

West Brett, Donna: *Photography and Place. Seeing and Not Seeing Germany After 1945*. Abingdon: Routledge 2016. ISBN: 978-1-138-83252-7; XV, 222 S.

Rezensiert von: Sarah Goodrum, BTK University of Art & Design, Berlin

Photography and Place gathers a variety of photographic images and projects that depict place both natural and urban and landscapes and interiors – and how it has been affected by the „ruptures“ of German history, particular after 1945. Donna West Brett, an art historian at the University of Sydney, draws on a variety of sources beyond art history, from memory studies, philosophy, photo history, and literary discourse, to buttress her analysis of photographs from both well-known and understudied contemporary photographers, such as Thomas Demand, Thomas Ruff, Arwed Messmer, and Erich Hartmann, along with photographers working in the pre- and immediate post-WWII era, such as Friedrich Seidenstücker, Arthur Grimm, and Richard Peter Sr. The book focuses on and theorizes images taken after the fact – of trauma, or simply of history – and „investigates how this kind of aftermath or late photography represents a dramatic rupture in the field of vision“ (p. 2). The rupture in the visual field is tied, according to Brett, to the ruptures of 1945, caused by Germany’s defeat and the impact of the Holocaust, and that of 1989’s fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent German reunification. For Brett, these photographs of place tied to rupture present the viewer with a tension between seeing and unseeing – and *astigmatic* vision that conceals or diffuses as much as it seems to reveal (see particularly *ibid.*, Chapter 3, p. 79).

The book is structured thematically, grouping a body of photographic images and ideas around a concept for each chapter: „Ruin Gazing,“ „View from the Edge,“ „After the Fact,“ „After-Image,“ „Aftermath,“ and the German *Wald* as a trope from the 19th century to the present. In „Ruin Gazing: The Disorienting View,“ Brett addresses the ruins of German cities post-1945, connecting these images to the German history of fascination with ruins – notably, Albert Speer’s notori-

ous „Theory of Ruin Value“ (a post-1945 invention), which proposed an architecture that would convey power in the present and age as majestically as the ruins of Rome (p. 34). Of particular interest here are the before and after shots of the Berlin Tiergarten and other sites by Friedrich Seidenstücker, as well as the images of urban ruins covered in chalk messages from and to missing friends and relatives in the aftermath of bombings in Berlin and Dresden by Arthur Grimm (who had been heavily involved in Nazi propaganda up to 1945) and Richard Peter Sr. (a determined antifascist).

„View from the Edge“ considers photographs from the 1980s and 1990s by Dirk Reinartz, Erich Hartmann, and Mikael Levin at or near sites of former concentration camps. These images are particularly good examples of Brett’s theme of the tension between seeing and unseeing, providing empty scenes of past trauma. Brett places them in dialog with and, in many ways, in opposition to the images shot immediately after liberation of the camps. This chapter is an interesting interlocutor with texts on the difficulty of depiction of the Holocaust, such as Didi-Huberman’s *Images in Spite of All*.¹

In „After the Fact: Late Photography and Unconscious Places,“ Brett looks at images by Thomas Struth and Michael Schmidt of empty urban landscapes which she labels as aftermath, late, or „slow photography,“ arguing that these images highlight the inability of the photographer to witness the important events that mark these urban spaces: for instance, Struth’s image *Sophiengemeinde 1, Große Hamburger Straße* (1982), showing the former Eastern European Jewish quarter of Berlin, or Michael Schmidt’s 1982 image *Untitled*, picturing the Berlin Wall framed by the ruins of the former Gestapo headquarters and the Ministry of Aviation, which was built in 1935–6 and survived the war (since 1999, this building has housed the Federal Ministry of Finance).

