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**HATJE
CANTZ**
**RWTHAACHEN
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- 003 EDITORIAL
- 009 **ALEXA FÄRBER**
TRACES OF THE FUTURE: URBAN TRANSFORMATION
AND THE PROMISSORY MULTIPLICITY OF PHOTOBOOKS
- 023 **MARY N. WOODS**
THE CITY HAS MEMORY: IMAGES OF RUIN AND
RECLAMATION IN BOMBAY/MUMBAI
- 037 **LARD BUURMAN**
MEDIATED PHOTOGRAPHY
- 055 **DAVIDE DERIU**
PORTRAITS OF PLACES: GABRIELE BASILICO
AND THE SLOWNESS OF THE GAZE
- 073 **NICHOLAS BOYARSKY**
THE EPHEMERAL IMAGINATION: THE POSTCARD
AND CONSTRUCTION OF URBAN MEMORY
- 087 **CLARE MELHUISH**
TRANSFORMING DOHA
- 105 **BIRGIT SCHILLAK-HAMMERS**
PICTURES OF BERLIN: CONSTRUCTION AND CONSERVATION
OF A 1920S METROPOLIS
- 119 **ELA KAÇEL**
SELF-LOCALIZATION OF MIGRANTS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS
IN CITIES VIA SELF-IMAGES
- 137 **MARKUS LANZ**
BRASÍLIA. PHOTOGRAPHING AGAINST THE IMAGE
- 155 **BETTINA LOCKEMANN**
EXPLORING THE URBAN SPACE: METHODS FOR VISUAL
URBAN RESEARCH
- 173 **ELISABETH NEUDÖRFL**
PHOTOGRAPHER'S DILEMMA: "GOOD" PHOTOGRAPHY
VS. "GOOD" PLANNING
- 191 **ROMAN BEZJAK**
MODERN LANGUAGE AND ITS MULTIPLE DIALECTS

Self-localization of Migrants and Photographers in Cities via Self-images

ELA KAÇEL

Self-images of both migrants and photographers mark their localities in cities and, thus, their self-positioning in the spaces of migration. Drawing examples from cultural, architectural, and photographic theories on memory, the author suggests to understand the photograph as a site of memory and of self-reflection in order to reinterpret the relation between photography and urban spaces.

Selbstbilder sowohl von Migrant*innen als auch von Fotograf*innen fangen ihre Orte in Städten ein und kennzeichnen damit ihre Selbstpositionierung in Migrationsräumen. Die Autorin diskutiert Beispiele aus kulturellen, architektonischen und fotografischen Theorien zur Erinnerung und schlägt vor, Fotografie als Ort der Erinnerung und der Selbstreflexion zu verstehen, um die Beziehung zwischen Fotografie und städtischen Räumen neu zu interpretieren.

Biography

Ela Kaçel is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Design of Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul. After studying architecture at YTU in Istanbul and at the AA in London, she received her PhD in the History of Architecture from Cornell University in 2009. As a Humboldt Fellow, she has lectured at RWTH Aachen in the Department of Architectural Theory and researched in the Institute for European Ethnology at the Humboldt University of Berlin. Currently she is co-curating an exhibition at the Museum Ludwig on the photography of labor migration in Cologne and the Rhineland.

Researching at the intersection of architecture, migration, and photography, and looking especially at the visual representations of spaces and people in cities in a variety of photographic genres—such as documentary, publicity, amateur, and artistic photography—I have recently started to ask myself what *locality* really does mean to both photographers and the photographed subjects. In photography, location is an essential element of the scene that defines the particular setting of the photograph as well as its spatial limits. Yet it seems to me that the usual function assigned to the location of a photograph as the background setting for the *sujet* photographed in the foreground reduces the location to a two-dimensional entity. There are, of course, some exceptions in landscape and urban photography where the location or the setting itself may become the *sujet* when photographed either with or without people.

