

# Not Fade Away: The Face of German History in Michael Schmidt's *Ein-heit*

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*Fotografieren verboten.* Photography forbidden. Is this the coded message that stutters at us in a central image from the photoessay *U-ni-ty* (Ein-heit) by the contemporary Berlin photographer Michael Schmidt?<sup>1</sup> The cropped image of a sign, perhaps a sign that was part of the material culture of the German Democratic Republic, is one of many truncated, only partially recoupable texts in *U-ni-ty*.

Schmidt's is not a household name—neither in his native Berlin, nor in New York, the site of his greatest public successes.<sup>2</sup> He was born in 1945 and trained, following his parents' wishes, as a policeman.<sup>3</sup> As a photographer he is an autodidact. And although there is a sense in which Schmidt's work in the 1960s and 1970s documents a rather steep upward trajectory as he sought not so much a characteristic vision as the appropriate contexts for his images, important features of his work were there from the beginning. Very early in his career he tied his photographic practice to an exploration of the public spaces of Berlin. He has seldom taken pictures elsewhere. "I could also," he said in 1989, "make photos somewhere else; I just wouldn't know why."<sup>4</sup> Schmidt's consistent approach to the dissemination of his work, which is also tied to Berlin, emerged almost immediately. For each of his projects, Schmidt shoots a vast number of images and only then begins to select from these (and from images associated with previous projects), first for exhibition, then for publication in an extended photo-essay. His first two projects, which he called *Ausländische Mitbürgerr* (Foreign Co-citizens) and *Das Alter* (Age) were publicly funded and exhibited in very public spaces, one in a subway station, another in a

1. Michael Schmidt, *Ein-heit* (Zurich: Scalo, 1996). The project appeared simultaneously in German and in English, as *U-ni-ty*. The two volumes differ only in the language of the title and a brief dedication on the verso of the title page. An early version of this essay was presented at Deutsches Haus, New York University; the present version benefited from the questions and comments of Eduardo Cadava, Carol Jacobs, and Avital Rovell.

2. Schmidt has had two single-artist shows at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; his work has been included in a number of other exhibitions at the museum.

3. For a brief biographical sketch, see Ute Eskildsen, introduction to *Michael Schmidt, Fotografien seit 1965*, ed. Michael Schmidt and Ute Eskildsen (Essen, Germany: Museum Folkwang, 1995), pp. 5–15.

4. "Ich könnte auch woanders fotografieren—würde aber nicht warum." Schmidt, quoted in Peter Sager, "Deutschland, ein Bildersturz," *Die Zeit Magazin* 21 (May 17, 1996), p. 14. All translations from the German are my own.

town hall. As the rather sparse documentation of these exhibitions suggests, the images on display were arranged in uneven clusters, or constellations, on the wall rather than in sequences. After the exhibitions closed, he issued the images in book form, reordered as sequences.<sup>5</sup> Schmidt followed these projects with a number of others, all of which were tied to Berlin, publicly funded, and resulted in a photo book. Until the 1980s, these studies could be understood rather conveniently as politically engaged and indeed tendentious documentations of segments and strata of a city that had escaped more conventional representation. If Schmidt came to the attention of critics and historians at all, it was as a tough, committed documentarian.

But in the 1980s and 1990s, a series of remarkable projects began to emerge from Schmidt's studio. What was most striking about them was that each constituted an absolutely new beginning. This is not an empty phrase. The major projects of the last twenty years—*Berlin nach 1945* (Berlin after 1945); *Waffenruhe* (Cease-Fire); and *U-ni-ty*—are linked only by Schmidt's obsessive fidelity to Berlin and by a growing interest in history. As groups of images, they are radically diverse; in fact, each one looks very much as though it had been shot by a different photographer. It is as if Schmidt, at the conclusion of each project, learned to take photographs all over again.

