

Michael Schmidt. *Photographs 1965-2014*



MICHAEL SCHMIDT
Waffenruhe [Ceasefire], Untitled
1985-1987
Gelatine silver print
50 x 40 cm
© Foundation for Photography and Media Art with the Michael Schmidt Archive

DATES:	22 September, 2021 – 28 February, 2022
LOCATION:	Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid). Sabatini Building, 3rd floor.
ORGANIZATION:	Stiftung für Fotografie und Medienkunst mit Archiv Michael Schmidt in collaboration with Museo Reina Sofía
CURATORSHIP:	Thomas Weski
CURATOR'S ASSISTANT:	Laura Bielau
COORDINATION:	Íñigo Gómez
TOURING:	Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (22-08-2020 / 17-01-2021) Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris (11-05-2021 / 29-08-2021) Albertina Museum, Vienna (24-03-2021 / 12-06-2022)

Michael Schmidt. *Photographs 1965-2014* is the first retrospective devoted to the German artist after his death, which will be open to the public for the next five months. The exhibition, German photographer's largest and most comprehensive show in Spain to date, has been organized by the Stiftung für Fotografie und Medienkunst mit Archiv Michael Schmidt in collaboration with Museo Reina Sofía, and includes almost **350 images made in a five-decade career and archive material**.

Michael Schmidt (Berlin, 1945–2014) is one of the most influential German photographers after World War II, an artist who traced the footprints of contemporary society with his camera, interleaving **portraits, landscapes, still-lives and cityscapes**. His work underlines **the importance of urban space, history's weight, female identity and the significance of nature**.



MICHAEL SCHMIDT
Berlin-Kreuzberg. Stadtbilder [Berlin-Kreuzberg. Cityscapes], Untitled
1981-1983
Gelatin silver print
33,6 x 27,8 cm
© Foundation for Photography and Media Art with the Michael Schmidt Archive

Born at the end of the Second World War in East Berlin, Schmidt occupies a unique position in contemporary German photography as a result of his **own descriptive approach to reality**. He discovered an interest in photography when he was working in the West Berlin police force. Though he was to join amateur photography clubs, he was primarily self-taught, working hard to improve his technique. **In the early 1970s he began to teach photography courses in adult training centers**, and in 1976 he founded the Werkstatt für Photographie [Photography Workshop] at the Volkshochschule in Kreuzberg, which was in operation until 1986. Works by contemporary American photographers, which were not previously accessible to the German public, were exhibited there.

In the mid-1970s he took the first photographs around his hometown, directing his gaze to neighborhoods such as **Kreuzberg** (1969-1973) and **Wedding** (1976-1978) to which he would dedicate major series within

his production, focusing on social issues with **a sober style derived from the American documentary tradition**.

The ***Waffenruhe [Ceasefire]*** (1985-1987) book and exhibition project, a visually stunning psychological study of the still divided city that was shown in Berlin for the first time in 1987, brought Schmidt international renown. With ***Ein-heit [U-ni-ty]*** (1996), a group of works examining the German unification process, he shifted his focus away from the world of his native city.

In the 21st century the photographer's careful gaze moved away from the city of Berlin in series such as ***Frauen [Women]*** (1997-1999) and ***Irgendwo [Somewhere]*** (2001–2004), on the German countryside, before veering towards more global concerns in his last project: ***Lebensmittel [Foodstuff]*** (2006–2010), literally, “means for living”, winning him international acclaim and taking him around Europe to photograph the food industry.

This retrospective includes his main series, publications and archival material, and **follows as far as possible Schmidt's own approach in the arrangement and presentation of the works.**

By 1973 he was working as a professional photographer, and he was commissioned by the district office of Kreuzberg to do a book on the neighborhood. It was published that same year, with a second edition being printed almost immediately, and was followed by commissions from other city districts and Berlin's Senate. In 1977, using a strict documentary style, he photographed **the neighborhood of Wedding** and its inhabitants, and a year later made copies in various shades of gray to publish as a series.



MICHAEL SCHMIDT
Berlin-Wedding, Schüler 4. Klasse Grundschule [Fourth-grade pupil, elementary school]
1976-1978
Gelatine silver print
43,4 x 46 cm
© Foundation for Photography and Media Art with the Michael Schmidt Archive

Between 1978 and 1980 he photographed Berlin's

Friedrichstadt neighborhood in the south of the city, which was badly damaged during World War II. These photographs capture the atmosphere of postwar West Berlin, a city scarred by gaps between buildings, brownfield sites, and fire walls. **Dominant motifs include urban wastelands and utility buildings, which he photographed in diffuse light using a large plate camera.** In these works, Schmidt found pictorial compositions that straddle the boundary between documentation and abstraction. His *Berlin nach 45 [Berlin after 1945]* was not published until 2005, twenty-five years after the photographs were taken. With the photo book *Berlin-Kreuzberg. Stadtbilder [Berlin-Kreuzberg. Cityscapes]*, published in 1983, he began turning away from the traditional documentary idiom, experimenting with a more subjective approach.

