

THE WORLD ATLAS OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

BERLIN

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To create a “symphonic film out of the millions of energies that comprise the life of a big city“ was the main objective of director Walter Ruttmann when he made his experimental documentary film “Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Großstadt” (“Berlin. Symphony of a Metropolis“) in 1927. Recording the life and rhythm of a late spring day in Berlin Ruttmann managed to capture the atmosphere of the Golden Twenties, when Berlin was the cultural centre of Europe. Among the bohemian world of international artists and intellectuals was the young German photographer Otto Umbeh, better known as Umbo (1902-1980), who produced several photomontages for Ruttmann’s film. After being expelled for dawdling from the Weimar Bauhaus, where he studied between 1921 and 1923, Umbo moved to Berlin and was soon celebrated as the originator of a new photographic aesthetic for his visionary portraits of the bohemians. As a “flaneur” and at times unemployed vagabond, he captured his poetic impressions of the metropolis, as well as the leisure activities of the city dwellers, and was one of the first photographers to systematically picture Berlin at night. His “Spielhof eines Kindergartens” from 1928 paradigmatically shows how the dynamic of the “New Vision” comes to a rest in his images. Between the austerity of the “New Objectivity” and the radical disassociation of Constructivism Umbo found his very own language and focused on the miracle and mystery of everyday life.

Besides the bright tones of the twenties, however, the Berlin symphony is also shaped by rather gloomy periods. Economic crises and two World Wars, as well as times of upswing and reconstruction were captured by numerous photographers, who walked the city streets and documented history while it happened. Early photo chroniclers of the late 19th century such as Leopold Ahrendts (1825-1870) and F. Albert Schwarz (1836-1906) were followed by photographers like Heinrich Zille (1858-1929) who recorded the old Berlin in often out of focus but atmospheric amateur photos of backyards, distilleries and socially deprived areas, which were the basis for his famous graphics and drawings.

The upheavals of the time, from the German Empire to the Weimar Republic, were documented extensively by Willy Römer (1887-1979), who photographed the changing cityscape mainly between 1905 and 1935. As somebody who knew and had experienced the long established as well

as the newly build, Römer created an unparalleled insider portrait of his hometown. With one of his long-term projects, “Children on The Streets”, he showed how streets were a lively, multifunctional and communicative living space at the turn of the century, not only for the city children: With apartments small and overcrowded, the street was the place to play, trade and have social interactions.

The playful and carefree moments of public life in the metropolis also attracted Friedrich Seidenstücker (1882-1966). Every day he wandered through Berlin, looking for unspectacular but characteristic moments that captured the spirit of the times. Besides his closely observed and humorous pictures of animals and people at the Berlin zoo, some of his most famous photographs are of women jumping over puddles. With the wit, optimism and lightness that is inherent in nearly all of his photographs, Seidenstücker records the new, self-confident woman of the twenties. Just a few years later, in 1934, the motif of the woman jumping the puddle was revived by the Hungarian news and fashion photographer Martin Munkácsi and again by Richard Avedon in 1954. Amongst the well-known fellow countrymen like László Moholy-Nagy, Eva Besnyö or Robert Capa, Munkácsi was one of many young Hungarian artists living and working in Berlin during the late twenties and early thirties – until the lively urban landscape and cultural climate changed drastically due to the National Socialist assumption of power in 1933. Numerous artists and photographers went into exile, were economically ruined or drafted for military service. The ones who returned to Berlin after 1945, such as Römer, Capa, Seidenstücker or the Jewish photographer Henry Ries (1917-2004), found a city in ruins and a population ravaged by hunger and exhaustion. Once more eyeball to eyeball with the events of the time was Umbo, whose entire archive was destroyed during an air raid on Berlin.

The division of Germany by the Allies and the time of the Berlin Wall in particular were covered comprehensively in various photographic works, such as Janos Frecot’s “Die Jahre mit der Kamera“ (“The Years With The Camera“, 1964-1966), John Gossage’s “Berlin in The Time of The Wall” (1982-1993), Michael Schmidt’s “Waffenruhe” (“Ceasefire”, 1988) or Rudi Meisel’s observations of everyday life from both sides of the Wall. The different perspectives on the social systems in the East and West also interested Arno Fischer (1927-2011), who documented his experiences during the years before the Wall’s construction. In symbolic images with complex compositions he captured moments where state and individual, political aspirations and everyday reality collide. Fischer also was a precursor of a lively photographic scene that developed in the DDR at the end of the seventies. Photographers like his later wife Sibylle Bergemann, Harald Hauswald, Ute and Werner Mahler showed the unvarnished life in East Germany, exposed social contradictions and witnessed the experiences of a generation. In 1990 they and three others

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founded the photo agency “Ostkreuz“, whose members are committed to sharing their multifaceted views on reality well beyond Berlin and the East up to this day.

Observing precisely and enhancing dialogue and exchange also characterizes contemporary photographers who turn their eyes on the Berlin of today. Since 2010 Göran Gnaudschun visits the historically charged Alexanderplatz once a week to portray the community of dropouts and runaways, punks and vagabonds living there. In his sensitive portraits he gives the overlooked a face, while South African artist Sue Williamson asks residents about the essence of their city in her work „Other Voices, Other Cities“. Both artists thereby add a unique and timely voice to the symphony of the metropolis Berlin.