At the outset of each of these later projects, Schmidt seems to have simply begun to shoot—in great quantity and with little preconception as to theme or problem. His practice is as far as one can get from the precepts of high modernist photography, a practice that concentrates on the production of single images readily attributable to their creators and suitable for display, singly, on a museum wall. In the extreme rejection of previsualization and even of preconception, Schmidt is in some ways the heir of Garry Winogrand, who shot hundreds of thousands of rolls of film, discarding all but a tiny fraction of his images, and in fact never developing more than thirty thousand exposures. Yet Schmidt's practice, in its stubborn insistence on an experiential dimension, differs from Winogrand's pure, automatic visuality (evidenced in his famous statement, "I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed"). Rather, Schmidt has said,

I need my images as confirmation of that which I have experienced, and, to be sure, in a different form from that in which I experienced it. I change in the course of everyday life and create, in the form of liberation and the production of harmony, that which has represented itself as failed in the everyday.<sup>6</sup>

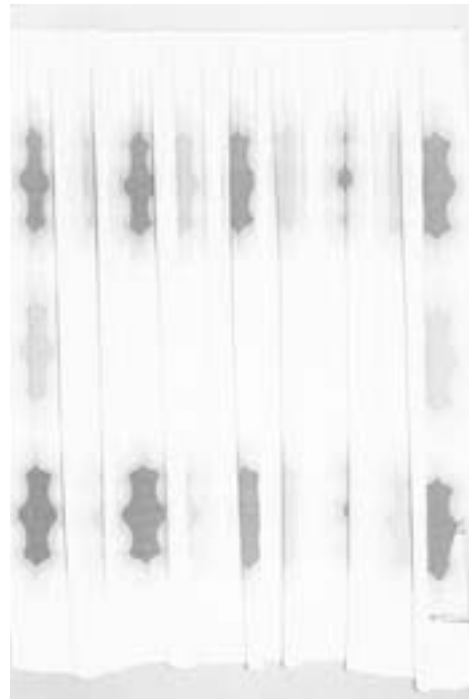
The tactile grip of much of Schmidt's work stems from his desperate desire to derive experience from a photographed reality and, at the same time, document

5. Michael Schmidt, *Berlin Kreuzberg* (Berlin: Bezirksamt Kreuzberg, 1973).

6. "Ich brauche meine Bilder als Bestätigung dessen, was ich erfahren habe, und zwar in einer anderen Form, als ich es erlebte. Ich verändere mich letztendlich über den Alltag und schaffe dann das, was sich im Alltag als gescheitert dargestellt hat, in Form von Befreiung und der Herstellung einer Harmonie." Schmidt, conversation with Christina Busin and Marion Pfiffer, quoted in *Michael Schmidt*, exh. cat. (Bolzano, Italy, 1992); cited in Eskildsen, *Michael Schmidt*, p. 12.

the failures and absences that he finds everywhere reflected in the relations between humans and an environment irreversibly marked by German history.

What historical experience could be derived, though, from the opening images of *U-ni-ty*? As a representation of one of the iconic elements of the material culture of the German Democratic Republic—the *Plattenbau*, any of tens of thousands of buildings made from prefabricated poured concrete elements—the first image certainly seems to ground the project in a time and place. The second image, though, begins to produce a subtle tension within the project's system of reference. This image could of course show only a drab curtain—one with rather evident class markers—at a window in the building depicted in the first image. However, two aspects of the image call attention to themselves. First, its formal qualities: if the first image was carefully composed, with the buildings serving as a kind of theatrical set for the patch of ice and especially the vanishing traces of human life on the sidewalk, this second image is almost slapdash, so nondescript as to suggest an anonymous snapshot. Second, its tonal qualities: if the first image used a restrained palette to capture a particular mood—leadensky, drab gray built environment, sameness, banality—the tonal range in the second image is nearly flat. It is disturbing in its gray banality precisely because it fails to assert itself as *something experienced*. The reality of the referent has bled away; it has become elusive and uncertain. Both the tonality and casualness of the image stand in strong contrast



All images: Michael Schmidt. *U-ni-ty*. 1996.

even to images from a related practice such as that of Robert Frank, for whom black and white were “the vision of hope and despair.” Schmidt’s images, in their resolute, uniform grayness, deny even this opposition. In *U-ni-ty* there is no white; there is very little black, and although Schmidt’s own work makes up only one part of *U-ni-ty*—found and rephotographed images, especially in the first half of the text, carry a disproportionate charge—this image of an anonymous curtain in an anonymous apartment is more subjective and formed than many of the photographs in the volume.

