

Helmhaus Zürich

17 April to 14 June 2009

DANIEL SCHWARTZ

TRAVELLING THROUGH THE EYE OF HISTORY Views from the Hinterland of War

The exhibition “Travelling through the Eye of History” at the Helmhaus Zürich is breathtakingly topical. For it takes us to Central Asia, to the “global heartland”. A region about three times the size of India, extending from the shores of the Caspian Sea to the deserts of Western China and linked together by the passes of the Pamir and the Hindu Kush, Central Asia is constantly in the news as the scene of both interminable warfare and latent conflict. Yet this has not made it any more familiar to us, nor has it lent the region any distinctive shape. In this exhibition, and in his two books *Travelling through the Eye of History* and *Schnee in Samarkand. Ein Reisebericht aus dreitausend Jahren* [Snow in Samarqand. A Travelogue of Three Thousand Years], internationally acclaimed Swiss photographer and author Daniel Schwartz sets out to understand this geographically heterogeneous and politically complex entity both from the inside and from the European, Chinese and Persian-Arab perspectives.

The photographs taken for this project in the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), Afghanistan and its borderlands between 1995 and 2007 are just as much the result of Schwartz’s nuanced approach to this cultural and historical palimpsest as are his textworks. Central Asia’s role as intermediary between East and West dates back to prehistoric times and was crucial to the emergence of a coherent and continuous world history. The geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of these passlands is now greater than ever.

In his ‘images of history’, Schwartz articulates the precariousness and unremitting existential uncertainty of human existence, and seeks to explain the deep-seated asymmetries and long-nurtured misconceptions in the hinterland of war which because of the post-9/11 political developments have become steadily more pronounced ever since.

Time and memory, present and past are the themes of these works by Daniel Schwartz. Significantly, the show opens with the textwork MY WORK IS IN THE HISTORY OF PLACES, indicating that Schwartz draws on the specific parameters of recorded history, which in turn takes him not only to places that recall the past, but also to places where the present is most manifest. His travels are always time travels.

The works exhibited were produced systematically over a long period and are complementary in nature. Their common theme is the dialogue between geography and history, between the repercussions of the past and the conditions prevailing in the present. As both images of the moment and 'images of history' rolled into one, Schwartz's photographs and textworks point far beyond themselves. In an age in which images are more vulnerable than ever to the charge of orchestration, the rigorously composed corpus "Travelling through the Eye of History" stands out as the testimony of one who is incorruptible, of one who travelled extensively in conflict zones long before they dominated the headlines. What also sets these works apart from those of conventional photojournalists is that despite their undeniable realism, they are still exemplary in character: They transport us into a remote here and now, while metaphorically shedding light on a topicality viewed against a broad historical backdrop. Schwartz's 'images of history' are a major contribution to political education in an age fixated on superficiality.

Drawn to places that have long been a scene of confrontation and cultural overlap, Daniel Schwartz first trains his sights on the topographical features that have helped shape these two civilizing processes. Within this geographically defined area, he then explores the projects of societies and dynasties, of despots and nations, and the impact that these have had. There is no need for him to reconstruct history – as in an earlier work on the 'idea' of the Great Wall of China, for example – and the parallels to emerge between what is and what once was are often too glaring to be overlooked. A present that is not detached from the past – that is what interests Schwartz.

History, and history transformed provided not only the theme of Daniel Schwartz's last major work to go on show in Zürich, that on Greece, as a place of memory (1977–1985), (exhibited by the Fotostiftung Schweiz at Kunsthaus Zürich in 1986) – but also a tool for understanding it. As Schwartz's art is by nature informative, it can do what all good photojournalism in the humanistic tradition should do. As an observer in this profession, Schwartz does not respond explicitly to specific events. His *datelines* are supplied by the developments he observes, which when they intensify and escalate, as now in the Hindu Kush, confirm the findings of years of dogged scrutiny. Schwartz's *deadlines*, meanwhile – the term originally defined the outer perimeter of a prison, beyond which a prisoner could not venture without running the risk of being shot – are "*that point in time when a true story from the 'false' country, meaning one that lies beyond the usual news flows, has to be finished, so that the world's newsrooms can sweep it under the carpet, nip it in the bud, or 'kill' it before it gets out*".

Not surprisingly, therefore, Schwartz shuns all media dramatization. Long before information is traded as a commodity in the service of existing opinion, he is already scanning the field, contemplating things from the most diverse perspectives. His theme in *Delta* (1991–1995) were those habitats of South and Southeast Asia that are most afflicted by natural disasters and most at risk from climate change. His essay "From Burma Road to Wall Street" (1998–2000) explored the spiritual qualities of money and the way in which it dematerialized into the black holes of the 'global financial architecture', which even then was being shaken by territorial collapses. *Travelling through the Eye of History* (1995–2007), his most recent work, addresses the realities on the ground in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Kashmir and elsewhere, which were a concentration area for the protean multinationals of terrorism long before September 11, 2001.

