

English Supplement

Bei Durchreise Ankunft

Arriving while passing through

Project titles: approximate translations

Monika Behringer	Homeland	Christian Schlicht	Training of the upright way
Aki Güldner	Conglomeration of K and C	Carola Thielecke	Kaleidoskop
Leslie Kuo	Large-scale life: Karl-Marx-Allee	Costas Voulgaris	DisOrientation
Lothar Meyer	Night fragments	Kristina Wedemeyer	The other gnaws away the reality
Tassilo Ott	Childhood		

Foreword

In the mid 80s, when I transferred to a university in Berlin, everyone who had been here for awhile told me that I would either leave at the end of the year, or stay for a very long time. Berlin in the post-War, pre-Reunification era was the Sleeping Beauty of cities. In the following months, it irreversibly changed my life. I met the people who I had spent years searching for in vain: people who experimented, pushed the limits, and, under what others might call primitive circumstances, constantly reinvented their lives and the culture of the city. At the same time, the West Berlin of that decade was also tranquil, in a way, familial – the big city, yet anything but a metropolis.

West Berlin, only associated with, and not officially part of, West Germany – a demilitarized zone, according to the Four Power Agreement – issued its own ID cards to its citizens, marked with words like “temporary” and “provisional.” The city itself had been stuck in a similarly provisional status since the end of World War II. The big businessmen had fled the city and retreated to their western provinces. Abandoned architecture and rubble-strewn lots offered space for a wild range of subcultures. As for

the Wall, people were more or less used to it – at any rate, the people who had come to West Berlin from West Germany after its appearance, and didn't have relatives on the eastern side. When American photographer John Gossage came to Berlin for the first time in 1982, to give a workshop for Photography at the Volkshochschule Kreuzberg, he was struck that no Berlin photographers had seriously engaged with the Wall in their work.¹ His book “Berlin in the Time of the Wall” was published in 2004.

Later, I was often told, “In Berlin, you can experiment, develop your style – when you're ready for success, go to Hamburg or Cologne.” I stayed in Berlin. Berlin was, and remains, myriad things. The possibilities are constantly changing, like the architecture and the people who choose to live here. Berlin can be something different for each of them: metropolis, frontier, hometown, stepping stone, habitat, possibility.

Seventeen years after the fall of the Wall, I wanted to work with the participants in the project course “Berlin” to investigate the

1. „Berlin in the Time of the Wall”. Photographs by John Gossage. Bethesda, 2004, p. 23.

very personal ties that connect each of them with the city. Berlin, ever transforming in a manner that has been called Babylonian,² is open to many interpretations: social, historic, architectonic, or personal – Berlin as a time and space for inner evolution.

The project began in fall 2006 with research. Together we investigated theoretical and established photographic positions. Around the new year 2006/2007, the course participants developed concepts for their own photographic projects, which they have realized in the past year. The majority of the projects clearly diverge from the canon of classic documentary photography, emphasizing analytical, subjective or biographical moments. However, they all fit under a definition of artistic documentary photography described by Reinhard Matz: “The meaning of a photograph is never exhausted in the analogous coupling to a given reality; but, in the degree that photography is pursued and understood as an artistic practice, it is positioned at odds to documentary demands – more precisely stated, what makes photography an artistic product is nothing other than the differential relationship to the given reality, the degree of differentiation, concentration, construction and constitution of meaning, the consistency of the formulation of the only thing a photograph can ever be: a specific way of seeing reality.”³

² “Berlin Babylon,” an essay on film by Hubertus Siegert, 1996-2000

³ Translated from a German text by Reihard Matz 1981: “Gegen einen naiven Begriff der Dokumentar fotografie”, cited from <http://www.matzfotografie.de> rev. 17122007

Monika Behringer, born in Berlin shortly after the end of World War II, connects Berlin with the idea of “homeland” and searches for places and internal images that, to her, mean home. In four groups of four pictures each, of which the exhibited pictures are just a small selection, she takes us to places where the urban is not to be discerned, places where the connection between internal and external become strong: woods, water, sky, and one’s own living space. For her, she writes, home means “to belong” and as the years have gone by, she finds that this feeling is no longer exclusive to Berlin: “Everywhere I go, I take these deeply anchored feeling of freedom with me. And everywhere I go, moments await my openness.”

