

# From Documentation to Poetry

There are realists, poets, constructivists and archivists of everyday life among contemporary German photographers. And sometimes everything is very different from what it seems.

By Esther Ruelfs



When people abroad talk about German photography, most of them mean primarily one thing: the Becher School, named after the photographer couple Bernd and Hilla Becher. Its best-known representative is Andreas Gursky. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, exhibited his work in 2001 – thus drawing international attention to New Documentary Photography from Germany. In one large, panel-size picture, Gursky shows the Bahrain Formula 1 racetrack. The camera's perspective makes you think you are looking out of a helicopter. In the roughly three-by-two-metre picture, the turns of the racetrack are transformed into an abstract pattern. These monumental pictures by Andreas Gursky, like those by Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer and Axel Hütte, are regarded as typical of German photography in general. Naturally, the Becher school is not nearly as uniform as is often seen, but there are similarities, which they characterize as a “school”. And these similarities are temptingly easy to recognize and connect with other stereotypically “German” qualities: after all, the pictures of the Becher School are very neat and tidy.

Deserted landscapes, cities and interiors are objectively documented; the rows of chairs in Candida Höfer's photographs are lined up with meticulous precision. The forest has been swept clean. Certain subjects come into focus, often formal structures of the man-made landscape: the drabness of prefabricated buildings, the asphalt of an underground car park or the concrete of autobahn bridges. The built-up landscape is lined up as if in formation. It is no longer the drama of unspoiled nature that is captured, but a world that has been ordered by human beings. With a format the size of a painting, Gursky's photograph of the Formula 1 circuit in Bahrain can become a visual experience of the sublime.

A reconstructed exhibition entitled *New Topographics* (1975) can be seen until the end of March 2011 in Cologne. It is devoted to this “man-altered landscape”. Apart from Hilla and Bernd Becher, most of the small-format black-and-white photographs are by American photographers of the 1970s. Judging by the attention now being paid to New Documentary Photography, whose roots are to be found here, it is one of the most influential exhibitions on the history of photography ever. “Who could have guessed 20 years ago that documentary photography would be the most ‘popular’ form of art photography at the beginning of the 21st century?” asked Frits Gierstberg, director of the Nederlands Fotomuseum in 2000.

But what do the small black-and-white pictures have to do with the large, glossy surfaces of the Becher School? A fascination with structure, sequence and order can quickly be found – for example, when Lewis Baltz is interested in the abstract rectangular shape of factory buildings that stand like shoe boxes in the American

landscape or when Joe Deal makes American detached family homes look like toy houses when seen from a high perspective. This exhibition is so interesting today because it also points to documentary positions that have – unjustifiably – been eclipsed by the massive popularity of the Becher School.

Michael Schmidt and Joachim Brohm are two of the most influential German photographers in the German documentary tradition. Both have advanced the possibilities of the documentary photographic method. And in both a crucial role is played by man-altered nature, to quote the subtitle of *New Topographics*: the transformation of landscape into an urban landscape. Michael Schmidt, whose work has been exhibited at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, among other venues, became known to a larger audience with his contribution to the 2010 Berlin Biennale and the simultaneous retrospective presented at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. Schmidt shoots his photographs in cities, initially mainly in Berlin. Already in his “Berlin after 1945” series, however, this metropolis can be interpreted as exemplary, and it was only consistent that in 2001 he began a series entitled “Somewhere”. Schmidt photographs the no-man’s-land between the post-war buildings, the deserted inner-city playgrounds and parking lots, fire walls and the modern concrete jungle. His camera does not accuse; it seems to register everything with equanimity. He does not record what is special; instead he is interested in the unspectacular – in the boring architecture he captures in his pictures that know neither deep black nor white, just endless of shades of gray.