The geographical starting point of “Travelling through the Eye of History” is the western end of the Great Wall of China – an edifice Daniel Schwartz knows well, having in 1987/88 become the first foreigner to travel its entire length. The work presented here traces an arc from the Taklamakan Desert in Xinjiang to the shores of the Caspian Sea, taking in not just Afghanistan and Iran, but the lost paradise of Kashmir as well as Mongolia. Both the book published by Thames & Hudson and the exhibition at the Helmhaus Zürich can be described as a distillation of what is commonly described – and vaguely imagined – as Central Asia, though the definition applied here is as deep in substance as it is broad in geographical compass.

The oases of Central Asia have played their predestined role of intermediary between the cultures of East and West ever since the Bronze Age. Later, in the thirteenth century, the exchange and spread of information between nomadic and settled communities was accelerated by the Mongols’ lightning attacks launched repeatedly from the northeastern steppes; and when the transcontinental cavalry campaigns had subsided, the terms of the *Pax mongolica* ensured that this information became more integrated in Central Asia’s border regions and beyond, in China, Europe, India and the Islamic world. Elements of experience became part of a more inclusive world of the imagination, certainties became facts, and facts evidence. Woven together, these successively ascertained facts produced a unified picture, a shared concept of a single world. What had been isolated geographies, separate historical developments and cultures became interlinked. And once set in motion, the global information circuit henceforth embraced world history only as a single, coherent continuum. Viewed in retrospect, Central Asia can be described as the ‘geographical pivot of history’ or, to put it another way, as nothing less than the origin of the four-thousand-year-old phenomenon of globalization.

Since the mythically inspired epic journeys of a heroic age, since the earliest colonialist, militaristic and economic advances into what were then thought to be the ends of the world, Greeks and Chinese, Persians and Romans have endeavoured to shape Central Asia to their own liking, and in doing so have cultivated – in their perception of each other as foreigners – the art of difference. The distinctions made were based not only on superficial features – native versus ‘barbaric’ tongues, specific traditions and variations in how societies were organized, for example – but also on origin and hence geographical roots.

“The region that Hekataios and his descendants believed to lie to the east of the Black Sea – with what were to be catastrophic consequences for Alexander’s campaigns – and which in sinocentric cosmographies was shown as nothing more than a few island kingdoms adrift in a nebulous area having nothing whatsoever to do with geographical reality, its insignificance evident from its having been consigned to the edge of the Middle Kingdom; the region, which on the Arabs’ round maps of the world filled the northeastern, and hence the lower segment of the circle, and which the Europeans, with their imperialist aspirations, mania for collecting data and fascination with cartography had neatly severed from their own little continent – this region is in truth a single, contiguous area of cultural superimposition,” says Schwartz, who besides being a photographer is an author who knows his sources well, as his *Schnee in Samarkand. Ein Reisebericht aus dreitausend Jahren* proves.

If the photographs in the exhibition “Travelling through the Eye of History” are supplemented by the written word, in this case rendered as screen printed textworks, then not because Schwartz believes he has reached the limits of the medium he has worked in hitherto, but because this is what seemed most appropriate to a subject-matter of such complexity. His familiarity with Central Asia’s millenniums-old history as a site of cultural assimilation and

scene of migration to say nothing of dynastic and imperial endeavours was acquired not just before, but during and after his time travels and sometimes risky reportages in the global heartland. There, he found himself face to face with a cumulative history that is present in all the social, geoeconomic and geopolitical processes of today. Descending the Pamir, Karakorum and Hindu Kush into ancient Bactria and Sogdia, into the arid expanses of the Tarim, Turkestan and Kandahar, he arrived – and with him all those who visit “Travelling through the Eye of History” – in a present which can unsettle only those who are so much a product of an age of accelerated progress and unmindful of history that they no longer possess a poetic memory.

The exhibition conceived by Daniel Schwartz and curated by Simon Maurer is a production of the Helmhaus Zürich. It will run from 17 April until 14 June 2009. The next port of call is the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin (June to October 2010).

As a tie-in with the exhibition, Thames & Hudson has published an ‘Artist Book’ of the same name (London, 2009) containing 165 photographs, which is also available in a collector’s edition of fifty numbered copies, each featuring an original black-and-white photograph.

Visitors to the exhibition will have a chance to hear readings from the book *Schnee in Samarkand. Ein Reisebericht aus dreitausend Jahren*, published by Eichborn Berlin (Frankfurt, 2008). The photographer’s debut as author is both journal and collage of direct observations interspersed with passages drawn from the most diverse sources, as well as the author’s own meditations on the history of the regions visited.

Daniel Schwartz was born in 1955 and studied Photography at the Zürich School of Art and Design (1977–1980). As a photographer, he has had numerous solo exhibitions, including at Kunsthhaus Zürich, 1986, at the Photographers’ Gallery, London, 1990, at the Imperial Palace Museum, Beijing, 1993, at the Kunstmuseum Solothurn, 2007, and most recently as part of the Billboard Programme of the Kunsthhaus Bregenz and at the Galerie Lelong, Zürich, both in 2008. His works have also featured in many group shows, including at the Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie, Arles, 1988, the Venice Biennale, 1993, the Fotomuseum Winterthur, 1997, and Encontros de Fotografia, Coimbra, 2003, and have been published worldwide, especially in the arts and culture magazine *du. Travelling through the Eye of History* is his fourth book.