to Schmidt's artistic investigation of his home town. It was the last time he would use Berlin as his subject.

Schmidt, who used to describe himself as a 'cul-de-sac photographer' penetrating ever deeper into his subject matter, probed each project for its specific entry point, building on the basis of earlier series while never repeating himself. He wasn't interested in the idea of a photograph as a singular masterpiece, but in constructing layered narratives, with each series a component element of his grammar.

In *EIN-HEIT*, Schmidt incorporated re-photographed images into his practice. When *EIN-HEIT* was published, in 1996, only seven years after German reunification, the series was hailed as visionary and as a cogent pictorial analysis of concrete sociopolitical processes playing out across the country. When it premiered the series, MoMA described it as follows: 'U-NI-TY merges two artistic traditions, treating photography both as a medium for describing personal experience and as a vast, impersonal resource created by the mass media. In its entirety, the exhibition explores the emotional weight of history, the power of ideological symbols, and the relationship of the individual to the body politic'.

Schmidt's last major body of work was *LEBENSMITTEL* [Foodstuffs], for which he travelled Europe in order to photograph the continent's contemporary food supply chain. For this series, he incorporated colour photography for the first time. From the 2000s on, Schmidt also tapped a personal archive spanning nearly half a century, using older images as material for the creation of new works by way of re-editing. His last book, *NATUR*, which he completed shortly before his death, was published posthumously.

The Foundation for Photography and Media Art with the Michael Schmidt Archive is currently collaborating with the Nationalgalerie Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, in Berlin, on a comprehensive Schmidt retrospective, which is scheduled for March 2020.