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LIVING IN TRANSITION

PHOTO SERIES BY URSULA SCHULZ-DORNBURG

"The houses of mankind form constellations on earth."

GASTON BACHELARD

"[...] for many things here overlap and coexist."

W. G. SEBALD

"Where the heart lies, one carries memories around like a hole."

DIANE GLANCY

Travelling with the requirement of exposing oneself physically and mentally, allowing oneself to be drawn completely into otherness. Becoming so strange to oneself that it is only then that one really first comes to oneself. For Ursula Schulz-Dornburg taking photographs is synonymous with being on the move, and her photographic investigation always takes the form of a series of shots. As they are portrayed, topographies develop into combinations containing many different perspectives and layers. Even though not a single person is to be seen in many of the series, these places are always inhabited places, or places formerly inhabited, albeit in the most remote antiquity. They are "settled" places, where even in individual features, even in faint traces, the human element present is like a resolute gesture of living in the world. But above all they are, both externally and internally, archetypal places. Here seeing means seeing again, and recognising, according to Plato, is recognising again – an interplay between external and internal image along the lines of *déjà vu*. Thus there are two simultaneous movements that correspond to one another, outwards and inwards, expanding and contracting: a movement into the distance that is matched by an inner concentration – a complementary movement of life. The camera acts as a medium between them: a casing, cave, camera obscura or black box. An interface between inside and outside. As a small physical object, the camera itself is also, in passing, a reflection of the motif that constantly runs through all of Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's work: the architectural motif of the house as a place of human dwelling, of persisting in time. An internal and external place of refuge. These two aspects come together in the photographs. Thus each picture is also always a kind of self-portrait. Becoming what one already is.

Der Tigris des alten Mesopotamien (The Tigris of Ancient Mesopotamia). This was the oldest cultivated region in the world, almost unaltered for six thousand years. The garden of Eden, where time stood still. A land between two rivers, the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris, which made agriculture possible in the wilderness. In 1980, at the outbreak of war between Iraq and Iran, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg photographed the marsh country in the lower reaches of the Tigris, the amphibious realm of the Ma'dan, one of the most ancient civilisations still existing in the world at that time. A realm of water, sky, horizon and reeds. On small islands in the water, woven out of reeds and set in among the reeds, stand the muhdif, light nomad constructions of which it is hard to say whether they are boats that have come to a temporary halt or houses that are about to cast off. At any moment more reeds can be added, in a living process in which they endure by virtue of their transitory nature. The beauty and skill that they reveal are the direct result of the simplicity and functionality of their woven construction. The enduring existence of the dwelling and its temporary nature are closely bound together in the architecture of the muhdif, as also are absoluteness and provisionality, isolation and openness. These reed structures were engraved as images on old stone stele that are now five thousand years old. In the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh, one of the most ancient texts in human history, the origins of which go back to about 2100 B.C. and which, like the muhdif, was kept alive for thousands of years, a god, not being able to impart a warning directly to men, addresses it to the house made out of reeds:

"Reed-hut, reed-hut! Wall! Wall! / Reed-hut, hearken! Wall, reflect! / Man of Shuruppak, son of Ubar-Tutu, / Tear down [this] house, build a ship! / Give up possessions, seek thou life. / Despise property and keep the soul alive! / Aboard the ship take thou the seed of all living things."

Power originating from a spirit of fear. The story of Gilgamesh, the ruler of Uruk, presents a drama that deals with dwelling in the world, the transition from the life of the nomad to settled existence. His deeds – the construction of mighty city walls, the clearing of the Forest of Cedar, his attempt to eradicate all evil from the land – are the classic projects of cultural heroes. What drives him on is the awareness of his mortality, for although he is predominantly a god, he also has a small portion of humanity, sufficient to make him mortal. The fear of death is like a thorn sticking in his flesh, goading him to search restlessly for eternal life, which in the end he finds, only to lose it again immediately. "It is not power that corrupts," says Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese civil rights campaigner and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, "but fear. Fear of losing control." One who no longer lives by the natural rhythms of the nomad must take over control of things. In the end he is seized by fear of losing control, fear of losing himself, fear of death.¹