Location has its own features based on a geographical position made of coordinates, a specific spot, or part of a wider territory that is either urban or rural, publicly or privately owned. *Location* provides individuals space for their everyday actions and practices, including taking photographs. *Locality*, on the other hand, is a social and personal construct that is produced in human acts and practices out of the relation between the self and the location. It is precisely in the photographic practices, especially in the practice of taking self-images, where a locality-producing activity comes into play. Therefore, in this paper, I would like to concentrate on self-images that are staged in specific urban locations.

Staging self-images in cities involves self-reflection and self-localization.¹ I would argue that locality is essential to understand the relation between the

photographer and the city, and the social, personal, and phenomenological implications of the city reflected on the self and its being-in-the-world as well as on the photograph that is taken in a specific location. In that regard, self-positioning in cities can be seen as one form of being-in-the-world. My argument here is that the practice of producing self-images, self-portraits, and snapshots in public spaces itself constructs one's self-localization anew while redefining localities through self-reflection. In this paper, I would like to explore and explicate two phases of this process: becoming local and constructing memory.

Comparing the self-images of migrant workers to those of photographers with a focus on their individual localities in cities, I am furthermore interested in exploring what the "discursive space" of photography is (a term that I use after Rosalind Krauss) and what the potentials of such a space in theory and practice are. In order to generate new transdisciplinary links and collaborations between photography and design professions, I believe that locality can be a key tool for an analysis of collective and personal memory through photography in the spaces of migration as well as for a reflexive practice of architecture and urbanism.

Becoming Local

Having started to work and live in European cities in the postwar period,

1. In her study of family photographs of German immigrants living in the United States, Petra Götte similarly argues that photography is a medium of self-reflection and self-localization. Götte 2008: 259. Yet her study differs from mine in the way that she has employed the serial iconographic method that is typically used in educational science and social science studies for the content and image analysis of photographs. Here I rather focus on the locality, self-positioning, and self-localization of those migrants and photographers who made self-images in cities.

migrant workers frequently used photography as a visual presentation of their new lives abroad. They preferred locations that would be perceived by viewers as visually aesthetic. Positioning themselves in front of palaces, natural and built landmarks, or in public parks, they produced self-images against the backdrop of contemporaneous images of the postwar cities in the 1960s and 1970s (Fig. 1). When taking such self-images and snapshots, they created a visual *mise-en-scène* as well as a contrived perception about their well-being abroad. Yet the selection of those public locations essentially contained an individual statement about becoming local and constructing new localities of one's own.²

In his definition of the German term *Selbstverortung* (self-localization) with regard to German autobiographical films and videos, Robin Curtis points out how significant the relation between the self and the self-defined space is. "The German verb *verorten* describes a process by which one may gain some insight about where one presently stands. Thus the compound noun *Selbstverortung* pertains to such a localization specifically with regard to the self; it emphasizes the spatiality of our being (i.e. the self), the relevance that our placement in space and time has for our 'situation,' in every sense of the word."³ To locate oneself in a city can occur in everyday life in a variety of forms that mostly requires individual skills, creativity, and engagement—for example, being able to show one's location on the map indicates being familiar with the urban

artifacts. Similarly, the appropriation and redesign of space to fulfill one's specific needs involves the invention of new cultural meanings, signs, and symbols attached to space.⁴ Such an engagement transforms space into place and enables self-localization in a specific place.

