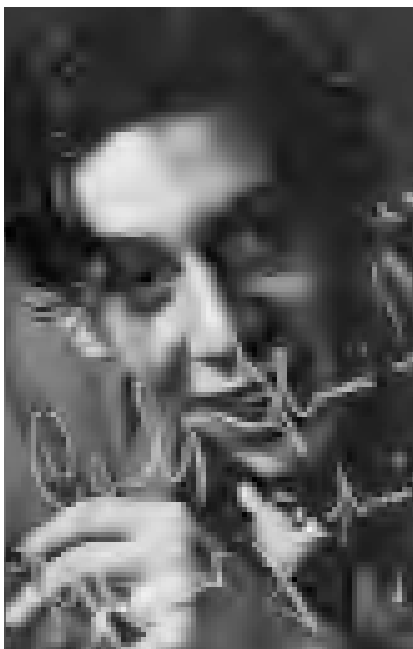


# CHARGESHEIMER

EMERGING FROM THE DARK DAYS OF WORLD WAR TWO, HE CAPTURED LIFE IN EARLY POSTWAR GERMANY WITH A POIGNANCY THAT HERALDED A NEW DIRECTION IN PHOTO JOURNALISM. UNVARNISHED AND GRITTY, HIS IMAGES BROUGHT OUT THE HARSH REALITY OF THE WORKING CLASSES IN HIS HOMETOWN OF COLOGNE. LATER, THE ONSET OF DEPRESSION COLORED HIS WORK EVEN DARKER, UNTIL, AT AGE 47, HE SAW NO OTHER WAY OUT BUT TO TAKE HIS OWN LIFE. ANNELU KÜSTERS AND ROBERT L. JONES EXAMINE THE CAREER OF AN ARTIST WHO HAS SEEN A RESURGENCE IN EUROPE BUT IS LITTLE KNOWN ON THIS SIDE OF THE ATLANTIC.

Everyday street life was grand theater to German photographer Chargesheimer (1924 to 1971). Born Karl Heinz Hargesheimer, he was a foremost observer of postwar Germany, using his camera and quick-witted, sardonic mind to fashion a visual documentary of the Rhine region, its people and their personality during the 1950s and 1960s.

Even though today Chargesheimer's work is little known outside his native land and the inner-circles of art collectors and aficionados, his reputation has seen a resurgence during the past decade. Last year, the Ludwig Museum in Cologne staged a retrospective, *Chargesheimer: Bohemian from Cologne*, exhibiting more than 250 photographs of the eclectic artist's work. The companion volume, published by Greven Verlag and edited by the museum's photographic curator, Bodo von Dewitz, captures the full range of Chargesheimer's



eclectic tastes and projects while manifesting his powerful photographic vision.

Little is known about Chargesheimer's early childhood. Young Karl Heinz was born on a narrow street in Cologne, the only child of Amalie and Heinrich, a tax inspector. The Great War had ended six years earlier, and Germany was burdened by reparation payments. Inflation had skyrocketed—by the time bank notes reached the store counter, they were already worthless. Never-

theless, his mother, who came from a relatively affluent family, encouraged her son's artistic aspirations.

Amidst the growing disillusion with the Weimar Republic, Adolf Hitler dictated the turgid *Mein Kampf* from his prison cell in the Landsberg fortress, and began forming the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), which



MOVIE THEATER, BERLIN—1959



VIEW TOWARD THE COLOGNE CATHEDRAL—C. 1960

Heinrich soon joined. It was during this period that young Karl, a sensitive soul, began developing a strong antipathy toward the brutal Nazi regime.

In 1942, 18-year-old Karl started studying photography and design at the newly founded Cologne Art College, moving to Munich the next year. The following years are like an underexposed photograph. Chargesheimer later wrote in his *curriculum vitae* that war and its upheaval prevented him from learning a trade or staying employed. Two stories circulated regarding how he avoided serving in the Nazi military: In one, in order to escape the draft, he went underground, was caught and sent to prison, where he became ill. In another, he told friends, he studied in Munich, working for Dr. Carl

Lamb, photographing historical monuments so in case of destruction they could be restored after the war. When the prospect of military service loomed, he successfully manipulated his health to avoid conscription, and was able to stay out of the war.

In 1945, Chargesheimer returned to post-war Cologne, one of Germany's most decimated cities. The Cathedral alone remained, towering over an area of more than 12,000 flattened buildings. Karl took it upon himself to photograph the ruins, applying a particular style usually reserved for antiquity called *Trümmerfotografie* (the photography of ruins).