Verschwundene Landschaft (Vanished Landscape). "Photographers deal in things which are continually vanishing," as Henri Cartier-Bresson said, precisely indicating the time-related basis of the process of photography. In Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's work, vanishing is present in many different forms. In this particular case, a contributory element is the fact that the dictator in Baghdad, Saddam Hussein, drained the marshes in only twenty years, thus depriving their inhabitants, the Shiite Ma'dan, of the basic means of existence, persecuting and killing them. For a dictator it was too hard to see what was going on in the floating in-between realm of the world of reeds, too hard to control the highly independent thoughts of its dwellers about matters of life and death. Men, animals and plants have vanished, and where the muhdif once were there are now motorways, military checkpoints, intensive agriculture and houses, the same as everywhere else. The blocking of the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris, retained in the reservoirs of the dams that were built in the course of the Turkish project in the upper reaches of the two rivers in South Anatolia, have contributed further to the disaster. Where the water ends, no land begins. Ursula Schulz-Dornburg photographed the marshes in black and white, archaic and clear, and in the light tones of the prints of the images she also takes them away. The ancient cultivated land is present here as it vanishes; someone who understands this pain does not need to see all the gory details. These topographies are shown as being in the process of transition, at the beginning of disintegration. The line of the horizon abolishes all perspectives, dividing space into two realms, nothing and almost nothing, sky and an expanse of water, which are folded together in a mirror image of one another, becoming one inside and outside. Seen from the horizon as a boundary that in itself is nothing, these places reveal themselves in the light of their finiteness. The horizon, the "zero line of humanity" (Ursula Schulz-Dornburg). The horizon, "perhaps the home of all mankind" (Eduardo Chillida).

"The horizon is more a verb
than a noun"
(Lawrence Weiner)

The magnificent work *Sonnenstand* (Solar Position) was produced in 1991-92, while the Gulf War was being waged in the Middle East and bombs were falling on the marshes of the Euphrates and the Tigris. Ursula Schulz-Dornburg repeatedly travelled to the Pyrenees and took photographs in the interiors of small hermitages and chapels constructed in the tenth century. Nearby is the Camino de Santiago, the Road of St James, the pilgrim route of the Christian Middle Ages: the journey, the way. The spiritual world of these ermitas (from the Greek word *eremos*, desolate), with their Mozarabic stylistic elements, comes from Christian and Islamic devoutness. In the ninth century, the Córdoba of Al-Andalus was the intellectual centre of Europe, a common history now commemorated in Spain by the Fundación El Legado Andalusi. The calendar of Córdoba establishes a relationship between the

earthly cycles of plants, animals and men in the course of the seasons of the year and the stellar cycles of sun and moon. The everyday touches the universal, the specific place on Earth and the cosmos enclose one another. In his Republic, Cicero lets three friends talk together about what significance should be conceded to earthly matters in relation to heavenly phenomena, and he writes: "Yet our house is not confined to the space that our four walls enclose, our house is indeed the whole world."

How can one represent time in photography, making time visible as a rhythmical process? Conceptually, *Sonnenstand* is Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's most powerful work. Photographs that are veritable images of light. In the *ermitas* she took sequences of photographs at different times of the year and at different times of day. The installation of the work shows the sequences during a single day – and thus the rotation of the Earth – in their horizontal progression in rows; the vertical arrangement of the rows one above another corresponds to the passing of the year, the cyclic movement of the Earth around the sun. Rays of sunshine enter through narrow window recesses, feeling their way with time through these narrow spaces. The cycles of time appear in the interior as shifting configurations of light, space blends into the dimension of time. Through perception a space-time develops in which the rotations and orbits of the heavenly bodies converge with the rhythms of human life, macrocosm and microcosm. Matter and light become apparent to one another in the resistance that matter opposes to the entering rays of light: as walls, the solid stone block of the altar, heaps of rubble or the hard-packed earth floor. The arrangement of the architectural structure and the nature of the material modulate the manner in which light appears, entering in a tight beam like a laser ray, fanning out, seeping away in the darkness or spreading as a soft glow. Light and darkness in a process of constant transformation. The horizon, the boundary of mediation, is drawn inside. An interaction of architecture and cosmological order in processes of sheer mathematical beauty.²