Unlike the studiously sober photographs of his earlier series, the portrait of the still divided city that Schmidt created in the mid-1970s in **the book and exhibition project *Waffenruhe [Ceasefire]*, with its condensed, fragmentary, strongly contrasting black-and-white photographs, is highly subjective and multifaceted.** For this group of works, the photographer used a more evocative approach to convey the complex and moribund political situation in Berlin. The project, funded with public money as part of the celebrations of Berlin's 750th anniversary, was first shown in the Berlinische Galerie at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in the immediate vicinity of the Wall. When the *Waffenruhe* series was included in a group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, in 1988, it brought Schmidt immediate international notoriety.

In between his major series, Schmidt created work of more modest scope, which afforded him more artistic freedom and enabled him to hone his photographic method and pictorial language. The works that followed *Waffenruhe* are characterized by their **tight framing, shallow depth of field, and formats that were unusually large for the time, focusing increasingly on architecture and portraiture.** Motifs became detached from their urban or personal contexts, functioning as emblems of metropolitan life, history, and society. The series *Architektur [Architecture]* and *Portraits* are distinguished by the presence and materiality of their objects and the immediacy of encounter.

In 1989, Schmidt turned his attention to his native city one last time, recording visual traces of German unification. He found many of his motifs in the former border area of the Wall and the no-man's-land. This work, entitled **89/90**, was not published until 2010. Similarly, the photographs he took around the same time of the rural landscape near his second home in Lower Saxony were not published until much later, when he assembled them in the artist's book *Natur [Nature]* shortly before his death. The book testifies to the importance he attached to landscape during this part of his life.

When Schmidt had a survey exhibition at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, in 2010, **he produced videos of his artist's books**. The realization of these books—including his decisions on design, size, image sequence, and paper as well as supervising the printing—was of equal importance to him as the mounting of exhibitions.



MICHAEL SCHMIDT
Ein-heit / U-ni-ty, Untitled
1989-1994
Gelatine silver print
49.6 x 33.89 cm
© Foundation for Photography and Media Art with the Michael Schmidt Archive

Ein-heit [U-ni-ty], which took shape during reunification, is concerned with history and the universal symbolism of the dominant social systems in Germany since 1933: national socialism, socialism, and democracy. This is the context for the photographer's examination of individuals' essential role in society and the stand they choose to take.

For Schmidt, a published image was an integral part of objective reality. In *U-ni-ty* he employed this approach. His photographs of photographs, accounting for roughly a third of this series, comprise severely cropped and occasionally inverted images together with straightforward renderings of existing photographic material, which he typically combined with his own shots. In so doing, Schmidt reformulates the content of the original photographs for his own purposes, depriving them of their unambiguousness and adding further layers of possible meaning.

Ein-heit, which opened in 1996 at New York's MoMA, was the museum's first monograph exhibition devoted to a German photographer in decades.

After German reunification, Schmidt never photographed Berlin again. Instead, he developed an interest in provincial scenes, as these were in his view both interchangeable and conducive to a sense of identity. After acquiring a caravan, he and his wife set off on tours across Germany—sixteen in all. **He published the resulting images in an artist's book entitled *Irgendwo [Somewhere]* and exhibited the photographs outside Germany's big cities.** The experiences he gained on these trips and his growing interest in eating and drinking, mirroring that of German society, led to a series entitled *Lebensmittel [Foodstuff]*. For this work, Schmidt carried out research in Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, Austria, Italy, and Spain, where he visited different types of food processing plants.

In *Lebensmittel*, Schmidt used color for the first time in his career, in addition to his customary black and white. The pictures are untitled and make no reference to location, making it impossible to pin them down geographically. Schmidt critiques the excesses of an economic system that is notorious for its wastefulness. Today's crises make clear that we have arrived at the limits of agricultural growth. Schmidt's photographs reflect this fact and the loss of confidence in the idea of permanent growth. With *Lebensmittel* Schmidt makes an important contribution to the discussion on what is inarguably one of humanity's most important resources. *Lebensmittel* was awarded the prestigious Prix Pictet only a few days before his death in 2014.



MICHAEL SCHMIDT
Lebensmittel (Foodstuff), Untitled
2006-2010
C-print
56,1 x 81,6 cm
© Foundation for Photography and Media Art with the Michael Schmidt Archive

In the late 1990s, Schmidt embarked on a series of portraits of young men and women. The portraits of women of the younger generation, dressed and undressed, sought “to capture the relationship of the photographed women with their own bodies, examining how socially transmitted norms and ideals affect the notion of individuality”, explains the show's curator. The phenomenon made itself felt in a wide range of spheres, from the choice of outer garments and underwear to the stylization of the body, even the private parts. He reveals “the traces left by this growing imposition of uniformity on physical appearance in the form of posture and bearing, scars and lesions”, as Weski states.

Schmidt interpreted these phenomena as the formative collective experience of an entire generation, as was evident in his exhibitions of the *Frauen [Women]* series. He presented the works as a block or tableau, emphasizing what this age group had in common instead of their individual nuances. A closer inspection reveals that this group of works added another facet to the photographer's preoccupation with the role of the individual in society. In 2000, Schmidt published the *Frauen* series in an eponymous artist's book, and in 2010, at the 6th Berlin Biennale, he showed extracts in the form of full-page ads in a national newspaper and as posters in public spaces

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