VAN DER GRINTEN GALERIE



Karl Hugo Schmölz

About the War / An Inventory of Destruction, in Vintage Prints from 1946/47

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Thanks to their aesthetic precision and intellectual acumen the photographic images of postwar ruins captured by Karl Hugo Schmölz (1917-1986) are an outstanding example of how a photo-documentary commission can become an artistic work of the highest order. The photography of Schmölz (father and son) now justifiably enjoys worldwide acclaim for an objective language of imagery that lends individual value to each detail that makes up the whole. This quality also characterizes this series of works from 1947 that, seen from a contemporary perspective, could easily be classified as “conceptual”. When, in the 1960s, architect Richard Neutra asked his trusted photographer Julius Shulman which colleague in Germany had the “right stuff” to document his buildings there, Schulman could name only one: Karl Hugo Schmölz.

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This extraordinary series of photographs has a notable backstory: in 1947 the head of the official news agency of the city of Cologne was looking for a photographer capable of producing images that would give an immediate impression of the city center, ninety percent of which had been destroyed in the war, in direct confrontation with images of the prewar, still intact Cologne. By 1947, most of the city center had been cleared of rubble and planning for a new beginning was imminent. In other words, the task at hand was to make a direct photographic comparison between prewar and postwar Cologne, aimed at supporting key politicians and promoting public acceptance for realizing a program of quick reconstruction. Several names, among them August Sander, were under discussion. But the logical choice was soon made: Karl Hugo Schmölz, only recently returned to the city after release from POW captivity. In the few months since his homecoming he had already regained his prewar footing as the most sought-after architecture photographer in town – also due to the fact that his photography studio, *Fotowerkstätte Schmölz*, had survived the carpet-bombing of Cologne more or less unscathed.

Karl Hugo Schmölz, who owed his prodigious technical and aesthetic capabilities to the close collaboration with his father Hugo (1879-1938), combed the intact glass plate negative archive of Schmölz, Sr. and collaborative works, searching specifically for images of the city and its buildings from before the destruction. There, in the fully preserved documentation, were recorded the time of day, focal length and light conditions of each photograph taken. Schmölz decided to take the new, postwar pictures using the exact same photographic technique, in the same light conditions from the exact same angle and perspective as the postwar shots. He printed the images from both the "before" and "after" negatives himself, all in the exact same quality, so that in some pictures the viewer has the impression that the two "paired" shots were taken only moments apart, just enough time for the clouds to have moved out of the frame. It is here that an intense emotionality wells up behind the strict objectivity of the photographs. The photo duos were mounted in purposed-produced photo books. At least three of these image pairs are now well known and belong to the city of Cologne. Our vintage prints are from the Schmölz collection itself. Never having been mounted with adhesives, they are in museum quality. In addition to 24 of the diptychs described here, the exhibition features a further 20 original prints of photographs of the destroyed postwar cityscape; skeletal bridges, and boulevards along which hardly a

structure is left standing. We see architectural incunabula, such as Cologne's famous Romanesque churches, and, of course, its iconic cathedral (only slightly damaged, the single remaining edifice in a field of rubble), the *Oper am Ring*, the airport, representative buildings and eerie industrial steel ruins.

In these so highly disciplined efforts at extreme objectivity the horror of the events depicted seems perhaps even more intense. In 1982, the *Kölnisches Stadtmuseum* published 26 of these diptychs from its own collection in a book to accompany an exhibition.