It was in connection with his return to Cologne that he changed his name to Charges-



CHILDSPLAY—1952



AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE FORUM THEATER, BERLIN—C. 1966



TORSO — 1960

heimer (a contraction of his given name, trading the *K* in Karl for a *C*), perhaps to separate himself from his father, perhaps to imbue his name with an international flair just as Cologne, though in ruins, started to open its doors to the world, blossoming into a cosmopolitan city.

**C**hargesheimer spent three months at the Institut Français, where he exhibited his prints of Paris. Out of the ruins of postwar Europe, he fashioned a gritty photographic vision that revealed the harsh everyday realities of the working classes. Here was a new kind of documentary photography that stripped away all adornments in grainy, straightforward 35mm compositions.

Less genteel in execution than street photographers of the previous generation, such as Henri Cartier-Bresson or Paul Strand, Chargesheimer's work is more direct, easily the German counterpart to such critical mid-century photographers as Louis Faurer and Robert Frank.

But, unlike these two European émigrés to America, who could never have been fully part and parcel of the New York streets, Chargesheimer could be both a fly on the wall and an active participant as he shot blue-collar German life on the back alleys of Cologne or in the beer halls of Gelsenkirchen. His images combine the poetic whimsy and cynical satire reminiscent of Weegee's urban photography.

Initially, however, acceptance of Charges-



VEGETABLE GROECER, ZWIRNERSTRASSE, COLOGNE—1957

heimer's bold new work was slow. When he tried to find an editor to publish his images of the Cologne ruins, all attempts were in vain. "Nobody wanted to see such ruins," writes von Dewitz. The postwar art scene in Cologne was vivacious and heterodoxical: Everything was now permitted, from classical sculptures to works by abstract artists who had suffered under Nazi censorship a few years earlier.

While Chargesheimer surely benefited from the new openness for artistic expression, he remained aloof from affiliations with cooperative efforts. "He was a maverick and a lone wolf," von Dewitz remarks about this shy man who nonetheless cut an imposing figure, his

face partially hidden behind a bushy moustache, his head topped by a wide-brimmed black hat.

Despite his reticent character, however, Chargesheimer was no pushover. Unafraid of confrontation, he was never interested in being liked by everybody. "Often he said the right things at the wrong moments," remembers Gigi Campi, one of his closest friends and owner of a popular Italian restaurant that "Chargie" often frequented.

Chargesheimer was first and foremost an individualist and bohemian, guided by his wide-ranging interests—including stints of theatrical work and later directing the graphic design of his photographic monographs—and a unique vision. A colleague characterized him as a radical realist in



WAITING ROOM, GELSENKIRCHEN—C. 1958





KISSING COUPLE, COLOGNE—1957



DANCING IN THE STREET, COLOGNE—1958

search of political and emotional truth, a quest clearly expressed in his photography, in particular in his portraits. He always tried to find authentic people who wore no masks on their faces. “I will undress you with my camera down to bare bones,” he once told an actress. He was as interested in what lay buried in the shadows as in what stood out in the bright light.

Nowhere is this philosophy more evident than in his 1957 portrait of German chancellor Konrad Adenauer. The German economic miracle of the 1950s under the Marshall Plan, rearma-

ment and the era of political reconstruction was in full swing under the Adenauer government. “*Wir sind wieder wer!* (We are somebody again!)” was the slogan of Germany’s new material prosperity. But Chargesheimer, ever the passionate observer, did not sugar-coat. His portrait of a sallow Adenauer—the face of the young republic’s economic resurgence—was printed on the cover of the newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* and shot Chargesheimer to fame.

While the left loved seeing their opposition’s leader unmasked in the national media, Adenauer and his Christian Democrats took offense at their standard-bearer being por-



PORTRAIT—1954

trayed in a less than flattering light. Ironically, more than 50 years later, this striking image is the most iconic and memorable of the conservative German leader, showing Chargesheimer as an artist ahead of his time.

The magazine cover and its ensuing controversy allowed Chargesheimer to come into his own. He photographed his beloved Cologne and its residents, especially those who lived at the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. His prolific output was channeled into a series of best-selling illustrated books, many in collaboration with internationally recognized author Heinrich Böll: *Cologne Intime* in 1957, and the charming *Unter*

*Krahenbäumen*, an intimate portrait of a side street (now sadly cut off by a freeway), were followed by his deceptively bleak *Im Ruhrgebiet* (*In the Ruhr District*) in 1958.