„After-Image: Rephotography and Place“ uses the idea of the after-image – an image left on the retina after the viewer has turned away – to anchor the analysis of a series of before and after images of urban

¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*. Four Photographs from Auschwitz, Chicago 2008.

landscapes of Berlin drawn from the Leipzig *Archiv der Wirklichkeit* and the work of Arwed Messmer. Pre- and Post-Wende images picture the uncanny alterations of the post-1945 city, from a normal city street in notable GDR photographer Rudolf Schäfer's images of Berlin's Bützowstraße, to Evelyn Richter's Koppenplatz images from 1971 and 2000. Arwed Messmer's digital reconstructions of the work of Fritz Tiedemann, featured in the 2008 Berlinische Galerie show „So weit kein Auge reicht,“ considered alongside Messmer's rephotographings of the same sites are particularly interesting. Brett's discussion of these images will hopefully serve to open further exploration of Messmer's work.²

One of the most successful chapters of Brett's study, „Aftermath: Absence and Place,“ assembles a series of photographic projects that revisit or recreate the lost vestiges of the GDR and the Third Reich – for instance, Ricarda Roggan's images of reassembled rooms using abandoned GDR furniture and Nina Fischer and Maroan El Sani's images of the interior of the GDR's *Palast der Republik* in a state of slow deconstruction in the early 2000s. Laurenz Berges' photographs of the crumbling formality of former buildings of Soviet occupying forces in Frankfurt (Oder), though included in a section puzzlingly titled „National Socialist Spaces,“ effectively embody Brett's concept of „unseeing“ spaces; as so Boris Becker's images of bunkers from the 1980s, which have been subjected to a process of erasure since 1945. The images and ideas in this chapter are perhaps the richest and most clearly analyzed in the book.

Brett closes her study with a consideration of the German forest, reaching back into its significance as a national and nationalist symbol in the Romantic period and placing contemporary photography of the *Wald* by Thomas Struth, Sarah Schönfeld, Ricarda Roggan, and Thomas Ruff in this context.³

The major strength of Brett's book is its particular thematic cross section through post-1945 German photography, which as far as I know has never been presented in this way before. The wealth of photographic projects discussed here is fascinating and offers an

uncanny relationship to space, history, and „place.“ Brett's study is a companion to other comparative studies of postwar German photography, which she of course looks to frequently in her discussions, such as Sarah James' *Common Ground* and Jörn Glasenapp's *Die deutsche Nachkriegsfotografie*, and adds a turn toward recent photographic projects of the 1990s and 2000s and their connections to the postwar milieu of both 1945 and 1989.⁴ *Photography and Place* does not limit itself to either West or East Germany, and the history here is of the shared German past as it radiates out toward the East and West after 1945, but Brett is attentive to some specific conditions in the East, such as restrictions on photography (pp. 104–5).

This study is driven by visual analysis of the photographs and exploration of her proposed governing concepts in each chapter and she provides ample references to other scholars' interpretations of the images, which sometimes overwhelm her own analysis. The book's biggest weakness, some imprecision of language, perhaps grows out of the sheer volume of photographic projects examined, and the highly conceptual framework – some passages thick with theoretical language take a second read to snap into focus. While numerous photographs appear in the text, it is also a challenge to read about so many other images that, I am sure for practical reasons, could not be reproduced in the text. However, this just points to how interesting Brett's choices are in terms of images and photographers, and these images can be accessed with a little effort.

Overall, this book gathers a fascinating collection of photographers and images, and addresses the idea of place in a way and to an extent that has not been done before in the his-

²See also his website: <<http://www.arwedmessmer.de>> (17.08.2016). For the exhibition of 2008, see <<http://www.berlinischegalerie.de/ausstellungen-berlin/rueckblick/2008/panoramen-1949-52/>> (17.08.2016).

³For the general topic, the most recent study is: Johannes Zechner, *Der deutsche Wald. Eine Ideengeschichte zwischen Poesie und Ideologie*, Darmstadt 2016.

⁴Sarah E. James, *Common Ground. German Photographic Cultures Across the Iron Curtain*, New Haven 2013; Jörn Glasenapp, *Die deutsche Nachkriegsfotografie. Eine Mentalitätsgeschichte in Bildern*, Paderborn 2008.

tory of German photography focused around the Cold War period and its historical roots. It offers scholars of photography, German History, and those interested in themes of memory, trauma, and landscape a useful assortment of theory and imagery and a body of discourse on these themes that contributes to the discussion of this material.

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