Migrants produce localities by giving specific meanings to a specific locale (*locus*). While becoming local in the new city, they produce a new identity for themselves as well as for the locale (*locus*). As Arjun Appadurai has argued, there is a temporal dimension to the spatial production of locality.⁵ Ethnoscape, a term coined by Appadurai, can be also interpreted as a series of localities that are economically, culturally, and visually produced in the act of photographing. For instance, in the photo series *Türken in Deutschland* (Turks in Germany, 1973–78) by Candida Höfer, the typology of various spaces initiated by the Turkish communities in Germany underlines the emergence of such localities. The spatial organization of grocery stores and all the goods displayed on the shelves and in the windows are indeed examples of "new commodity worlds."⁶ The "integrated locality," as argued by Alexa Färber, has the potential to transform the culture of a specific ethnic group into socio-culture (*Soziokultur*); in other words, it makes the urban culture of ethnic communities and their social codes accepted and embraced by the society as a whole.⁷ From eating to socializing practices, there are wide implications of the "integrated locality" that can be observed in public spaces. The individual's attempt of localizing oneself in the city was not only

2. Having researched spatial integration among migrants in Lisbon, Franz Buhr comments on becoming local from a similar perspective: "becoming local' is a skilled practice.... [I]t is about migrants' awareness of what the city has to offer and of the possibilities or impossibilities of reaching out for that offer." Buhr 2018: 315.
3. Curtis 2008: 229.

4. Smolarski 2017: 143.
5. Cf. Appadurai 1996.
6. Appadurai 1996: 185.
7. Färber 2005: 13.



Fig. 1.

Neumarkt in Cologne, ca. 1965.
Source: DOMiD-Archiv, Köln.



Fig. 2.

Pulverteich Hamburg
1978.
© Candida Höfer,
Cologne / VG Bild-
Kunst, Bonn 2020.



Fig. 3.

Lindenstrasse Hamburg 1978.
© Candida Höfer, Cologne / VG Bild-
Kunst, Bonn 2020.

experienced by newly arrived migrant workers. Photographers who had started to regularly encounter migrant workers, shopkeepers, and women and children in daily life established cultural contact to them in the public sphere through their photographic interests and practices. The distance between the photographer and her subjects is obvious in Candida Höfer's photography of migrant workers (Fig. 2). As her familiarity with foreign subjects increased, she not only observed migrants and their localities from a safe distance, but also started to stage self-portraits on the shop windows of grocery stores and music halls (Fig. 3).

Self-images produced in cities by both migrants and photographers are a reflection of their urban experiences, the interpretation of which would go beyond the so-called "snapshot aesthetic" (Figs. 4 and 5).⁸ Making self-images in both genres, amateur and artistic, involves two common steps—the staging of the self and the staging of the place/location. I believe that locality is indeed the intersection between these two genres. Both migrants and professional photographers assign new meanings and semantic associations between the self and the place/location out of which a new self-localization emerges.

For instance, working as a technician in her day job in the Urban Hospital in Berlin-Kreuzberg, Gudrun Ebert started to become friends with a Turkish woman named Ayşe who worked in the same hospital as a cleaner. In contrast to the images documenting Ayşe's daily activities in the workplace, two of the portraits Gudrun Ebert created of Ayşe and her colleague are peculiar (Figs. 6 and 7).⁹ Ebert

had asked her subjects to pose in front of a historic black-and-white photograph of Berlin that isolated them from their usual working environment and the mundane, functional spaces of the hospital. In order to create such a frame, the photographer staged both her subjects *and* the location. In that way, she transformed an ordinary workplace almost into a studio setting. Being placed in front of a historic view of Berlin in their white uniforms seems to create an estrangement effect on the photographer's subjects, because this is unlike any of the familiar snapshot photographs taken at a leisurely moment on one of the outings where they have a different type of relation to the city and to the spatio-temporal experience through a specific locale (*locus*).

Analogous to this estrangement are the photographic situations created by Candida Höfer while working on her series about Turks in Germany. Her staging involves both the subject and the place/location. When taking individual portraits of Turkish shop owners, she positioned the subject in the interior of their workplace in such a way that the interior turns into an alienating space (Fig. 8). Precisely in this setting, the posture and gaze of the subjects give away the staging created by the photographer, in the process of which the subjects ironically become estranged at their own workplaces.