Twenty-four years younger and also born in Berlin, **Aki Güldner** belongs to the generation who experienced with particular intensity the transformation of Berlin after the fall of the Wall as a *Freiraum* for subcultural projects. *Freiraum* means open space in the physical sense, but also in the social and mental sense – freedom, room for a multiplicity of ideas and values. In 1990, there was more than enough *Freiraum*: ownership and responsibility that had yet to be clarified, plus a government whose executive could only slowly adapt to the new conditions, resulted in a vacuum of power which allowed young and flexible creative people with little capital to realize their dream of a club and party culture. The hunger for life was great and

before slower-moving investors and city planners could react and reclaim even a part of this space, Berlin had become the hot travel destination for music- and party-lovers worldwide. Clubs, often operating on the edge of legality, created their own culture involving the rapid design of spaces and means of communications. The name of a club or event was no longer necessarily connected to a place, as it was for the clubs in old West Berlin; parties traveled nomadically through the city until some became successful enough to buy real estate and become sedentary; others disappeared. This movement continues in 2007. In his pictures, Aki Güldner detects the intensity of this living counterculture that, in the face of gentrification, remains in motion.

The boulevard was first called Große Frankfurter Straße and was renamed Stalinallee on December 21, 1949, then Karl-Marx-Allee on November 13, 1961. It leads from Alexanderplatz over Strausberger Platz up to Frankfurter Tor, where it continues as Frankfurter Allee. The residential buildings, which stretch from Strausberger Platz past Frankfurter Tor into Frankfurter Allee, were conceived as "Workers' palaces" and were supposed to function as a prestigious representation the strength and engineering skills of the GDR. The monumental width of the street was explicitly not just intended for city traffic; rather, it was supposed to speak to Berlin's status at the capital city and also

be used for processions and parades. This Boulevard of Pomp runs straight as an arrow for kilometers, bordered with residential blocks of imposing dimension, up to thirteen blocks high.⁴

Leslie Kuo, an American, moved to Friedrichshain in 2006 and was immediately fascinated by the contradictions of this street: the facades in the high-flown style of Berliner classicism decorate simple living quarters. The uneven quality of the construction means that today, "what's behind the facade" is quite clear to see. Now that ideology has retreated from this street, retired citizens of the former GDR live at close quarters with young immigrants. The rows of storefronts are populated both by pre-Reunification restaurants and cafes and by outlets of large grocery and drugstore chains. Business is not good for everyone and, in comparison to Prenzlauer Berg, the process of renewal is not yet in full swing. Leslie Kuo shows the area around Karl-Marx-Allee as a habitat full of calm, a place in which people of the varied interests and ways of living have found a home. The street itself – today a major artery and route out of the city – is only seen at the edge.

In his "Night fragments," Lothar Meyer shows pictures of the city that he recorded during walks in the winter months. The common image of Berlin – in recent years, hectic and constantly

⁴ Translated from the German from <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl-Marx-Allee> rev.17122007

in transition – appears enigmatic and silent in his pictures, illuminated by streetlamps and the lights in storefront windows. Observing the pictures, you can exhale, absorb some of the peaceful coolness, look around you, see clearly and recharge for the next day. Alone, at last, alone. Still, at last, still. And see, at last, see.

Tassilo Ott's work investigates childhood. Having grown up in a small town, he directed his attention to playing children in Berlin. How is childhood in Berlin different than in a sheltered, well-to-do environment? And what can we even know of the inner world of a child's experience? What is real and how can one navigate between the clichés about childhood generated by adults, whether positive – innocence, potential for development, free and playful activity – or negative – poverty, abuse and violence. In the course of his work, Tassilo Ott realized that the depictions of what he saw were quickly entangled with these clichés, becoming useless. He chose to show only three of these direct pictures in the exhibition: three that are strong because they refrain from value judgements and refuse easy identification with well-known images of childhood. In a second body of work, Tassilo Ott pursued a subjective viewpoint: memories of his own childhood and projections, which he became increasingly aware of in the process of his work, were condensed in a series of shots of

places and things, some close up and some taking in more, that, empathetically observed, suggest being alone, the strange in the known, but also beauty and quiet happiness.

“Training des aufrechten Gangs” (Training of the upright way) is the title of **Christian Schlicht's** series. With a 35mm camera and no tripod, he took a look behind the S-Bahn ring (the rail line encircling Berlin's center) into residential areas that look no different than housing areas in much smaller cities. Yet the bourgeois “home sweet homes,” architectonic stereotypes with a simple vocabulary, are not the main focus.