Images such as this, if viewed in isolation, say on a museum wall, would be all but unattributable. The individual images in *U-ni-ty* resolutely refuse the autographical, the individual, or the creative. No single image reveals a personal style or vision; no single image seems to result from a consistent logic, theory, or principle. No single image is memorable. No single image is so specific as to serve as an adequate receptacle for remembered experience. And no single image conveys the importance of the project of which it is a part. This resistance to fixation within the autographical, more than any other feature of Schmidt’s work, has rendered him essentially inaccessible to the history of photography, which is, after all, constructed as a developing line of individual signatures. This contrariness of Schmidt’s is nowhere more evident than in a comparison of his work to that of the dominant school of German photography, the Düsseldorf school of Bernd and Hilla Becher, a school that, as it has developed, has become increasingly—and paradoxically—autographic. The principles that inform the images produced by the Bechers themselves—single images of industrial architecture taken from rigorously reproduced, “objective” viewpoints and arranged taxonomically into grids according to a rigid enlightenment logic—have gradually given way to other concerns in the work of their students such as Thomas Struth and especially Andreas Gursky. Impersonality has yielded to the star marketing of the art market, rigor to effect. If the Bechers’ work tends to dissolve the local and historical specificity of its referent into a carefully constructed abstract matrix, Schmidt manages in *U-ni-ty* to retain a subjective investment in a lived experience ineluctably shot through with German history while denying the force of individual creation in his work. He does so not to deny complicity in the ideological processes he depicts, but rather to represent the effects of that complicity in the very mode of representation.

Schmidt’s later projects seem never to begin with an idea or intention. A logic, though never a theory, emerges only as images accumulate, are selected, and begin to speak to one another. The result is an additive search for ever new image worlds, or in Walter Benjamin’s term, image necessities.<sup>7</sup> These groupings lend meaning to images that, in their isolation—like the window curtains—resist signification. Schmidt’s recombinatory logic discovers new potentials, not merely in the images shot in the course of the project, but in older images that have “come loose” from

7. Benjamin’s term is “Bildnotwendigkeiten”; see “News about Flowers” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume Two: 1926–1934*, trans. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 156.

their former contexts. Schmidt has said that his “sensations arise in contexts,” implying that meaningful sensation occurs not in direct interaction with a lived environment, but only in contexts first *created* by groups of photographs.<sup>8</sup> The context, or constellation of images, which produced Schmidt’s international breakthrough was the project he called *Waffenruhe* (Cease-Fire).<sup>9</sup> Although Schmidt was born in what was then East Berlin; although his father and brother had spent time in the notorious political prison at Bauzen in the German Democratic Republic; and although his family had come “across” before the building of the wall, Schmidt had until *Waffenruhe* avoided representation of the wall with a certain ostentation. The belated emergence of this proscribed subject invests *Cease-Fire* with a remarkable subjective power. The images themselves (of the wall itself, of the areas scarred by its presence, of young people whose lives were truncated by it) are saturated and contrast in a way that sets them apart from anything Schmidt had done before or has done since. The palette speaks specifically to the depth of the human experience of the wall and its effects. The series also inaugurates a practice that is central to *U-ni-ty*: the combination of portraiture with images of the detritus of a history in order to show how historical events and processes are inscribed on the human face. Schmidt could thus say of the project that it represented “the endpoint of photography from my point of view—*Cease-Fire* was, subjectively, the longing for my own image world and beyond that the defense of the individual.”<sup>10</sup> This is in some ways a puzzling and contradictory assertion in that other projects have followed *Waffenruhe*. As *U-ni-ty* reveals, however, *Waffenruhe* was not so much an endpoint of Schmidt’s photography itself as an endpoint of the personal, subjectively saturated images that went into the project. *U-ni-ty* starts over once again, with the very notion of a represented subjectivity called radically into question.