Yet the shops served a different function for the photographer. Playing with several reflections on shop windows, Höfer took her self-images in an artistic style and produced collage-like scenes where her own image is entangled with the images of her subjects (Fig. 9). What I find notable in Höfer's self-images is the fact that she liberally integrates the staging and making of self-images into her photography series on a migrant community

8. Bate 1980: 46.

9. Cf. Ebert-Behr 1980. These two portraits are not printed in the photobook by Ebert, yet they are part of the same series.



Fig. 4.

The Aachener Weiher in Cologne, ca. 1965.
Source: DOMiD-Archiv, Köln.



Fig. 5.

Still from the projection of Düsseldorf III 2012.
© Candida Höfer, Cologne / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020.



Fig. 6.

Ayşe at the Urban Hospital ca. 1977.
© Gudrun Ebert, DOMiD-Archiv, Köln.



Fig. 7.

Ayşe's colleague at the Urban Hospital ca. 1977.
© Gudrun Ebert.

living in Germany. Through such an intrusion of her own portrait, I would argue, she could substantiate that her work on a migrant community is neither documentary nor reportage.

At least a decade earlier than her, photographers such as Vivian Maier and Lee Friedlander had already exhausted self-portraits as an idiosyncratic device for their artistic study of the self while drifting in the streets and locating themselves among other urbanites. I am in particular struck by Maier's practice of making self-images and her unique way of seeing/placing herself in the flow of her practice.¹⁰ The best way to imagine this flow is to view and perceive those self-images as embedded in the contact sheets in the order of real time and not as singular, detached photos. And this reminds us that the construction of the image of the self is relational; it is related to people around us and to places where we are located.¹¹

Picturing himself over a decade within the urban landscapes of American cities in the 1960s, Lee Friedlander named his self-portraits simply after those cities. Each portrait published in the photo-book *Lee Friedlander: Self Portrait* is titled by the artist after the name of the city/state and the year to underline his presence in that city as well as the location of the photographed urban scene.¹² In a similar manner, in the series *Türken in Deutschland*, Candida Höfer

decided to name the photos after the streets, squares, and/or cities.¹³ Those titles predominantly mark the location of both the photographer and her subject matter while enhancing the potential use of the photos in a series for social, economic, and urban studies of the neighborhood and of the locals and their placemaking.

Constructing Memory

In her study of migration in Berlin-Kreuzberg in the 1970s, Gudrun Ebert developed another art form using the montage technique where two distinct localities are artistically distorted and visually juxtaposed. Collages define a kind of "proto-place"¹⁴ that is created by photographers. In his recent study of the rhetoric of the city, Pierre Smolarski writes about the qualities of a "collage-like space" that is perceived as contradictory and heterogeneous.¹⁵ Thus, the photo-montage by Ebert (Fig. 10) contains such a conflict, or actually a series of conflicts between urban and rural, familiar and foreign, and reality and imagination, while stating extreme doubts about the integration of Turkish migrants into German society that started to be debated in the mid-1970s.

10. The book, edited by Maloof (2013), features a selected number of Maier's self-portraits as singular photos. See the following link for Maier's self-portraits embedded in the contact sheets: vivianmaier.com/gallery/contact-sheets/. Accessed: July 23, 2020.

11. Bate underlines this fact with reference to Freud. "It has long been known in psychoanalysis that the image of our 'self' is related to images received of us by others, first, from carers and parents, then, later in life, from other important figures." Bate 2009: 50.

12. Cf. Friedlander 1998 [1970]. John Szarkowski recalls in *The Friedlander Self* (1998) that Friedlander once presented his photography in slides in complete silence—until someone in the audience asked him where a particular photograph was made. After giving an answer, he continued to run through the remaining slides, yet simultaneously called out the location of each image to inform the audience.

13. Cf. Höfer 1980. The series is originally made of black-and-white prints and color slides for projection.

14. Smolarski 2017: 150. "Proto-place" is a place metaphorically considered under construction, that is to say in the process of becoming a concrete place. Therefore, "proto-place" resembles to a collage that is fluid, transformative, and open to new interpretations.