Joachim Brohm’s photographs could also be called “Somewhere” or “Everywhere”, since he photographs the ground of “Bangladesh” or “Malaga,” of “Hohentauern” or “Gelsenkirchen”, to quote the titles of a series. Here he points his camera at a small section of the ground, sketches abstract pictures that symbolize the changes of time. Brohm is interested in the urbanized cultural landscapes of the Ruhr District and photographs a landscape marked by footpaths, fences and boundaries, the traces of landscaping and urban sprawl. After years of work in the 1990s he created a documentation of an industrial site in a suburban area of Munich. The “Areal” project records the transformation of a site with the typical factory buildings, a mixture of trucking companies, used-car dealerships, small car repair shops, car washes and scrap yards for various materials. He documents the gradual demolition, the wasteland, and finally, after the transformation, the residential housing area. In his book project, what is conceived as a chronological documentation is made up of topographical overviews from an elevated position and abstract fragmentary impressions. In the small-format, colour photographs he is interested in a lyrical imagery; his washed-out colours no longer document reality, but content themselves with pointing to fragments of reality that never come together to form a whole.

These positions, which stem from a documentary tradition, contrast with those that no longer use a discovered reality as a template, but produce reality in their images. Thomas Demand’s work, for example, was the subject of a major exhibition at the National Gallery Berlin in 2010. The photographs in his “Yellow Cake” series do not show the Nigerian Embassy, where the documents were stolen that were used to “justify” George W. Bush’s decision to go to war in Iraq. Instead he photographed a paper model of the embassy façade, which he had made on a scale of 1:1. The models for his pictures are often press photographs that everyone has seen at some time: pictures that evoke vague memories, such as an impersonal-looking room with toys lying around – it generates the uneasy feeling that you have already seen the original in a newspaper report on a case of child abuse. They are diffuse souvenir pictures of something that we have stored in our subconscious.

Similarly, Beate Gütschow (born 1970) also represents a counter-position to the Becher School's documentary tradition, in that her photographs no longer rely on a prior picture of reality. With her black-and-white images of post-apocalyptic urban designs, she, too, focuses on the fact that photography is something that is made. The pictures seem plausible, and yet something is wrong: the perspective varies within the picture; the railings on the outside stairs of a residential high-rise block are missing; the observer doesn't know whether the building is unfinished or abandoned. Is it a residential building, a guard tower or an airport control tower? A building from the past or the future? Gütschow often builds up her photographs from up to a hundred different templates shot using analogue photography; she assembles these to make her "factual fiction fakes". Her photographs could not be further from the assumption that photography is a true document of the world outside. The way Gütschow archives and administers the image data in specific categories and numbers her photographs in the titles, using combinations of letters and figures, is reminiscent of a scholar or archivist.

Indeed, archiving has always been an important part of photographic work, and that fascinates photographers like Peter Piller, whose artistic approach is based on collecting and arranging pictures that already exist. For example, he bought a commercial archive of aerial pictures of German owner-occupied homes from the 1980s; he then sorted them using his own categories – "Sleeping Houses", "Dirty Clouds", "Paths" – and compiled an exhibition. In his series called "End of the Road/Turning Area", he depicts the turning bay as the dead-end street of the German detached-house idyll.

People share asphalt as a habitat with other urban residents: the common street pigeon. It is a pedestrian, as we learn from biologist Jochen Lempert. The photographer observes everyday phenomena with the eye of a scientist. He is interested in coexistence between people and animals and observes how urban space is shared out and what adaptation strategies the street pigeon uses.

The racetrack of Bahrain is a long way from a street scene with pigeons. Alongside the realists, the constructivists and the archivists, there are also photographers who don't seem to fit into any category. For example, Turner Prize winner Wolfgang Tillmans gives us one of the most poetic images of the road. He calls it "New Family". A German living in London, he first worked for magazines; he used his friends as models and in this way dissociated himself from standard magazine practice. He was celebrated in 2009 with an exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. In the meantime, he has shifted his focus to art. The title "New Family" remains indicative of his agenda. The aesthetic of the family snapshot was already the inspiration for his first photographs, and today, as a sensitive observer, he still captures the beauty of everyday life in atmospheric images.////

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