At this point the name that has haunted my presentation of Schmidt’s work needs to be spoken. If Schmidt’s practice is little like that of other photographers, it is in some essential respects very like that of the greatest German artist of the second half of the twentieth century, Gerhard Richter. Like Richter, Schmidt seems to be a different artist every time he gets out of bed in the morning; like Richter, the rejection of everything once tried and the tireless search for new modes of representation has consistently distorted and even prevented a widespread reception.<sup>11</sup> “I have become involved with thinking and acting without the help of an ideology,” Richter has said. “I have nothing that helps me, no idea that I serve and am known for . . . no rules that regulate the how, no belief that gives me direction, no picture of

8. “Ich empfinde in Zusammenhängen.” Schmidt, conversation with Busin and Piffner, cited in Heinz Liesbrock, “Re-vision” in Michael Schmidt, *Landschaften. Waffenruhe. Selbst. Menschenbilder (Ausschnitte)* (Münster, Germany: Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1999), p. 133.

9. Michael Schmidt and Einar Schleef, *Waffenruhe* (Berlin: Verlag Dirk Nishen, 1987).

10. “Endpunkt von Fotografie aus meiner Sicht—*Waffenruhe* war subjektiv die Sehnsucht nach meiner eigenen Bildwelt und darüber hinaus die Verteidigung des Individuums.” Schmidt, conversation with Ute Eskildsen, cited in Eskildsen, *Michael Schmidt*, p. 13.

11. The first draft of these remarks predates, perhaps all too obviously, the triumphal 2002 Gerhard Richter show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

the future, no instruction that produces an overly ordered mind. I acknowledge only what is and, accordingly, regard every description and configuration of that which we don't know as madness. Ideologies seduce and exploit uncertainty, legitimize war."<sup>12</sup> Richter's practice, in its range of historical reference, is of course more circumscribed than is Schmidt's practice: *Uncle Rudi's* Nazi uniform and dive-bombers have gradually given way to the gestures of the grand master, blurred images of terrorists to intimate scenes with an all-too-human warmth. Schmidt's acknowledgment—and critique—occurs late in *U-ni-ty*: an early Richter photo-based painting of a young woman in a pornographic pose is itself rephotographed and pixelated almost past the point of recognition.

If we look now at the first major sequence in the essay, several distinctive features of the project emerge. Like the most influential photo-essays of the twentieth century—August Sander's *Face of Our Time*, Walker Evans's *American Photographs*, and Robert Frank's *Americans*—Schmidt's *U-ni-ty*, for the most part, formatted with one

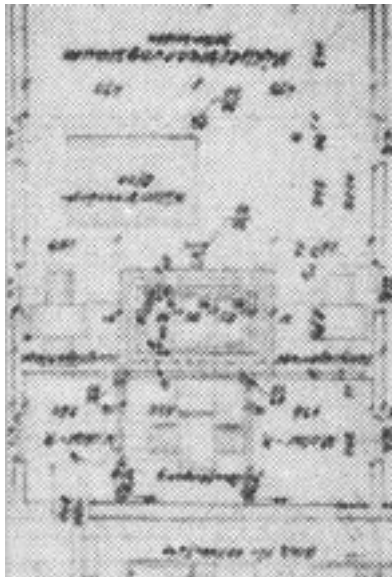


image per spread so that each image faces a blank page. The images of the *Plattenbau* and the window are followed by an image that is captivating in its undecidability: it may be a circuit board, or an engineering diagram, or even a blueprint of an apartment block. But it might also be a gauze curtain through which we look onto the row of houses across the street. Whatever it represents, the manner in which it represents it is rather clear: the image has been rephotographed and then posterized, producing an intrusive level of pixelation. Much of the image's illegibil-

12. Richter, quoted in I. Michael Danoff, "Heterogeneity," in *Gerhard Richter Paintings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 9–10.

