

TRANSFORMING SENSIBILITIES

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF BASTIENNE SCHMIDT

BY EDWARD J. SULLIVAN

THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY, MORE THAN ANY OTHER FORM OF AESTHETIC EXPRESSION, HAS BEEN ABLE TO EVOKE THE MOST INTIMATE OF HUMAN EMOTIONS. NO OTHER METHOD OF VISUALIZATION CAN CAPTURE, WITH THE INSTANT SHOCK OF RECOGNITION THAT WE ALL EXPERIENCE WHILE LOOKING AT A PARTICULARLY SUCCESSFUL PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE, THE INNER CORE OF THE HUMAN ACCEPTANCE. IN HER OFTEN SHOCKING, ALWAYS STRIKING AND INEVITABLY

BEAUTIFUL PHOTOGRAPHS, BASTIENNE SCHMIDT HAS DEMONSTRATED HER POWER TO CREATE DRAMATIC SIMULACRA OF THE REALITY OF ALL OF OUR LIVES, ALLOWING THE VIEWER A GLIMPSE INTO HIS AND HER SOUL AS WELL INTO MANY OF THE AREAS OF OUR IMAGINATION WHICH WE OFTEN ATTEMPT, WHICH SUCH VIGOR AND FORCE, TO KEEP HIDDEN FROM OUR CONSCIOUSNESS AND THAT OF EVERYONE AROUND US. IT MAKES LITTLE DIFFERENCE THAT THE VAST MAJORITY OF SCHMIDT'S RECENT WORK DEPICTS SCENES OF A SPECIFICALLY LATIN AMERICAN REALITY. ALTHOUGH HER PHOTOGRAPHS ARE SET IN COLOMBIA, GUATEMALA, MEXICO AND OTHER LATIN NATIONS WHICH HAVE EXPERIENCED PARTICULARLY DISTURBING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TURMOIL OVER THE LAST DECADES, WE ARE ABLE TO RECOGNIZE IN THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE OFTEN BIZARRE-SEEMING TRAGIC DRAMAS SHE RECORDS, ASPECTS OF OUR OWN IMAGINATION AND OUR OWN INTENSE PREOCCUPATION WITH THEMES OF SUFFERING AND DEATH AND IT'S CONSEQUENCES FOR THOSE AROUND US.

THE WORK OF BASTIENNE SCHMIDT MUST BE CONSIDERED ON ONE HAND, AS REPRESENTATIVE OF A SPECIFICALLY

LATE-TWENTIETH CENTURY WORLD SITUATION IN WHICH THE HORRORS OF DRUG ADDICTION AND IT'S CONSEQUENTIAL SOCIAL CONFLICTS, POLITICAL AND FACTIONAL DISPUTE OVER IDEOLOGY, TERRITORY OR MATERIAL POSSESSIONS OR ESPECIALLY , THE DEGRADATION OF POVERTY, HAVE WRECKED HAVOC

OVER THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE "MODERN" CONSCIOUSNESS. CERTAINLY, IN ONE OR TWO HUNDRED YEAR'S TIME, HER WORK WILL BE REGARDED AS REPRESENTING THE PAINFUL ATMOSPHERE AS WELL AS MANY OF THE SPECIFIC DISTURBING EVENTS SURROUNDING THE FINAL YEARS OF THE MILLENNIUM.

NONETHELESS, TO CONSIDER HER PHOTOGRAPHIC ART AS COMPLETELY ROOTED IN THE TRAUMATIC MATERIALITY OF THE 1990S WOULD REDUCE, I BELIEVE, OUR COMPREHENSION OF HER CONTRIBUTION TO MERELY TEMPORAL DIMENSIONS. WITHIN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY WE MIGHT ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH A PLACE FOR SCHMIDT'S IMAGES ALONG HISTORICAL LINES. ALTHOUGH HER ART IS QUINTESSENTIALLY OF THE MOMENT IN WHICH SHE IS WORKING, HER PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES MAY ALSO BE SEEN WITHIN THE PARAMETERS OF THE URGE, ALWAYS PRESENT IN THE WESTERN AESTHETIC IMAGINATION, TO MEMORIALIZE BOTH THE GRANDIOSE AND THE CONVENTIONALLY "SIGNIFICANT" MOMENTS OF HUMAN EXISTENCE AS WELL AS THOSE INSTANTS OF SEEMINGLY INCONSEQUENTIAL HUMAN BEHAVIOR.

DEATH, PAIN AND SUFFERINGS HAVE BEEN THE SUBJECTS OF THE ARTIST'S CONCERNS FOR CENTURIES, YET WITH THE INVENTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE 1830S, THE ELEMENT OF POIGNANCY AND THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF SUCH THEMES CAME MORE DRAMATICALLY TO THE FORE. IN THE 1850S THE AMERICAN ALBERT SANDS SANDWORTH AND JOSIAH JOHNSON HAWES BEGAN TO PHOTOGRAPH

