

A Typology of Mess Punkt: 101 Mess Punkt found in Berlin

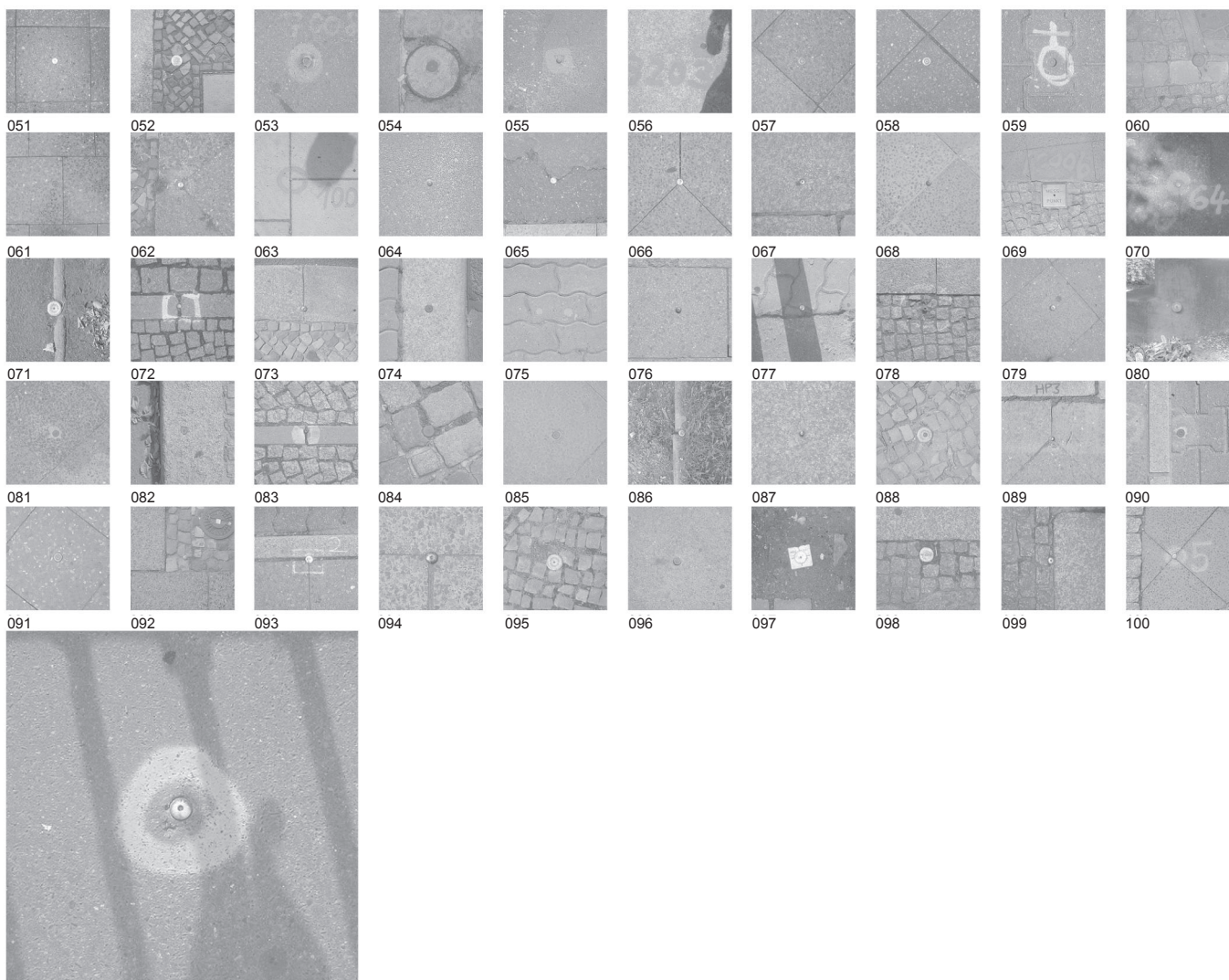
by Jeremy Beaudry

Within the course of walking down any given block in Berlin, you might notice out of the corner of your eye a small raised metal disc or knob placed on the sidewalk; it might be brass or steel, with a weathered patina, or gleaming new and shiny. And maybe what draws your attention in further, then, is this: there appear to be letters embossed or stamped in relief around the circumference of the disc. So, the tiny metal dot seems to have some intentionality invested in it, some vague purpose to its being where it is. Closer inspection allows you to identify the letters, which spell the words “Mess Punkt” or maybe “Verm Punkt” and you also notice a precisely machined dimple in the exact center of the disc. With your foot you give it a little nudge; the thing holds fast and you guess that it is spiked into the sidewalk.

You may register this first encounter as an oddity, merely another errant distraction among many which has stuttered your walks through the city, possibly giving cause for a snap-

shot or at least a closer look. However, the next day you spot another one of these strange metal discs in the sidewalk, and maybe this one is slightly larger or smaller, made of aluminum rather than steel or brass, and maybe there are some markings and numbers sprayed in fluorescent paint around the disc on the paving there as well. One Mess Punkt is an anomaly, but two (then 3 and 4 and 5...) Mess Punkt suggests a typology. But a typology of what?

“Punkt” is easy: “point.” Your dictionary shows you that “Mess” is shorthand for “measuring,” and “Verm” is an abbreviation for “Vermessung,” meaning “measurement.” Measuring, or measurement, point. Measuring points spiked into the sidewalk obviously used for measuring what? Utilities infrastructure buried underground? Lot lines? Building setbacks? You guess that the dimple in the Mess Punkt must be for coupling with some other instrument, a stake or a plumb line or a surveyor’s sighting device. But you’ve never seen one in action.



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You become obsessed with the Mess Punkt. As you walk, your eyes scan the ground from left to right and back in search of other Mess Punkt, perhaps never-before-seen types to add to your taxonomy. Your eyes are tired and strained, your forehead aches. The intensity with which you search for these miniscule points is blinding you to the world above the plane of the sidewalk. Your thoughts are filled with abstract representations which plot a new map of Berlin according to the network of all the Mess Punkts in the city. In your imagination you move from point to point making any number of precise measurements and calculations in search of some new hermetic understanding of the city. Your theories devolve into some vast cryptic code capable of creating a magnum opus text of the city with which initiates descend upon Berlin, measuring tapes and notebooks in hand, plotting points of intersection and curvature, climbing through windows and running across courtyards in search of direct lines between adjacent Mess Punkt. With so many of these spikes distributed across the city, you begin to wonder if perhaps, too, they are holding the city to the earth, some makeshift attempt to fix Berlin to the world lest it fly away because of some freak sudden loss of gravitational pull.

In time, the images of the Mess Punkt gather further significance through the machinations of memory. Half-remembered itineraries, fragmented observations, and abridged commentaries are affixed in the mind through the puncture of the Punkt. (Barthes' notion of the punctum in photographs takes a giant step towards the literal!) Seen comprehensively, the Mess Punkt form a tidy little map of a summer in Berlin, a sequence of quotidian moments that reveal one possible narrative of many in the experience of everyday life in the city. You recall with difficulty, or imagine recalling with difficulty, the longish shadow of the Mess Punkt in the narrow street as it turns slightly to the right just before reaching the entrance to the S-Bhan. Or maybe along the Spree quickly snapping the photo before running to catch the bus. What section of the wall were you near when you noticed the crushed cigarette butt and how it gestured so specifically in the direction of the Punkt and your left foot? A city compressed into a constellation of discursive points.

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