ity stems precisely, then, from deliberate choices regarding its mode of representation. But the illegibility works in another register as well. This image launches a constellation of images, a persistent thematic concern in Schmidt's book with portals of perception: windows, doors, views from between slats and plates, views through partially occluding surfaces, to say nothing of the quiet virtuosity with which he assembles the multiple gazes of his sitters. Schmidt's essay is at heart an experimental investigation into the visual models available to him, and to us, for encoding and potentially decoding an ideologically charged world.<sup>13</sup> Although they have a clearly referential, documentary function, these images are primarily unstable explorations of discrete perceptual models, a point borne out by the restless search for new image constellations from project to project. Yet the illegibility of this image and many others like it, its casualness, lack of tonal range, and somewhat blurred focus point to a deep suspicion regarding the adequacy of all such models. The constantly changing modeling techniques that Schmidt develops from project to project



and the abandonment of each mode as it serves its purpose raise questions not merely as to the adequacy of these models—of all such models—but as to the authenticity of the vision that produces such constellations. Schmidt's suspicion of the category of the creative is coupled, then, with the conviction that all models available to him are ultimately produced and contaminated by very specific image regimes that arise from the intertwining of the ideologies that shaped German history in the twentieth century.

13. See also the discussion of Richter's use of similar strategies in Danoff, "Heterogeneity," pp. 9–10.



Within this opening sequence, the pixelated image is followed by a rephotographed image of a German, presumably from the 1950s but of indeterminate nationality. This is followed by a found image of a piece of tapestry or embroidery that speaks of Romanticism and *Heimat*; a rephotographed image of soldiers of the German Democratic Republic as they pass review; a casually rephotographed image of a statue of the Communist party leader Ernst Thälmann; a kind of folk montage, presumably also found, of an adolescent in East Germany in 1955; and a murky, out-of-focus beachscape with a radically condensed tonal range. This complex sequence calls up a number of themes and issues. It brackets questions of historical, causal, and relational understanding such as that posed by the juxtaposition of the Communist leader Thälmann and East German soldiers. It combines self-reflexive meditation on the photographic medium and certain models of perception with an acid view of innocence, subjectivity, and the state (the young boy in the “folk montage” is shown with the letter he has written to the Stasi, the state security apparatus, betraying his parents). It asks how a German self-representation of a particular cultural heritage is inscribed ideologically and visually. This heritage is of course ironized—the renaissance troubadour/artist survives in rephotographed kitsch, the beachscape offers a bleak comment on the current state of the aesthetic absolute once evoked in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich—but it, too, is shown to flow on through the sequence and to its endpoint. The sequence closes with a remarkable double portrait, two images of one woman printed back to back, breaking the sequence of alternating blank and printed pages. The woman represented here serves as the endpoint and repository of the effects of the first



sequence. That we see her twice, flipped and from a slightly different angle, suggests not just photography's necessarily perspectival, time-bound nature, but in fact an ironization of the "reality effect" from which we cannot escape when viewing photographs—an ironization not unlike that effected by Manuel Alvarez Bravo's *Optical Parable*. The doubleness of the image, together with its presence as a disruption of a dominant pattern, subtly figures the fissures, confections, and especially repetitions in the historical field within which the identity of the individual German arises. And the doubleness of this apparently self-identical portrait repeats one more thing: the hyphens in Schmidt's titles that break and call into question the wholeness of the words "Einheit" and "unity."

If the first sequence combined self-reflexive meditation on the potentials and dysfunctions of photographic representation with an introduction to the inimitable German intermingling of a high-cultural longing for the absolute and everyday politics, the second sequence introduces more prominently the highly specific system of historical reference that will come to dominate *U-ni-ty*. Here, Boris Eichmann, perhaps in Jerusalem, is juxtaposed to Ludwig Erhardt, the minister of economics and later federal chancellor who is often credited with the great West German postwar economic boom. Like the first sequence, the end of the second is marked by a double portrait, with images placed back to back; rather than a human visage, however, the doubled image is of a tablet bearing the third stanza of the German national anthem, that most historically ambiguous of all such songs. Like the double portrait of the woman, the second image is "reversed," its verso legible only to those who read history backwards. This tablet is significant, in that it marks an extension of the notion of doubling from the human face to the face of history:



the lyrics, written by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben in 1841, served as the national hymn of the Weimar Republic, while this third stanza was adopted as the anthem of the Federal Republic. The coded repetition of this kind of slippage through doubling will become a constitutive feature of *Uni-ty*, a feature that culminates in the double portrait—on a single page—that introduces a crucial sequence at the exact center of the book: a portrait of Friedrich Ebert, an East German official who bore the same name as his father, the first chancellor of the Weimar Republic. In Schmidt's essay, history indeed breaks down into images, and not into stories, into images that capture a historical and ideological differentiation that is, at the same time, a sameness that breaks, disfigures, and alienates.