Like all Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's projects, *Sonnenstand* has many different aspects and can accordingly be appreciated on many levels: as precise documentation, not least of loss, and at the same time as a committed vote for an open, intercultural view of things – a commitment that arises from preciseness and contemplation, with melancholy not far away – the *ermitas* are deteriorating or else being ruined by exaggerated restoration. Conceptually and aesthetically, the conditions of perception, and also those of self-perception, are reflected. Last but not least, although perhaps not expressly thus intended, the medium of photography is subtly picked out *en passant* (by itself) as a central theme: light, which enters the black box of the camera as it does in the dark chambers of the *ermitas*. The great seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke described how the cavernous, room-sized *camerae obscurae* of his time exposed men to the uncertainty of a dark space, and thus really cut the ground beneath the supposedly sure stand point of the non-involved, objective observer. In 1922 Kazimir Malevich spoke of a "projection apparatus" that was both small and, at the same time, infinitely large: "The human skull displays infinity as the movement of ideas. It is like the endlessness of the universe [...] and it houses a projection apparatus that makes bright points appear, like stars in space. In the human skull, everything rises and declines exactly as it does in the universe."

The series *Grenzlandschaften* (Borderscapes), 1998-2000, also shows interiors. Rock chambers, hermit cells, hacked out of the precipitous mountain face of the Transcaucasus in or after the sixth century by Christians who had emigrated from Syria. Bertubani, Udabno, Natlismtsemeli, Chichriduri, Zamebulo, Mrabalzkaro, Dodosrka, Muchrani, Saberejbi, Berebis Seri, Werangaredja. The concept of a boundary does not only refer to the modern frontier location of the caves between Georgia and Azerbaijan. Historically, they lay on a borderline between imposed and voluntary exile. And of course, in the solitude of extreme reclusion, there were also existential borderline experiences, physical and mental. Borderline experiences that also had to be brought to their conclusion so that these pictures could be created.

The caves could not be seen from outside. Inside, the rock walls of the cells are permeated by cracks and splits: this is a tectonic collision zone, an earthquake area. Seismic forces have tilted, compressed, stretched and torn apart the sedimented layers of stone. Inside the caves, stillness and mountain enclose the body like a stone womb. Shut up inside a cave in the mountain: the body as place, path and boundary. Embodied time, embodied space. Shut up in the cave of the body. Squeezed into this narrow space—the words *angostura* (narrowness) and *angustia* (anguish) share the same root. Perhaps the meditation on existence here was like Meister Eckhart's paradoxical description: "The more the soul collects itself, the narrower it becomes, and the narrower it is, the broader it becomes." A path through a narrow passage, gain through loss. Living in the world as a visitor, in transition, taking refuge "on the back of a tiger". In this existential exposure it is possible to experience a radical freedom that, by its very nature, reacts subversively towards any demand for power. In sequences, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg develops the entire phenomenological spectrum of these rock cells: traces in the fine sand of the cave floor, as distant as the first footprints on the surface of the moon; scars in the stone, made by chiselling or by tectonic movements; the interplay of light and darkness, which condense into abstract sculptural forms in space; the eye within looking outwards: the horizon — its horizontal line answered within by the vertical line of gravity.

Transitorte (*Transitsites*), 1997-2001, is a title that could be applied to the whole of Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's work. Bus stops in Armenia, the oldest Christian country in the world although nowadays nobody rightly knows where it belongs. Architectural elements constructed in the time of the Brezhnev era, some even earlier, as Communism's promise of a better world. Shelters between road and horizon, the boundary of settled territory and mountains, steppe and sheer nothingness. Places for waiting and people waiting, expressing solidarity in their temporality. The monstrous contradiction echoed in the very word "utopia": *eutopos*, the good place; and *outopos*, no place.

One of the bus stops is occupied by people who have come back from Germany, rejected asylum-seekers — "man spricht Deutsch" / "we speak German". At another bus stop a small cube has been constructed, set on pallets; this is where the shepherd lives. Many of the bus stops no longer provide shelter — iron frameworks through which the wind and weather pass, filigree ornaments, arching flourishes, calligraphy with or without people waiting, simply a sign for shelter. At any rate a sign, a reference point where one can stop and get one's bearings. A marker in space, on which time breaks. Waiting, nothing more. The people waiting, exposed to time, hold their ground, wait obediently and continue to hold out. Their raised faces, like the characters of a shifting, indecipherable text, are spelt out in a provisional eternity.³