15. Smolarski 2017: 149.

Fig. 8.

Ulmenstrasse Düsseldorf 1978.
© Candida Höfer, Cologne /
VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020.



Fig. 9.

Weidengasse Cologne 1975.
© Candida Höfer, Cologne / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2020.





Fig. 10.

Photomontage ca. 1978.

© Gudrun Ebert, DOMiD-Archiv, Köln.

The woman traveling on a donkey in Berlin is in fact a villager from Gümüşlük, a seaside village on the southern Aegean coast of Turkey and a place the photographer frequently visited and spent time beginning in the early 1970s. This photograph is made in Gümüşlük on one of her visits. In the photo collage, therefore, Ebert's personal memory of village life is embedded and juxtaposed with the collective memory of city dwellers living in Berlin-Kreuzberg, where migrants had already settled in and become permanent residents of the neighborhood by the mid-1970s.

In *The Collective Memory*, Maurice Halbwachs demonstrates the multilayered and intricate relationship between space and the collective memory. While stating that "every collective memory unfolds within a spatial framework,"¹⁶ he underlines the fact that both personal and collective recollections of the past are always bound to space. This means that we cannot recall any past event without thinking of a certain place where it was originally set. Halbwachs elaborates this statement by way of two related arguments. According to his analysis, memory is embedded in spaces and always linked to a locale, and, at the same time, it is defined by the spatial images individuals as well as groups collect with time.¹⁷ In that regard, the photo collage created by Gudrun Ebert also contains spatial images of the photographer herself as well as the social groups living in those localities.

The Italian architect Aldo Rossi understands the city as an analogous system in which the reality and the imagination, the historic and the personal coexist.¹⁸ In the panel *La città analoga* (1976), Rossi and his colleagues created a collage of histo-

ric urban spaces and architecture, and of Rossi's personal memories, architectural designs, sketches, and drawings of his projects, with the intention to represent the complex structure of the city (Fig. 11). This was indeed an assemblage of spatial images and a new understanding of memory embedded in the city that brought Rossi to the concept of analogy. Being familiar with the work of Halbwachs on collective memory, Rossi understood the city as "the *locus* of the collective memory"¹⁹ and created a collage based on analogy to represent the city's function as the locus of collective as well as personal memories: "This overlapping of the individual and the collective memory, together with the invention that takes place within the *time* of the city, has led me to the concept of *analogy*. Analogy expresses itself through a process of architectural design whose elements are preexisting and formally defined, but whose true meaning is unforeseen at the beginning and unfolds only at the end of the process. Thus the meaning of the process is identified with the meaning of the city."²⁰

Memory also comes into play in Candida Höfer's work, especially when she re-arranges her self-images in solo exhibitions such as the one in Düsseldorf. Snapshots dating as far back as the 1970s were selected out of her photography archive and re-arranged to make a new series entitled *Projection Düsseldorf III 2012*. Most photographs originate from the *Fenster* (Window) series of the mid-1970s

16. Halbwachs 1980 [1950]: 3.
17. Ibid.: 15.

18. For the collage panel *La città analoga*, Canaletto's painting of Venice inspired Rossi in that it is "a capriccio in which Palladio's projects for the Ponte di Rialto, the Basilica of Vicenza, and the Palazzo Chiericati are set next to each other and described as if the painter were rendering an urban scene he had actually observed." Rossi 1982 [1966]: 166.
19. Ibid.: 130.
20. Ibid.: 18.
21. Cf. Luyken / Wismer 2013.

