

## **Mühe's Picture of Germany?**

*by Ingo Taubhorn*

Andreas Mühe's photographs are charged with the artist's obstinacy. In their analog quality, these pictures defy the digital spirit of the era. At a time when Facebook snapshots taken on smart-phones are disseminated within seconds and magazine and advertising photographers use digital image editing in an effort to create counterweights to the deluge of ephemeral images flooding our everyday lives, Mühe returns to classical analog techniques of large-format photography, whose fine grain and high photosensitivity he handles with expert skill; as though retreating to an island entirely under his direction in order to escape the market of photographic self-affirmation: "Large-format photography constantly forces me to focus on the essential. The camera calms me." \*

Mühe's pictures convey openness and distraction, improvisation and imponderability. Gone is the visual control characteristic of today's digital icons. Eastern realism supplants or ironizes the synthetic glamour of the West. The pictures become living events. They begin to tell stories. There is a hint of psychodrama in the portraits, haunting close-ups hovering between distance and intimacy. A silent theatricality permeates the group scenes, which are only in part staged; thus for instance during the reception held by the Italian ambassador, Antonio Puri Purini. Carefully lighted or bathed in daylight, the relationship between human being, space, architecture, environment, and nature, seen from a variety of angles, bristles with a new, a different and strange energy. The collector or the artist becomes part of his own art's inventory. Photography does not rehearse, and by no means does it aim at a set schema; instead it improves and observes, taking on the stylistic intentions of the professional and lay actors up to the fine line of a slightly different mise-en-scène: "I started early on to use lighting and the choice of technique to make the picture my own." \*

Helmut Newton staged Chancellor Kohl in front of a solid German oak. Peter Lindbergh's shot of Chancellor Schröder in a bespoke Brioni suit almost dissolved the hard brand core of the political class, replacing it with a hotly debated substitute. Andreas Mühe's pictorial compositions radically depart from the idea of an unambiguous icon. Chancellor Merkel and her office at the chancellery, with the European and national flags, with Kokoschka's portrait of Adenauer and the view outside the window of the government buildings on the bank of the river Spree,

are equal actors in the work on the set until the extraordinary close-up portrait of an otherwise ubiquitous face emerges: "From the very first moment I met Mrs. Merkel as a human being." \*

You get the sense that Mühe, working with people we know and others we have never seen, with aging stars and rising ones, defies our expectations regarding people's public images and his own genre, that he aims at the individual's sensitive and vulnerable side—and, when he is lucky, catches him or her in a heretofore uninhabited mode of introspective absorption. They appear before us, monumental or inconspicuous: the artist-prince Markus Lüpertz and the Wall gardener Egon Krenz; Bush senior, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Helmut Kohl; the stars of today's silver screen Thomas Kretschmann (as an S/M master) and David Kross; Jana Bach in porn action, the former Electro-Rock band The Aim of Design Is to Define Space, and the photographer's sister Anna Maria Mühe as a fashion victim: "There is something unique about everyone I photograph—sometimes it is evident, sometimes concealed—that captures my interest. That's exactly what my pictures try to talk about: photographic fascination and character." \*

Mühe's pictures explore the uncharted space between the finished movie and the as yet open production, between sudden dreamlike intensity and crude reality, between incipient control and real imponderability. His pictures and sequences are best compared to the model of a theater rehearsal where the director holds back, leaving a maximum of leeway to his actors, to possibilities and perspectives. Mühe avoids the premature effects of easily consumable images, aiming to document the unfinished and seeking a synthesis of what had heretofore gone unnoticed, what harbors the potential to be something yet entirely different. He benefits from the poetry of an honest making-of. That means, however, that his pictures must be understood as subversive conceptions of a photography rendered epic, as sensual acts of unmasking in the struggle against the purely aesthetic façade of overly perfect and empty images. "I'm not looking for the shot, the quick snapshot, but rather for what is concealed and unrecognized, which has to my mind always been the tremendous appeal of photography. You might say: what is obvious and has yet remained unseen." \*

In this light, Berlin turns out to be something other than the impregnable metropolis of photographic media freeze-frames and readily available national sculptures. Instead, Berlin appears once again as a place that bristles with the tensions between East and West, as a hot spot of culture, media, and politics, a seething cauldron of fiction and reality. Faces that have long

been familiar and others, young ones, emerge in surprising constellations, lending today's political capital a multifaceted contemporary physiognomy that spans the entire range from happiness to tragedy - that is Andreas Mühe's picture of Germany.

\*All quotes from an email interview with Andreas Mühe the author conducted on June 24, 2011.