

Ursula Schulz-Dornburg: Series and Transformations

'When the combat ceases, that which is does not disappear, but the world turns away.' Paul Virilio uses these words from Martin Heidegger to introduce his 1975 book *Bunker Archaeology*. Comprised of the author's own photographs (taken between 1958 and 1965), maps and other documents, it offers a radical reappraisal of the 15,000 defensive concrete structures left along the coasts of France by the occupying German forces during the Second World War. Radical not because of Virilio's cultural politics, (which he would develop in later, more provocative texts), but because *Bunker Archaeology* fuses research and apparently 'documentary' photographs with a sculptural sensitivity that seems derived more from the minimalist avant-garde than a conventional history of military architecture.

It is tempting to imagine that Virilio, in the late 1950s, had already somehow 'seen' the photographic archaeologies of Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose typologies of soon-to-be-defunct industrial structures transformed the art world's understanding of the relationship between sculpture and photography in the 1960s. But if Virilio's chapter titles 'Series and Transformations' or 'An Aesthetics of Disappearance' could also have described the Bechers' work, it is perhaps because between the time he took his own photographs and published his book the Becher's grids and series had become a reference of sorts. Arguably then, having been brought into being after their success in Europe and inclusion in the influential American 'New Topographics' exhibition, Virilio's book can be understood as both pre-dating and post-dating, so perhaps 'spanning', the emergence of a new conception of the complex relationship between photography, research and aesthetics.

Evidently however, the spaces between photography, research and aesthetics, like the spaces between combat, disappearance, and turning away, are as appropriate to the work of Ursula Schulz-Dornburg as they were to Virilio's prescient and important book.

Her practice, over more than half a century, has relentlessly returned to sites of social, political and cultural conflict with an approach that combines the curiosity and erudition of an academic, with the systematic process and formal rigor of a minimalist, or even conceptual, artist. As likely to know an obscure date about the early history of the Middle-East as the precise text of a work by (her friend) Laurence Weiner, and totally detached from the Bechers' Dusseldorf 'school', despite living in the city for much of her life, Schulz-Dornburg is an enigmatic outsider in whichever field she chooses to operate.

Coincidentally, (or not...), 1975, the date of Virilio's book and the exhibition which it accompanied at the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris, was also the year in which Schulz-Dornburg exhibited her series 'Vorhänge am Markusplatz in Venedig' (Curtains in St Marks Place, Venice). A striking and beautiful body of work, it already embodied so many of the qualities that would mark out Schulz-Dornburg's career-long practice: a series of modestly scaled, technically stunning photographic prints that offer an informed and sensitive account of a subject than brings together architecture, its context, use and transformation over time, with the ability of the camera (in the hands of an artist) to allow us to see and understand the ignored or overlooked. With an approach that could be understood in a venerable topographic tradition from Charles Marville to Eugène Atget in France, George Barnard and Timothy O'Sullivan to Walker Evans in the USA, and to Albert

Renger-Patzsch in Germany, Schulz-Dornburg has staked out her own unique photographic landscape in which disappearance, absence and endurance are registered across vast stretches of distance and time. From Venice in the 1970s, to Iraq in 1980, Spain in the early 1990s and then Armenia repeatedly from the late '90s to the second decade of the twenty-first century - and then more recently Syria and Kazakhstan - Schulz-Dornburg has not only travelled widely, and with profound engagement and commitment, but she has built up long-term relationships with the places and people she has photographed. Far from some kind of post-conceptual humanism, however, the results of this investment of time and effort continue to manifest themselves as restrained and formally sophisticated installations of quiet, poetic, often apparently empty, black and white photographs: images that offer difficult questions in place of simple answers.

Although there are multiple threads and connections between the various aspects of her practice there are perhaps three essential set of concerns that we might identify as being of consistent importance to Schulz-Dornburg. Her work in Iraq and Mesopotamia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, relates directly to questions of boundaries and borders, the shifts of power as empires rise and fall, and the effects of these changes on the landscapes and peoples that live in them. In her key series 'Transit Sites' (in Armenia) and on the Hejaz Railway between Medina and Jordan, she investigates the specifics of architecture and infrastructure, especially as it relates to notions of mobility and movement; opposed by the stubborn resistance and longevity of outmoded and defunct architectural forms. Finally, in her work around nuclear test sites in the former Soviet Union and the wheat archive of the Vavilov Institute in St Petersburg, she brings into focus the relationship between political contingencies and environmental

devastation (or the destruction of natural resources) highlighting the political stakes in man-managed, or man-abused, landscapes. But beyond these evident concerns and commitments, there is also a subtle, beguiling and absorbing poetry in Schulz-Dornburg's attention to the most essential formal properties of the photographic medium: to the effects of light on, and in, space; to focus over distance under shifting patterns of atmosphere and weather; and to the uncanny ability of photography to produce sculptural forms from even the least promising raw materials. For, despite the politics and social engagement that has underpinned her career, it is, finally, Schulz-Dornburg's sensitivity and sophistication as a visual artist, a consistent and unswerving commitment to formal concerns, and to the rhetoric of presentation (whether on the wall, the screen, or the page) that transcends her documentary and archival impulses. As such, the stories that Schulz-Dornburg discovers, investigates and brings back to us, whether of combat, conflict, trauma, disappearance, or the ebb and flow of power over time, become stories from which we no longer seek to turn away or forget; but instead, turn towards and learn to remember.