Schlicht's ordered observation yields comparisons and also creates room for delighting in small variations, the tiniest signs of individuality. Thus the “upright way” can be understood in more than one way: as the physical posture of the photographer before his subject – necessary to control the lines in the picture without additional tools or retouching, metaphorically as a position in the face of a strongly normalizing environment, a position that may well be part of growing up in such a social environment (the artist was raised in a similar residential area). “Upright way” can also mean being ready to show yourself, to signal interest, in a place where walls, fences, hedges and curtains want to prevent looking in, where the personal has no place on the street. Or we can understand it as Christian Schlicht's approach to life, as he

writes: "To hold oneself upright means to me to open yourself, to be receptive for what is around you, and not to exist only in your thoughts."

The work "Kaleidoskop" expresses **Carola Thielecke's** fascination with Berlin's diversity and capacity for transformation. As the mirrored toy creates new pictures with every turn, the artist finds new constellations with every journey through the city: sometimes magical, sometimes alienating but always new and always different. Can you ever fully know Berlin? Just stray a few meters from your daily path and you'll think you're seeing a completely different city. Patterns remind you of something familiar, as if by walking around a corner you've landed in a Disneyland of German cities. Who lives here, anyway – and is this still Berlin? Carola Thielecke orients herself on what she knows, pictures of places with which she's had the most contact, whether they are places reminiscent of where she comes from or just places where she feels particularly comfortable. To do justice to the diversity of impressions, she has made tableaus on different aspects of the city, three of which can be seen in the exhibition.

Costas Voulgaris calls his work "DisOrientierung" (Disorientation) a "walking project." It describes the feelings of this young immigrant in Berlin and, at the same time, observes the street as a stage for an intriguing play of people in time and space.

The work was inspired by an orientation course, a required part of the government-financed immigration program in which he participated. When one is speechless in a new social environment, meanings are not understood but guessed at and newly constructed. But who says that those who have the power of language are better oriented, that they really know what they are doing, where they are going? How do we know that the protagonists are not proceeding on their way only because they've always done so and questions and contact are no longer part of their survival plan?

Costas Voulgaris shows the people of this city frozen at a particular place, at a particular time. On pause – seemingly. And we can ask ourselves how, and whether, the story continues or if some kind of unexpected event will lead to an interruption. "DisOrientierung" is the practical implementation of a question: how are sense and meaning constructed in a complex urban social environment?

"When I talk about my dreams, I tend to use expressions like 'Head cinema' and 'stage in my head,'" writes **Kristina Wedemeyer** about her work "Das Andere zernagt die Realität" (The other gnaws away the reality). In 2002, upon finishing high school, she moved to Berlin. In 2007, with the help of friends, she re-staged five dreams from her first year here. Each dream plays out in five

pictures. Cryptic and lacking in a logical progression of plot, as dreams tend to be, they refer to another aspect of reality. Not a city in bricks and mortar and real relationships, but the other side, the images experienced at night that can continue to affect daily life long after. In the heat of the summer of 2003, Kristina Wedemeyer experienced the city as particularly vulnerable, sick and frail. And even when Berlin is not directly portrayed, the work reflects themes and connects to places that were important to the artist at that time. As for a theater or film production, Wedemeyer wrote a storyboard. Short texts are provided with the pictures. The material employed, Polaroid and typewriter, emphasize singularity and authenticity. Image and text emboss themselves in a layer made even more fragile by removing the photo edges. In contrast to the copy-and-paste identity of Myspace and Co., the staged dreams of Kristina Wedemeyer remain personal to the end, eluding comparison and co-opting. In the era of Web 2.0, that is their strength.

I would like to thank everyone who was involved in the realization of this exhibition. First of all the participants of the course, who each invested financially and from their time in developing and realizing their contributions to the show. Heartfelt thanks also go to the Volkshochschule Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg; its director, Mr. Bernd O. Hölter, for supporting this unique teaching model; the head of the art department, Mr. Peter Held, for his continuing

support and taking care of many organizational details for us; and the team at the school's building on Wassertorstraße who tolerated the unusual working hours of "those photographers again..." For the fact that the exhibition could be shown at all, the credit goes to the projektraum alte feuerwache and its director, Ms. Kerstin Ottersberg. Without her support and her commitment to the project, none of this would have been possible.

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Thomas Michalak