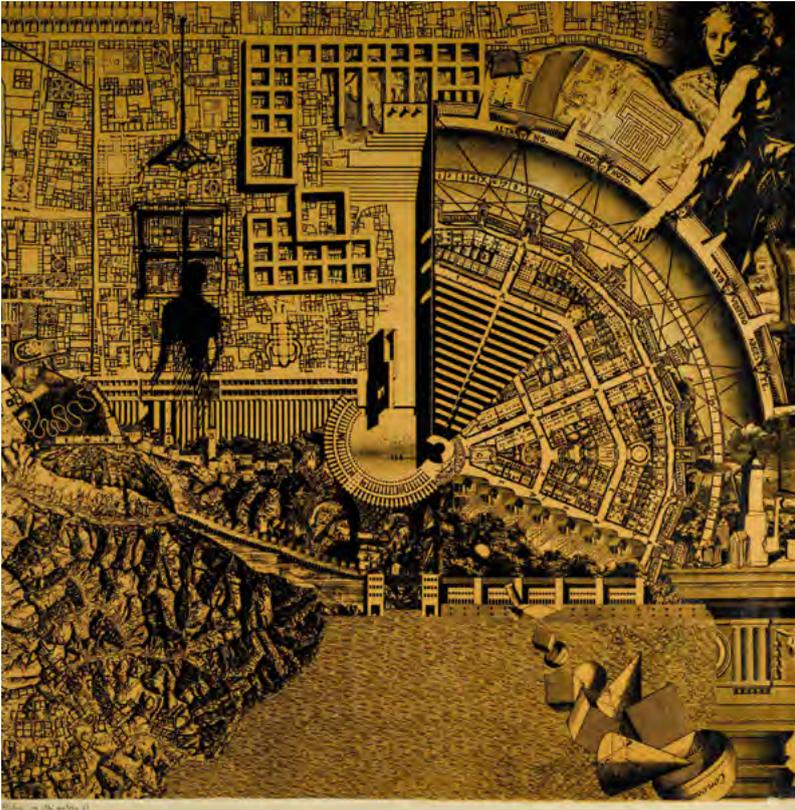


Fig. 11.

Aldo Rossi, Eraldo Consolascio, Bruno Reichlin, and Fabio Reinhart,
La città analoga, 1976. Print on paper, 102 x 100 cm. Private collection.
© Eredi Aldo Rossi, courtesy of Fondazione Aldo Rossi.

Fig. 12.

Weidengasse Cologne 1982.

© Guenay Ulutuncok, DOMiD-Archiv, Köln.



(Fig. 5).²¹ The photographer herself conducts this process of re-assembling images, not necessarily the curator. Therefore, she involves her personal memory, intertwined with the urban memory of the photographed street where she lived in Düsseldorf while studying at the Art Academy with Hilda and Bernd Becher.

In his seminal text *The Memory of Photography*, David Bate reminds us that photography is a “device for remembering.”²² Furthermore, he states that “photography is the machine that industrializes visual memory” in what he calls the “meta-archive.”²³ Thanks to her photography archive, Candida Höfer allows herself a temporary forgetting and the distortion of the real moment of the photograph. In that way, her archive stores the memory of her photographic practice and the traces left by her personal memory, “mnemic-traces,”²⁴ as Bate would call them.

Constructed both visually and spatially, memory then contains a series of “spatial images” (after Halbwachs) and personal “mnemic-traces” (after Bate) that have to be localized. The self-images of Höfer provide such a localization, especially the ones with her own reflection in shop windows. In a recent interview, Höfer revealed her interest in windows where the interior and exterior are juxtaposed: “What intrigues me deeply about windows is the fact that through them, elements from the exterior can enter, and things from the interior can leave to go outside. To put it another way: the inside can see what is outside, while that which is outside can enter into the inside.”²⁵ Standing with her camera in front of shop windows, the

photographer indeed makes the porous qualities of those public spaces visible.²⁶ Yet it is also true that she was intrigued by the reflections of her own image and posture that showed her dressed differently depending on the time of the year. Her initial self-images taken in front of shop windows made her aware of the potential of creating a new photographic series on shop windows in which the spatial expansion of multiple urban artifacts on the street (building façades, roads, sidewalks, etc.) overlap with the interior spaces of the shops, all of which indeed compose the spatial framework of the collective memory. Thus, a photograph in the series, once printed and publicly viewed, reveals the *locus* of the collective memory.