This riddling doubleness is caught in an image at the heart of the second sequence, an image that rhymes, in its undecidability, with the window of the first section. The image clearly depicts what Siegfried Kracauer so memorably describes as a mass ornament—row upon row of young women, identically clad in white leotards, performing rhythmic gymnastics in unison—but the historical and thus ideological context is blurred: does the image depict an event in the Third Reich, the German Democratic Republic, or the reunification Federal Republic? These images, the doubled portrait of the text that concludes the section and the undecidable image of the mass ornament at its center, produce a tension that in many ways defines Schmidt's project. The tablet text, whose legibility is immediately called into question by its reversed image, is consistent with Schmidt's general and pervasive treatment of textuality in his project. As the tablet here as well as the truncated text, photography forbidden, with which I began suggest Schmidt is fascinated with public semiosis: tablets, typefaces, labels, and inscriptions on monuments. Like Walker Evans, who in *American Photographs* depicted an America whose public buildings and private homes were literally invaded by capitalist textual practices, Schmidt captures the contradiction between the pervasiveness of inscription and its progress toward a total inscrutability, as competing ideologies erode, truncate, and cover over public forms of writing. History as broken inscription: Benjamin has already shown us this effect. "When in the *Trauerspiel* history wanders onto the scene, it does so as script. On nature's visage, 'history' stands written in the sign-script of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of natural history, placed on the stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is really present as a ruin. In the ruin, history has withdrawn—tangibly—into the stage set. And in this form, history does not unfold as a process of eternal life, but as the course of unstoppable decline."<sup>14</sup> At odds with this insistence on a haptic textuality (in however mutilated a form) is the shocking captionlessness of *Uni-ty* itself. Each image stands alone, unaccompanied by any caption or explanatory text whatsoever—and that in a photo-essay pervaded by images of humans, the key to whose identity is recoupable only within a highly specific system of historical and political reference.

14. Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), p. 353.



My own rewriting of the text thus obscures its most prominent feature: its difficulty and even obscurity. Historical reference is omnipresent, the referent too often tantalizingly elusive. Is that Bertolt Brecht with half of his face obscured? Is that yet another statue of Thälmann? Exactly how obscure is that politician? To precisely which resistance group do those anonymous youths belong? This absence of all forms of textuality *outside the images* stages a scene of reading that is at once purely visual, yet directly related to the hidden, distorted text of German history.

The sequences that follow become gradually more complex. Although they contain multiple images with clear historical referents—section three commences with what may be a drawing of Gudrun Ensslin, a member of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group; while

section four includes images of members of the communist youth corps Freie Deutsche Jugend, of a pile of shoes, presumably in a concentration camp, and of soldiers in the Federal Republic—the third and fourth sequences are dominated by portraits of anonymous youths and young adults, some clearly from the Democratic Republic, some contemporary, all of their faces subtly marked, in their dislocation and alienation, with signs of German history. The effect of this intermingling of the historical and the contemporary is startling: Thälmann and an anonymous woman meet across a turned page, as do Nazis and punks, SED bosses and bookkeepers, big cats of the *Wirtschaftswunder* and plump, confused young soccer fans.<sup>15</sup> The images of the young people body forth a deep empathy with the historical and ideological situatedness of these anonymous Germans who people Schmidt's project. The ongoing inclusion of truncated and occluded texts takes on a new meaning in this context: Schmidt's cropping techniques, which challenge the viewer to reconstruct fragmented or obscured meaning, function as an analogy to the implied reading process through which the young people in the sequence must attempt to find meaning in their own image worlds. These images thus have no discernible politics: it remains constantly unclear which ideological system produces

15. The SED, or Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party), was the ruling party in the German Democratic Republic; it was formed in 1946 through a merger of the eastern Social Democrats and Communists.

which shards, which anomalies, which dysfunctions in *U-ni-ty*. As Heinz Liesbrock has pointed out, Schmidt absolutely refuses to dissolve historical experience in its individual, tactile moment into the larger, hegemonic trajectories of history, ideology, or politics.<sup>16</sup> Cause and effect remain uncertain but omnipresent.