*Im Ruhrgebiet* was not without controversy. The regional coffee table book underwent a thorough overhaul with this seminal volume—Chargesheimer flaunted the area's industrial *schmutz*. The precise tone of gray soot predominates, wiping away any attempts at carefully rendering a full tonal range. Shooting in a withering method without stylistic affectation, he presented a landscape dominated by the grime of



BASEMENT JAZZ CLUB, COLOGNE—C. 1950S



BERLIN — 1959

cobblestones, girders, smokestacks, slag heaps and railyards. He shot Cologne's famous Gothic cathedral from a distance, framed behind the kind of places tourists avoid—squat houses and stucco tenements topped by television aerials, spires reaching to the new gods of technology and commerce.

Chargesheimer's street portraits, which included rudely gawking schoolchildren and sleeping drunks slouched over bar stools, were also a far cry from the travelogues boasting clean-scrubbed happy peasants in *lederhosen*. "We are sick and tired of being depicted in this way by outsiders. We cannot accept being represented like this!" groused the Lord Mayor of Essen upon its publication. "But his friends lauded his self-assurance," von Dewitz remarked on Chargesheimer's artistic integrity, and "his courage to stand up for his beliefs when criticizing postwar society."

Indeed, Chargesheimer's newfound fame allowed the Renaissance man to spread his artistic wings. He staged several modern theater and opera productions, including Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza*, an account of fascism, in Cologne in 1962. He also did theatre work in Hamburg and Essen. His participation in theater and music opened up photographic opportunities to him. He made impressive portraits of jazz icons Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, and his book, *Theater-Theater*, published in 1967, is a fascinating document of the dramatic world Chargesheimer loved and worked in.

Chargesheimer also made serious inroads into abstract photography. He created chemigrams exposed onto photographic paper, many of which were reproduced in his book *Lichtgrafik (Light Graphics)*, published in 1961. The



THE FUTURE OF COLOGNE LIES IN BABY CARRIAGES—1957

duotone prints communicated a visual sophistication that evoked Oriental symbolism and had inviting, luminescent textural motifs that created in the reader a desire to connect with Chargesheimer's inventive images. He also tinkered with filigree wire sculptures and acrylic perpetual motion sculptures, which he called "meditation mills."

Despite his successes, as with so many great artists, Chargesheimer was haunted by the demons of melancholy and an unstable home life. "He would have periods of great activity and afterwards fall into deep depression," photography professor Pan Walther says in describing his compatriot. By the time Chargesheimer embarked on his final photographic project in 1970, *Köln 5 Uhr 30* (*Cologne at 5:30 a.m.*), he turned his camera eye toward a new kind of social commentary.

Gone are the bustle of people and industry found in books like *Berlin*, published in 1959, and *Menschen am Rhein* (*People Along the Rhine*), published in 1960. The full extent of Chargesheimer's alienation became evident with the publication of *Hanover*, published in 1970—the portraits seem burdened by a heavy weariness. By the time of *Köln 5 Uhr 30*'s publication, the face of man is excised entirely—only the cold fingerprints of his handiwork are left behind in this "melancholy swan song to Chargesheimer's Cologne", as von Dewitz wrote. Chargesheimer's traditional Cologne has been transformed into a deserted ghost town designed just for automobiles; arrows embossed in reflective paint on asphalt are symbolically herding humanity in a direction of conformity and mindless groupthink, proclaiming the end of the world—as T.S. Eliot wrote—"not with a bang, but a whimper."



CHANCELLOR KONRAD ADENAUER—COVER OF *DER SPIEGEL*, SEPTEMBER 1957

Chargesheimer's depression worsened after his second divorce, and he fell ill, lost weight, and began to fear that encroaching arthritis would prevent him from using his hands. One of the last portraits shows him wearing a beard that all but hides his face. He sits in front of his meditation machine with a deep sadness in his eyes. In December 1971, he spent Christmas with a girlfriend in the Alps, but returned home alone. The new year had just begun when he was found dead in his apartment, alcohol bottles and pills strewn around him. The police assumed suicide. The world of *Köln 5 Uhr 30*, poignantly without people, seemed like a legacy now. Perhaps Chargesheimer realized that his time was up. He was only 47.

In 2006, the city of Cologne erected a street sign commemorating Chargesheimer

on a drafty square in the shadow of the Cologne Cathedral. A place devoid of character, ugly and flattened, it could have been an image taken out of *Köln, 5 Uhr 30*. A symbol of the destruction of the artist's hometown by modern urban planning, *Chargesheimerplatz* may not be the best place to commemorate this man who built the Rhine metropolis an everlasting monument with his striking photographs—but it is the most ironic. Chargesheimer, in his own sarcastic way, would certainly have approved.

■ All photographs were provided courtesy Museum Ludwig, Cologne. The book titled *Chargesheimer: Bohemian from Cologne*, was published by Greven Verlag, Cologne, in connection with the 2007 exhibition by the same name at Museum Ludwig.



WILLY BRANDT, COLOGNE—1960