I would argue that Höfer’s self-images function as a site of memory in two ways. For the photographer, her self-images generated a new way of looking at the city in the 1970s, enabling her to document the complexity and multilayered character of urban space. On the other hand, the locals who lived in those streets and neighborhoods of Düsseldorf would later perceive these self-images in public art exhibitions and in printed catalogues, and absorb them as spatial images through which they could localize their collective memory.

Photograph as Site

Reflecting critically on the capitalist-driven uses of photography in 1978, John Berger stated the need for an alternative use of photography. His suggestion for an alternative practice stressed a correlation between photography and memory that aims “to incorporate photography into

22. Bate 2010: 243.

23. *Ibid.*: 248.

24. *Ibid.*: 252.

25. Hamma 2018.

26. In another essay, I have illustrated the porosity and porous qualities of public spaces of migration in the 1970s with an analysis of Candida Höfer’s photography of the Turkish community living abroad. Cf. Kaçel 2018.
27. Berger 1980: 58.

social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory.”²⁷

According to Berger, a new context for a photograph could be constructed based on social experience as well as social memory. Opposing any unilinear use of a photograph, he described this context as a “radial system” analogous to memory. This means memory involves “an enormous number of associations all leading to the same event.”²⁸ Considering the public use of photography in contemporary architecture today that just serves to beautify and aestheticize the design in printed and digital media, one could argue that this needs to be challenged by transferring Berger’s words to urban memory. But how? Can photography as visual urbanism generate such a challenge and change in practice?

Thinking of photography as discursive space (after Krauss) enables two expansions: (1) photograph as a *site of memory* and (2) photograph as a *site of self-reflection* that is made of intertwined relationships, between the subject photographed, the photographer, and the viewer, objects and places, events and people.

Locating collective and personal memories of migration in urban space through photography would allow the study of micro-urbanisms to emerge in two ways: first, visual memories and biographies of places can be recorded, and second, a new kind of knowledge production can emerge by perceiving, analyzing, and narrating a photograph as a site of memory. Such a reading of time and place is the great potential of photographic works

28. Ibid.: 60, 63. “A radial system has to be constructed around the photograph so that it may be seen in terms which are simultaneously personal, political, economic, dramatic, everyday and historic.”

29. Eisenman 1982: 7.

produced by a number of photographers. Here I would like to name Guenay Ulutuncok and his documentation of a street near the main train station in Cologne that is significant for the urban and social history of Turkish and Italian communities living in the city (Fig. 12). The *locale* or *locus* that is present in the photograph here is in line with Peter Eisenman’s remark in the preface he wrote for the English translation of Rossi’s book *The Architecture of the City*. In Eisenman’s words, “while the locus is a site which can accommodate a series of events, it also in itself constitutes an event.”²⁹ The event here—waiting outside of the Italian/Turkish cinema in Weidengasse—triggers a photographic act for the photographer to pursue. Containing both “the singularity of place (*locus solus*) and a record of events that are part of collective” and personal memories, this photograph, I would argue, constructs itself as a site.³⁰ It relates itself to a specific location or *locus*, and thus generates a potential for “site thinking” and “site knowledge” (to use architectural design terms)³¹ in a reflexive way among locals and photographers, designers and planners, and thereby initiates a common ground for the analysis of spatial, cultural, and political resources of the city.

The interplay between the city as the locus of collective memory and the photograph as a singular site surrounded by present and past experiences can be the central focus of a new transdisciplinary, visual approach to architecture and urbanism. Visual urbanism can indeed provide the basis for that radial and plural system John Berger hoped for, as it is made of spatial images on which any social group’s collective memory is based.

30. Ibid.: 7.

31. Cf. Burns / Kahn 2005.

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