

Time and the Desert of Ambition: Ursula Schulz Dornburg's *Some Works*

“the truth of photography belongs to contingency”

— Wolfgang Scheppe “Field Loss” in Ursula Schulz-Dornburg *Some Works*

I.

Upon completing the reconstruction of London Stock Exchange in 1795, architect John Soanes commissioned his assistant Joseph Gandy to paint his new structure as it was incorporated within the larger Bank of England complex. Gandy, also a trained architect, began a second painting one week after delivering this first, which imagined both the Stock Exchange and the Bank of England in ruins. This second painting, “*View of the Rotunda of the Bank of England in Ruins*” was completed in 1798, one hundred and twenty seven years before Soane’s Bank was actually demolished in 1925. In this “dramatic irony,” as Christopher Woodward describes it, there is an uncanny prolepsis about the ineluctable fate of vaunting ambition, prefigured here by a painting

commissioned in a moment of triumph.



Joseph Gandy “A Vision of Sir John Soane’s Design for the Rotunda of the Bank of England as a Ruin” 1798

Gandy’s first painting of the future ruins of Soanes bank focuses on the collapsed husk of his protean rotunda, its insides cruelly exposed to the elements, and depicted in the process of being raided by industrious corpuscular men. The sweeping curvature of the rotunda becomes a rib-cage rent open by cataclysmic forces, and the four tiny figures that toil away in its

innards seem parasitically small against the immensity of its graceful but fallen shape. Soanes’s rotunda is plainly the wounded protagonist of the cadaverous 1798 painting, and yet in a subsequent painting completed in 1830, “*Imagined Ruins of John Soane’s Bank of England*,” an integrated complex of buildings seem to stand for a civilisation now collapsed under the forces of dismemberment and decay.

Both of Gandy’s paintings inject tragic consequence into an equation between the self and grand expressive creation, one that is linked to the German romanticism embodied in *The Abbey in the Oakwood* by Caspar David Friedrich. Gandy’s paintings operate in

a deeply melancholic register in which devastation is comprehensive, and undergirded by an unspoken dread at the irreducible fact of mortality. As Wolfgang Scheppe argues, in his essay “Field Loss”, part of the boxed catalogue of beautiful works by photographer Ursula Schulz-Dornburg:

“The ruin in the fictionalizations of the landscape park and in painting belongs to the ‘vanitas’ motif of the loss of self, as reflected in the loss of the world. There the lifelessness of the moldering, disintegrating object represents the doom and disappearance of the individual who sees himself in the decompositional processes of his products.”

Gandy’s painting crystallises a centuries-old tendency to anthropomorphise the landscape, and such a sensibility is arguably apotheosised in the triumphal architecture of imperial ambition. Such vaunting ambitions are often at stake in the collection of photographic projects published in *Some Works*. Schulz-Dornburg pictures the diffident scale of a natural world that has been marked, but not subdued or fully incorporated into the systematic planning of imperial power. Round the decaying flanks of the austere structures that punctuate the frames of Schulz-Dornburg’s photographs, “[t]he

lone and level sands stretch far away,” as Shelley once wrote.



Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, *Untitled*, from “Hejaz Railway, Saudia Arabia” (2003)

II.

The object that comprises *Some Works* takes the unprepossessing shape of a pale grey cardboard cube that measures roughly 11cm in height and 17cm on each side, recalling nothing so much as the implacably stoic order of an institutional archive. It has a mildly funereal feel, as though it might contain within it the extant fragments of some long-forgotten structure, properly indexed and filed. The cube contains nine thin numbered booklets in which sequences of

Schulz-Dornburg’s projects are printed at small scale, along with six cards of images from the Museum of the Arctic and Antarctic in St Petersburg, three text works by Lawrence Weiner, a poster, an English and German version of Scheppe’s essay, and a map entitled *30°E – 80°E Degree of Longitude*.

This map charts an expanse of the globe that runs from the northern edge of the African continent to the midpoint of Russia, and from the tip of Portugal to the southern cone of the Indian subcontinent. It is an azimuthal equidistant projection, a form of map in which all points are at proportionately correct distances from the centre in the Caspian Sea. On it, Schulz-Dornburg has pinpointed the places and regions in which each of her nine projects were made, running the gamut from Opytnoe Pole in Kazakhstan to the Hejaz Railway in Saudi Arabia, and from Kronstadt in Russia to the border between Armenia and Georgia.

