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Ursula Schulz-Dornburg: photographing the architecture of the past

The German photographer is fascinated by what dwellings from earlier civilisations can tell us about the present and future



Mesopotamia, Iraq, 1980

APRIL 28, 2017 by: **Liz Jobey**

At the end of a long telephone conversation about her life and work, the German photographer Ursula Schulz-Dornburg added an aside. “Just something for you to know while I am talking about my life,” she said, “is that, right from the beginning, caves were a shelter for me. We used to hide in them when we were small children, because we lived so close to the border.”

When I asked her to explain, she said: “I was born in 1938, and in 1945 we lived in the countryside in the very south of Germany, on the border with France. So we were on the frontline.”

In the winter of 1944-45, Breisach, the town in the Rhine Valley where she grew up, was destroyed by Allied bombing. She and her family hid in the underground shelters that had been built nearby. “We would stay in them, sometimes overnight, when the bombing of Breisach or Freiburg came near,” she said. “So caves were always shelter for me, they were something that I lived with. I think that’s why I find all this so interesting. You go through the world, and you find these little houses, little shelters . . . ”

Since the late 1970s, Schulz-Dornburg has concentrated her photography on the architecture and dwellings of earlier civilisations, a lifetime’s fascination that has taken her to sites of the ancient cities of Mesopotamia, to Buddhist temples in Burma, to Christian chapels in Islamic Spain, to the cells carved by monks high up in the mountains between Georgia and Azerbaijan, to the abandoned Hejaz railway line in Saudi Arabia, once intended to connect Damascus to Mecca, and to the ruins of Soviet nuclear testing sites in Kazakhstan.

Her work is often grouped with those of the German photographers [Bernd and Hilla Becher](https://www.ft.com/content/55c88a60-38e2-11e4-9526-00144feabdco) (<https://www.ft.com/content/55c88a60-38e2-11e4-9526-00144feabdco>) and their pupils at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf — what is now known as the “Düsseldorf School” — but it is a connection she disputes. “We started at the same

time, we are the same age, yes, but I am absolutely different. The only thing [we have in common] is perhaps the very formal approach — how they isolated a form without clouds, to [emphasise] the physical impact of it, this was maybe an influence. But for me there was more influence from America, I think. There were many encounters that determined the vocabulary I needed in order to find my bearings.”



Necropolis, Palmyra, Syria, 2010 © Ursula Schulz-Dornburg

She had begun to study anthropology in Munich, but in 1961 moved to the Institut für Bildjournalismus, which concentrated on newspaper photography.

“Photography as art didn’t exist,” she says. In 1967 she moved with her husband and two children to New York. This is where she discovered the photographs of Robert Frank and Walker Evans. Later she would follow American conceptual land artists such as Michael Heizer and Walter de Maria. But probably her greatest influence, she says, was [Ed Ruscha \(https://www.ft.com/content/b883a40a-7db0-11e5-98fb-5a6d4728f74e\)](https://www.ft.com/content/b883a40a-7db0-11e5-98fb-5a6d4728f74e), whose serial study “Every Building on the Sunset Strip”, with its

“sequential planning” and “uncensored montage”, was an inspiration.



Necropolis, Palmyra, Syria, 2010 © Ursula Schulz-Dornburg

Apologising more than once for the complicated trajectory of her life, she explains that once back in Germany, she used her photography as an educational tool, working with children and then, as a therapist, with heroin addicts — something she did from the mid-1970s for almost a decade. During her vacations she began to travel and take photographs. In 1978, with the sculptor [Rudolf Knubel](http://www.knubel.eu/) (<http://www.knubel.eu/>), she went to Burma, to the Buddhist temples of the Pagan dynasty (10th to mid-13th century), and two years later, again with Knubel, to a region that had fascinated her for years: old Mesopotamia, the triangle of land between the converging rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates, now in southern Iraq. This is where the Marsh Arabs had built their houses on the rivers' edge or on artificial islands of reeds, a way of life described by the British explorer [Wilfred Thesiger](https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2003/aug/27/booksobituaries.obituaries) (<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2003/aug/27/booksobituaries.obituaries>) in his book *The Marsh Arabs* (1964). “I knew about

it because of [my early studies in] ethnology,” Schulz-Dornburg explains. “I knew about the marshes, I knew Thesiger and I knew about Saddam Hussein.”