Erinnerungslandschaften (*Memoryscapes*), 2000-01. "Remembering means having to retrace one's steps, totally alone, in a dried-up river bed" (Osip Mandelstam). One can see muffled-up figures, lost in a landscape of snow and ice. As if to confirm a human presence in this wilderness, there are things: tents, meteorological instruments, sledges, a small boat, a ship, a plane and, of course, a flag, rammed into the ice. At first sight Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's photographs show this reality accurately, but after a brief irritation one realises that they are models that faithfully reproduce the original to scale. They are dioramas in the Museum of Arctic and Antarctic in St Petersburg, constructed in order to keep alive the memory of heroic events. The memory of the rescue by the Soviet icebreaker *Krasin* of the crew of the airship *Italia*, which had broken down during an attempt to fly over the North Pole in 1928, and the pilot Babushkin, who then became the first man to succeed in landing a glider on an ice floe. And the memory of scientific heroism: since the thirties the Soviets had had scientific research stations on ice floes drifting in the Arctic; those who went out there exposed themselves to a year of extreme silence, cold, darkness and loneliness in order to measure and record the flows of ice, wind and water and their own drifting through the cold heart of the planet.

The scenes were photographed with a simple amateur camera using a small film format (APS), and subsequently enlarged. The blurred quality resulting from this discrepancy gives the images the authenticity of photographs taken in extreme conditions, and at the same time an atmosphere of

reverie: dream image and waking image blended together. Believable yet unreal. "The image comes from a collaboration between the real and the unreal" (Gaston Bachelard). This impression is further strengthened by the use of colour, which, as in the case of prints of early photographs that have later been coloured by hand, by its unreal transparency drives the subjects into the realm of the imagination instead of making them appear more realistic.

The photograph and the diorama share a common history. Louis Daguerre invented the diorama in 1822, and in 1837, by means of a chemical process, he succeeded in fixing the image produced by the camera obscura, with which painters had been working for many years. From the very start, both diorama and photograph were techniques for fixing moments, fixing time. Memory itself plays no part in this process, it only comes later, in the act of looking at the image. "We cannot develop and print a memory" (Henri Cartier-Bresson). In transferring the Arctic scenes of the St Petersburg dioramas to photographs, Ursula Schulz-Dornburg commits a twofold breach of what is already an abundantly unreal reality. Thereby she provides access to a very personal, ambiguous world of images, which contains the inherent possibility of being a world of internal images, saturated with memories. The *Erinnerungslandschaften* – icy tableaux of isolation and solitude, distress and rescue – are images that scramble together both personal and collective memory. By introducing recollection and at the same time distancing it, they have the liberating effect of a Buster Keaton film: without any trace of irony, but human and comically heroic.

"Hold still – keep going"

"Now I travel maybe more inside than outside"

"The eye should learn to listen before it looks"

(Robert Frank)

The five series of photographs, created between 1980 and 2001, are related to a concept that is of great importance in Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's work: Shelter (*Zuflucht*). A concept that in the history of art and architecture in the twentieth century is associated with Henry Moore's "shelter books" – drawings of scenes in London Underground stations during the air-raids in the Second World War – and with alternative "shelter architecture" and its references to the constructions of earlier cultures, especially in the USA.⁴ Reed houses, caves and ermitas, bus stops, tents and research stations are examples of shelter architecture, each in its own particular way. In the images their presence is sharp and dear. At the same time they are existential metaphors for what the word "shelter" indicates: refuge, protection, sanctuary.

Shelter architecture interprets the existence of human beings on the Earth on an elementary level and places it in dialectical tension between self-assertion and exposure of oneself to risk. Steering between two poles of tension: a lifelong personal experiment with shifting parameters. The poet Georges Spyridaki expresses this wonderfully as he evokes an image of his house: "My house is diaphanous, but it is not of glass. It is more of the nature of vapour. Its walls contract and expand as I desire. At times, I draw them close about me like protective armour [...] But at others I let the walls of my house blossom out in their own space, which is infinitely extensive." It is clear that here the poet is speaking of an inner house, an inner dwelling. This corresponds to the desire for an "internal structure", an inner refuge, which, according to Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, provides a strong impulse for her work. However, the possibility of withdrawal into an enclosed space, whether internal or external, requires a move in the opposite direction, as is made clear – with the ironic ambiguity of photography – by the Spanish word *exposición*, which means exhibition, but also exposing oneself, staking one's own life, and, last but not least, the time during which the film receives light, the exposure of the photograph.

Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's photographs are formally perfect, but she is not content with formal excellence. She combines the external elements of form and structure and documentation with a narrative approach, with history, and also with perception, alert intuition, reflection and recognition. She

keeps this combination equally open to "outer" – the objective and general – and "inner" – the personal and special; and, in so doing, in her photographs she establishes depths that are also accessible to the observer in their many facets. Answers are not to be expected, of course, but rather, perhaps, the very same questions, always presented in new ways and perhaps more dearly, more decisively than before. The inexplicability of oneself is not resolved but liberatingly drawn into the realm of the ordinary, placed in context. On this path there is no certainty to be had, but instead, most probably, a resolute openness guided by alertness.

The dominance of the theme of architecture in Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's work is reminiscent, in terms of photography, of Karl Bloßfeldt, who photographed plants as fantastical architectural structures of geometrical strictness. With Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, the aspect of formal, compositional construction is scarcely of lesser importance. But it is consciously counterbalanced by a relational quality: her photographic series reveal a very varied, dynamic echo chamber of references and connotations. They evoke what is not visible (any longer), what has vanished or been lost, those who have retreated or departed, simultaneously and together with what is visible, with what (still) remains. In their existential openness, the people waiting in Transitorte mark the precise crossing point, a nomadic manner of living "in transition". The situations presented correspondingly embody places of transition, of in-between worlds, of borders. Transitory places. Places that derive their individuality not from their autonomy, their self-sufficiency, but from an interplay with many different references. They are characterised by the dynamic created when different realities engage together.

A paradigm emerges, the paradigm of an enlightenment resolutely broadened in its spectrum, with an urge for accuracy, objectivity and commitment that is drawn from contemplation; in other words, from awareness of the integration of the individual into its surrounding, living context. It is clear that such awareness reacts exceedingly critically towards the institutionalised practices of "culture". As has been explained by, for example, the Indian theorist on culture Homi Bhabha, a part in this is played by the concepts of imagination, memory and cultural interchange, and of course also the common field of ethics and aesthetics. The activity of art creates links – as is impressively exemplified by the many connections between the countless NGOs working throughout the world against the excesses of the process of globalisation – with other areas that produce knowledge and recognition, other areas of engagement. Ursula Schulz-Dornburg's places of shelter are more than a reflection of this – they anticipate this development, specifically in the focus on what is vanishing, what has been forgotten. Sometimes one must plunge into the past in order to re-emerge in the future. Or, rather, in the present, which throughout the world is characterised by voluntary or forced migration and all kinds of departure and exile. Movement in transition, remaining "in-between", the figure of the drifter: a reflection on our human condition as a visitor in time, which could be embodied in real freedom and solidarity.

MATTHIAS BÄRMANN

¹ Digression: Fear is certainly inherent in mankind from the very start of the history of our development, as a form of life that, in comparison with others, is born too soon. There also definitely seems to be a causal connection between fear and the formation of human intelligence. The situation becomes critical, however, when, in modern western civilisation, fear hardens into excessive safeguarding, an unparalleled mania for the protection of civilisation. Thus, for example, the "gated communities" of the American middle class are an expression of a quite neurotic need for security, as are the mobile high security camps that private American concerns are operating in Australia, for instance, in order to detain refugees in the desert: security, a service promising very high returns. But it must also be quite clear that the accelerated process of fortification and segregation in our lives is producing precisely the opposite effect, leaving us living more dangerously than before. Set against this, there is the insight that it is vulnerability that provides adaptability.

² Essentially, Sonnenstand is not far removed from Eduardo Chillida's great project on Fuerteventura, where a huge cube-shaped space is to be created inside the mountain of Tindaya. Chillida speaks of a twofold movement: the extraction of rock and matter, and at the same time the creation of emptiness in the heart of the mountain. Two shafts connect the interior with the exterior, leading the rhythms of light, sky and sea inwards. The visitor, a tiny figure in the huge empty cube, finds himself again between this universal context and the rhythms of his own body and mind.

³ The ambivalent situation of waiting, this removal from time and everyday activities, is also very well shown by the Kirghiz director Aktan Abdykalykov in his short film *Beket* (Bus Stop) (1995-2000). Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* begins with the words "Nothing to be done".

⁴ See, for example, Kern, Ken et al. (eds.): *Shelter*, 1973; Rudofsky, Bernard: *The prodigious builders*, 1977, and *Architecture without architects*, 1964; and Bourdon, David: *Designing the earth*, 1995.