

THE BACK OF THE CITY

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Bleak, barren shrubs in front of equally bleak balconies. A warped, torn map of the GDR (the former East Germany). The wall of a prefabricated building, laced with holes. Those are views of Leipzig captured by Peter Riedlinger. For half a year he roamed this city, the face of which has decidedly changed in the last while. The new face shows little of itself. Above all, the photos point to the vestiges of earlier times. This past history ended only ten years ago, but it already comes across as an epoch long gone by.

Through almost all of Riedlinger's photos is to be found a mixture of reserved 'Sachlichkeit' and a bit of melancholy. They raise attention without being judgemental. The small and unnoticeable appears to be just as picture-worthy as the colossal. A white-tiled, Stalinesque exhibition 'palace'. A blue sign, almost lost in front of the façade directs pedestrians to a narrow zone in front of the building. Whoever walks along from a distance can more easily evade the deadening enormity of the massive building. Formerly, perhaps that was to be prevented. Far and wide one sees neither people, nor cars. This square seems empty and deserted, almost like a painting by Giorgio de Chirico.

Another square is filled with people. It is the assembly of a crowd in front of the Nikolai church, which in 1989 decisively contributed to the 'Wende' (the fall of the Berlin Wall). Riedlinger couldn't have directly photographed that, as he came to Leipzig eight years later. A brownish, framed photograph in a store window somewhere allows the historical incident to nonetheless become a part of his picture collection.

The subjects which Riedlinger includes in his photos don't fulfill the usual idea of the interesting and picture-worthy. Again and again, a picture finds itself within a picture. Walter Womacka's famous picture of a young couple on the beach, the icon of folksy socialist realism, hangs on a reddish, unpapered wall. But these aren't the surroundings where such reproductions usually hang. Here, Womacka's painting appears as a relic which one can't observe without irony. Finding something that good again, or good at all, is 'Ostalgie' (nostalgia for former East Germany).

A picture of an earnest Asian girl holding a bouquet looking slightly upwards. Underneath on a yellowed background clearly standing out from the white wall: "We practise solidarity with Vietnam". The North Vietnamese were the only foreign-looking immigrants who lived in greater numbers in the GDR.

The lack of cultural influences, outside of those from other 'socialist foreign countries', contributes to the old-fashioned impression which GDR culture makes today, and that's what makes it so easy to reduce it to 'Ostalgie'-kitsch.

Not only the reminiscences of the GDR seem nostalgic. The world appears to stay still altogether. Lively occurrences, that post-'Wende' euphoric atmosphere, the building boom - all of that appears to be of less interest to Riedlinger. His glance lingers and locks. Whatever moves slips away from him like fuzzy T.V. pictures. The succinct profile must be that of Egon Krenz; Helmut Schmidt is more clearly recognizable. There is only one 'real' portrait. Is she Vietnamese? She is looking the same way, that is sideways and upwards, like the girl on the propaganda poster. Only, she has a sceptical look in her eyes. They appear to evade those of the viewer.

Riedlinger avoids the frontal and the representative. Several cars are parked in a lot at the back. Rather than experiencing the hustle and bustle of commerce and traffic, we see the city, so to speak, from behind. Posters hang on a bent fence; evidently they have been there for quite a while. Sky and lawn were there first. The page of a 1989 calendar, part of an advertising campaign for "Interdruck", a firm probably not around today, is glued over that. Boris Becker, shown on the picture taking a big swing, hasn't been the "Number One" for a long time now. Even the first West German posters and serves bear witness to former times.

To a large extent people are made conspicuous by their absence. They seem to have disappeared from this world, which has cracks all over. The dilapidation stands out prominently on prefabricated buildings and other plain rectangular architecture. The inability to foresee this bears testimony to a city planning incapable of adapting its ideas from the model to reality. In several GDR propaganda representations, drawing-board versions of a 'modern' city, the sketched-in people seem like set pieces, arbitrary and interchangeable décor components.

A demonstration march goes by along war-torn areas. This is once again an old photograph. The images from the present show us neither passers-by nor groups of people walking the streets. Maybe this is because the photographer himself is the pedestrian who moves through the city. The other passers-by, finding themselves in the same 'medium' as Riedlinger, are thereby invisible to his glance.

No people, no traffic. Riedlinger doesn't show us the entire city. He shows the back, the gaps, the holes. The individual subjects don't really add up to a whole. It is a collage with omissions. They often seem like a still life; and not only when the most extraordinarily common potted plants sit in the window-sill or meagre rose bushes grow on a wall where paint is peeling off. Those roses want to cut it for solidarity with Vietnam.

André Bazin, the film theorist, remarked that photography is the only art form which can benefit from the absence of people. It can do without people, because it can make things seem significant. But it also hides the people who stand behind the camera. For that reason, photos, when they couldn't be as easily manipulated as today, were regarded as immediate evidence of that which was shown: "That's how it used to be". In Riedlinger's pictures, this evidence gets disturbed in a way beyond retouching or digital manipulation. The time difference, visible on the old photographs, also appears to include pictures produced only recently. This effect originates beyond that of 'picturesque' techniques, such as ageing through the use of brown tones and other similar tricks. A direct subject and a re-photographed documentary picture are suddenly presented on the same level. The combination with found pictures even turns Riedlinger's own photos into found pieces.

The nameplate " H. Liebeskind " appears on a damaged wooden door beside peculiar, thin metal bars which run together into a triangle. I think instinctively of an architect, although his name isn't written like that. Of course, it has nothing to do with him. Misconceptions such as that however, could set in motion what has been captured by Riedlinger's camera. That which has disintegrated into details can perhaps be put together again after all, when like with a Freudian Rebus, it isn't taken so one-to-one with the exact word and picture meaning.

By qualifying his own way of seeing repeatedly and to such an extent, Riedlinger also deconstructs the 'image' of the city. Rather than putting together a panorama, he lets everything disintegrate into details. The resounding rhetoric of totality, with which 'Hero Cities' were proclaimed, is dashed to pieces by the empiricism of detail. After the socialist model, one wanted to declare Leipzig a Hero City, because the starting point for the heroic victory over precisely this socialism essentially began here. But how little 'the people', who gathered here ten years ago still exist, could be symbolized by a glance at the empty rows of seats in Central Stadium. The enormous playing fields stand in grotesque contrast with the quality of soccer - Germany's most popular sport - currently being offered there; Leipzig's soccer team is playing in the third league. When today's 'Verein für Ballsport' (Club for Ballsport) was still successful, it was called 'Locomotive'. Even sport was seen as a motor of progress. Today, this mechanical metaphor only stands for the fact that their trains have long since departed - they have missed the boat. The 'socialist inheritance' is as a rule either simply scorned or commercially 'kitschified'. Perhaps the better way would be to carefully recode it. This is the way proposed by Peter Riedlinger's photography.