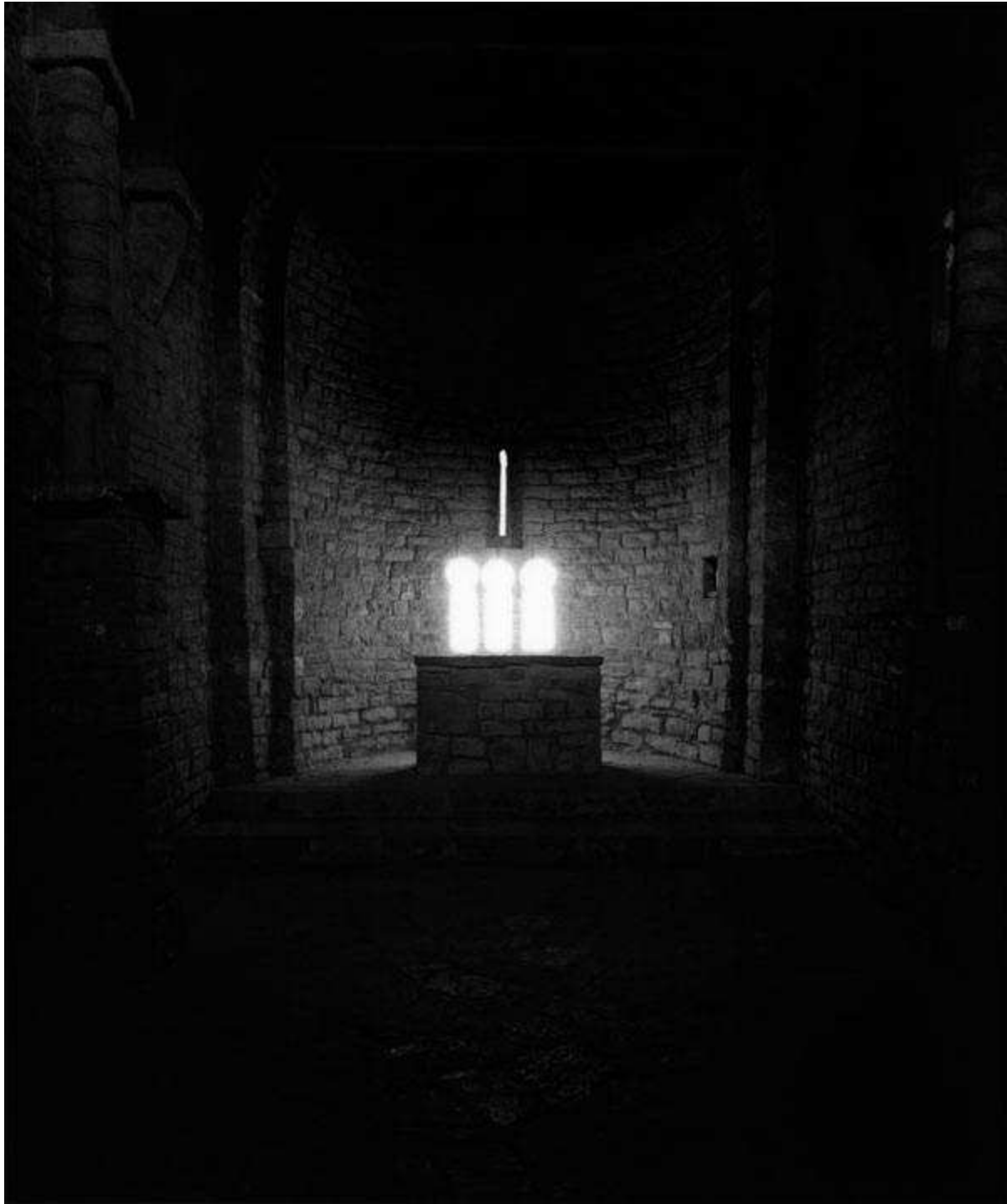


Necropolis, Palmyra, Syria, 2010 © Ursula Schulz-Dornburg

They arrived in Baghdad in April 1980, five months before the Iran-Iraq war broke out. “It was crazy,” she says. “I had three weeks. But I knew it was the only chance I had, I wouldn’t be able to go back.” They were forbidden to drive more than 5km outside the city. “But we met a group from Finland who showed us how to block the kilometre-counter and then we drove south.” Her photographs of structures in the landscape, such as the Ziggurat of Ur, and the reed houses of the Marsh Arabs, established the practice she has followed since then: documenting a subject, isolating it in the frame, then publishing the images as sequences, allowing the viewer to study it from different vantage points, though without the strict typological approach of the Bechers.