AUTOPSIES. ALTHOUGH THE ANATOMY LESSONS HAD BEEN THE SUBJECT OF PAINTINGS SUCH AS DISTINGUISHED ARTISTS AS REMBRANDT HIMSELF AS WELL AS THE AMERICAN THOMAS EAKINS, THERE WAS SOMETHING MUCH MORE SHOCKING ABOUT THESE PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN IN CA. 1855. PICTURES SUCH AS THESE, AS WELL AS OTHER NINETEENTH CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGES AS THE THOUSANDS OF PORTRAITS OF DECEASED CHILDREN ( A TRADITION THAT RECEIVED SPECIAL ATTENTION IN MEXICO AND OTHER PARTS OF LATIN AMERICA, WHERE THE “CULT OF DEATH” IS TAKEN AS A PART OF HUMAN EXISTENCE –A FACT INNATELY UNDERSTOOD AND SHARED BY BASTIENNE SCHMIDT), PROVOKED THE MORBID, VOYEURISTIC URGES AS WELL AS THE PURE FASCINATION OF THE VIEWER.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TRANSPORTABLE CAMERA ALSO MADE POSSIBLE THE FIRST-HAND RECORDING OF THE EVENTS OF HUMAN SUFFERING ASSOCIATED WITH WARFARE. IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, SUCH CATAclysms AS THE TERRIBLE FEROCITY OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, THE CRIMEAN WAR AND OTHERS WERE REGISTERED WITH THE OBJECTIFYING FORCE OF THE CAMERA’S LENS. IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, WAR DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY BECAME THE STANDARD FORM OF RECORDING NOT ONLY THE HEROICS OF BATTLE BUT THE TERRIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR ORDINARY CITIZENS. THE PHOTOJOURNALISM AND WAR REPORTAGE SUCH AS ROBERT CAPA, CHIM AND OTHERS MAY BE VIEWED AS HIGHLY RELEVANT TO ANY DISCUSSIONS OF THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF BASTIENNE SCHMIDT. SCHMIDT’S ART ALSO REALIZES AN INEVITABLE KINSHIP WITH OTHER FORMS OF TWENTIETH CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHY. THE COMPELLING AND OFTEN REPULSIVE IMAGES OF WEEGEE( ARTHUR FELLIG), PHOTOJOURNALIST WHO SPECIALIZED IN RECORDING IMAGES OF MURDERS FOR MORE SENSATIONALISTIC NEWSPAPERS OF NEW YORK CITY, SHARES A SENSIBILITY WITH THE IMMEDIACY AND SHOCKING QUALITY OF SCHMIDT’S WORK. IN ADDITION OF

SCHMIDT'S STRAIGHTFORWARD RENDERING OF THE MOST DEBASED FORMS OF HUMAN SUFFERING ALSO SHARE SOMETHING OF THE SENSIBILITY OF CERTAIN CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHERS WHOSE ATTENTIONS HAVE TURNED TO THE SUFFERING OF SUCH QUINTESSENTIALLY LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY MALADIES AS AIDS. ROSALIND SALOMON, TO NAME ONLY ONE OF MANY PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORDERS OF THIS DEVASTATING DISEASE, PRESENTS ITS EFFECTS WITH STRAIGHTFORWARD DIRECTNESS, SHYING AWAY FROM NONE OF THE PAINFUL ELEMENTS, YET NOT DWELLING IN A MORBID WAY ON ANY ONE OF THE MANY EXCRUCIATING SYMPTOMS. BASTIENNE SCHMIDT SHARES THIS OBJECTIVITY IN THE FACE OF PAIN.

VIEWING BASTIENNE SCHMIDT'S RECENT EXHIBITION (FALL 1985) AT THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN NEW YORK, THE VISITOR WAS COMPELLED NOT ONLY BY THE IMAGES THEMSELVES (MANY OF WHICH ARE PUBLISHED IN THE PRESENT VOLUME), BUT ALSO BY THE REACTION OF THE OTHER VIEWERS. REPULSION WAS ONE OF THE INEVITABLE INITIAL RESPONSES, YET WHAT WAS MORE INTERESTING TO WATCH WAS THE TRANSFORMATION OF REPULSION INTO COMPASSION, FASCINATION AND SOME SORT OF INNATE UNDERSTANDING OF THE UNDERLYING REASONS FOR AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE SCENES AND ANGUISH AND DEATH THAT THIS PHOTOGRAPHER HAS CAPTURED. SCHMIDT HAS A UNIQUE ABILITY TO ENTER INTO THE DEEPEST RECESSES OF OUR IMAGINATIONS AND TO TAKE OVER, IF ONLY FOR THE BRIEF TIME OF VIEWING HER ART, SOME HIGHLY INTIMATE CORNER OF OUR RESPONSE SYSTEMS. YET THE DRAMA AND THE IMPACT OF THESE PHOTOGRAPHS IS NOT DISSIPATED WHEN WE LEAVE THE EXHIBITION, CLOSE THE BOOK OR PUT AWAY THE PHOTOGRAPH. THE PICTURES WHICH SHE PRESENTS US BEQUEATH AN INDELIBLE MARK ON OUR SENSIBILITIES. WE ARE, IN A WAY, DEEPLY SCARRED, BRANDED AND ALTERED BY THE EXPERIENCE OF SEEING HER WORK. AFTER THE SHOCK WEARS AWAY, WE ARE LEFT

WITH THE AFTER-IMAGE OF AN INSIGHT OF HUMAN  
BEHAVIOR AND HUMAN REACTIONS TO EXTREME  
SITUATIONS THAT WE NEVER BEFORE HAD. SCHMIDT THUS  
TRANSFORMS US. EVEN IF WE DO NOT IMMEDIATELY  
RECOGNIZE THIS, WE ARE IN SOME TINY WAY, NOT THE  
SAME AS WE ARE BEFORE WITNESSING HER ART.

ESSAY FOR "VIVIR LA MUERTE", 1996