As the cross talk between sequences increases in volume and complexity, the multipartite images that close each section change accordingly. In the third section, the final portrait is now no longer doubled, but quadrupled. The four images of a young woman interchange portraits from minimally differing perspectives with abrupt, disorienting blowups of individual aspects of her face. The visual effect is perhaps less cinematic than cubistic; thematically, these portraits mark the point at which the doubling, fissuring, and dismemberment to which the human face is subjected reaches its greatest intensity. The fourth section's concluding double portrait rhymes not with the multipartite images of anonymous Germans, but with the historical conflation evident in the portrait of the national anthem. Like that image, the double portrait here is cruel but just. The young Konrad Adenauer, mayor of Cologne, soon to be chancellor of the Federal Republic, looks out at us; the turned page and its by-now-familiar perspectival shift reveals Adenauer's



semblable, his *frère*, the equally young Walter Ulbricht, member of the Politburo of the German Communist Party in exile, soon to be secretary general of the SED and the ruler of East Germany. It is in the conclusion to the fifth section, however, that *U-ni-ty* reveals the deepest cruelty of a history such as Germany's, the cruelty of a hope crushed definitively. The first half of the double image may well show members of Commune 1 in Berlin in 1967. These young people, whose politics were guided by a Situationist understanding of event and attitude, were an important motor of the social changes that threatened to sweep Germany in the run-up to 1968. The turned page, the second half of the concluding images, takes back any glimmer of

16. Liesbrock, "Re-vision," p. 131.



hope: the body of a young student, Benno Ohnesorg, lies beneath a policeman's truncheon. Ohnesorg had been shot in the back by a policeman as the state dispersed a democratic protest against a visit by the Shah of Iran to Germany on June 2, 1967, the date that gave its name to the first underground resistance cell as democratic resistance gave way to the terror, kidnapping, and assassination of the 1970s.

After Ohnesorg, a set of gruesomely tendentious sequences announces the conclusion of *U-ni-ty's* first half. Stills from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934); doubled party rallies (one fascist, presumably at Nuremberg, one presumably from the Democratic Republic); and rephotographed images of plans for concentration camps, of ovens, and of the victims of medical experimentation give way without any mediation to the book's second half, which is as different from the first half as are the two sections of Evans's *American Photographs*. Much of *U-ni-ty's* second half is given over to a depiction of the details of architecture and material culture of the west and the former east: Ikea lamps, imitation wood veneers, artificial house plants, shoddy light fixtures, and defaced vending machines. This built environment and its accoutrements—anticipated in the first three images of the book but then allowed to wait in the wings—form the stage set, as it were, for the muted historical drama of the book's first half. These obsessively reduced cityscapes are punctuated only intermittently by rephotographed historical and ideological material.





If the traces of that history and its ideological formations are most evident in Schmidt's faces, the built environment nonetheless functions as a kind of photographic emulsion: the murky traces of history reside in its textures and materials, waiting only for exposure to the light of the camera, to the light of criticism.

On the book's final pages a long series of portraits run toward a decidedly unemphatic endpoint, a simple portrait of a teenage girl. These portraits still include many youthful faces, but an aging society shows itself in increasing numbers of middle-aged sitters. Schmidt's subjects look anywhere but at the camera: the frontality of a Sander or a Thomas Ruff would suggest a complicity alien to *U-ni-ty*. Blank stares search for something we certainly do not see, and which the subject might not find. Like much of the project,

these portraits are at once remarkable for their impersonality and anonymity *and* deeply expressive of the individuality of the sitter and the experience at which the face can only hint. *U-ni-ty* is in this sense 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*. Like Sander's project, it avoids not just the pathos of subjectivity, but especially the collective violence done to the historical specificity of individual experience by the dominant analytical models of the century, models such as the social psychology of the Alexander Mitscherlich or the neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School. In *U-ni-ty*, history is never merely a general referent, never a totalizing structure: it is the very form of the images.