There are always two parts to taking a picture, she says. One is to find the subject of the picture; the other is to find a form for it that communicates her ideas about the subject: for example, what an ancient building might tell us about the past, but also — particularly given the cyclical nature of wars and religious division — how it might relate to the present and future.

Pursuing her interest in architectural metaphors, in the 1980s Schulz-Dornburg visited the small chapels built by Christian monks around the 10th century in Islamic Spain, a period when Arab, Christian and Jewish cultures managed to coexist. Struggling to capture the charge of these dark, meditative spaces, she watched as the sunlight entered through the arched east windows and shifted across the interior. It was the key to her problem. “Suddenly I found out it was possible to get the horizon into the room.” The resulting work was “Sonnenstand” (1991), a sequence of light studies, taken at hourly intervals, that simultaneously suggested the continuous passage of time across decades and centuries.



Light from West, 17.00–20.00h, from the series 'Sonnenstand' (1991) © Ursula Schulz-Dornburg

The installation was shown in Washington in 1996, and at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1998. It was about this time, travelling through Armenia on her way back from the Caucasus, where she had photographed 12th-century cave dwellings along the Georgia-Azerbaijani border, that she came across a subject that would lead to a

series of photographs that eventually brought her a much wider international audience. She encountered her first [Soviet bus stop \(http://www.schulz-dornburg.info/english/Werke/Armenien-Bushaltestellen/\)](http://www.schulz-dornburg.info/english/Werke/Armenien-Bushaltestellen/).

“The first one, and it’s the best one — the one with the umbrellas,” she says now. “There was a woman standing there, quite sexy, and one man, drunk, just sitting there, like this.”



Erevan-Yeghward, Armenia, 1997, from the series 'Bus Stops' (1997-2011) © Ursula Schulz-Dornburg

The shelters, some no more than rusting metal canopies, others sturdy bravura pieces of Soviet brutalism, represented not only structural failure in microcosm but the breakdown of the entire political system. People waiting there were stranded between one system and another, waiting for the future but formed by the past.

She was particularly interested in the women, “because the situation there was absolutely horrible. They came from this communist empire, but they still had their dreams, and it showed in how they dressed, you know?” At another stop she had

asked a group of women if they'd mind being photographed. "One said, 'Oh, I have to get my red shoes out of my bag. Then she put her red shoes on — of course I didn't tell her [the picture was in black and white] — it was, 'Somebody's looking at me, looking at what I've [made of] myself.'"



Chapel San Juan de Busa, Spain, 21 June 1991 © Ursula Schulz-Dornburg

Too often — as in Iraq, where in the years after her visit Saddam ordered the

draining of the marshes and destroyed the Marsh Arabs' way of life — Schulz-Dornburg has worked in places where catastrophe and destruction have soon followed. Never more so than in Syria, where she photographed at [Palmyra \(https://www.ft.com/content/d3a4a734-ff5f-11e6-96f8-3700c5664d30\)](https://www.ft.com/content/d3a4a734-ff5f-11e6-96f8-3700c5664d30), the ancient city close to Homs, a year before the civil war broke out. Five years later, and again in January this year, monuments on the site that represents 4,000 years of civilisation and conquest were destroyed by Isis: a cycle that looks set to continue.

“I think it’s a kind of traumatic energy which brings me to these places,” she says. “The house has always been a symbol of human existence: you need a house, a shelter. And then you have to think: ‘Where does it start? Why? Where will it end? What is there in between?’ And then, how to find a form for this. All these questions. You can work on that until the end of your life.”

Works by Ursula Schulz-Dornburg will be at Gallery Luisotti at Frieze New York, May 5-7; [frieze.com \(https://frieze.com/\)](https://frieze.com/). The bus stops are included in ‘Waiting’ at the Hamburger Kunsthalle until June 18; [hamburger-kunsthalle.de \(http://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/\)](http://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/). ‘Sonnenstand’ is on permanent display at the Insel Hombroich Foundation, Neuss; [inselhombroich.de \(http://www.inselhombroich.de/\)](http://www.inselhombroich.de/)

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