These projects range from a series of delicate landscape photographs of Marsh Arab dwellings in Iraq, to a series of candid portraits from the escalators of a metro station

in St. Petersburg, or from an intimate study of solitary walls in Palmyra, Syria, made five years before the city fell under the control of ISIS, to a study of the Hejaz Railway in Saudi Arabia, built in the early 1900s under the Ottoman Empire with the support of the late German Empire.

In Mesopotamia, Iraq, in photographs made in 1980, Schulz-Dornburg pictures the naked and seemingly endless surfaces of a desert whose small ridges, thin crevices and dunes seem merely to counterbalance the immense weight of the overhanging sky. These pictures appear to be made from light filtered through gauze, which spreads an even and muted radiance over every channel, gully, path and rock.

The series begins with a photograph in which the dead end fork of a railway line edges into the lower left corner of the frame, pointed toward the low slung complex of buildings that sits before the verge of a wide spreading plateau. As the pictures lead us through the variegated surface of this Mesopotamian desert, they are marked by the dry rivulet shapes that snake between low ridges and squat hills, signalling the glacial procession of water and geological pressure that has given shape to a landscape veiled in a haze that stands for time itself.



The railway reappears toward the final image of the booklet, sweeping low and suddenly in and out of frame, like a sudden reminder of the alien character of rigidity in landscape formed by uneven and undulating forces. In the final image of the sequence, a military garrison rears up from the carpet of the desert, its façade peppered with arrow-slits and carved out of sheer verticality and sleek diagonal lines. It is an anachronism of mathematical perfection in the midst of such leisurely disorder, but equally the garrison is somehow a changeless structure that seems undiminished by the passage of years.



Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, *Untitled*, from "Mesopotamia, Iraq" (1980)

Such photographs elicit a subtle recognition in the viewer for the millennial history of the human inclination for warfare, even in a desert that seems to empty out all quantitative measures of any intelligible meaning. Schulz-Dornburg's works address themselves not only to the deep history of empire, and to its tendency to insist on control that inevitably proves unsustainable. They also intimate a subtle, but sustained disbelief at the history of our instinct to impose quadrilateral order on the constantly shifting surface of the earth.

In the contrast between Schulz-Dornburg's photographs of the disassembled modular elements of ships that line the banks of a river in Kronstadt, Russia, and her photographs of the stooping woven shapes of floating Marsh Arab dwellings, there is an implicit and arguably critical observation of the distinctions between civilisation and civility, or between imposition and integration. Just as the stone-brick garrison in Mesopotamia seemed changeless, so too do these floating dwellings have the air of structures in a constant reciprocal process of ageing and reconstruction.

By contrast, in Schulz-Dornburg's series of photographs from a nuclear test site in Opytnoe, Kazakhstan, we see a placid and irregularly vegetated landscape, punctuated by a series of jutting fin-like concrete structures, which protrude suddenly from the earth like surfacing submarines. Many of these images are made in a square format that stresses the rectilinear order of the architectural structures, which stand in abandonment and disarray, like a panoply of sundials on a scorched and empty plain. These are images made in an area known as Semipalatinsk, where between 1949 and 1990, the Soviet Union conducted over seven hundred nuclear tests during the heat of the Cold War. The irregular decaying condition of these military structures seems to mock the strident nature of their design, and as in many of the abandoned ruins in which Schulz-Dornburg has made her work, the scenes themselves give little indication of the intensity of armed conflict that provoked their construction.

III.

We might think of Schulz-Dornburg's work within the framework of a mode of landscape photography originating in the early survey photography of the American West, as embodied in the archives of photographers like Carleton Watkins, Timothy O'Sulli-

-van and William Henry Jackson. Such photographers, working in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, produced a mass of images that reveal the interlinking of industrialised expansion with militarisation, images which presaged the emergence of an American Empire that rose amid the dissolution of European imperial power.



Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, *Untitled*, from "Opytnoe Pole, Kazakhstan" (2012)

But we would be remiss were we to forget Schulz-Dornburg's map in *Some Works*, and its conjuncture of a waning German Empire with Ottoman lands and the vast expanses of Russia. Empire is not a distant, nor even a turn of the nineteenth century notion for those who have lived through a divided Germany, which was exposed to the antagonisms of American and Russian power for over thirty post-war years. The invisible devastations of nuclear tests in the Opytnoe Pole reflect the perilous escalation of a global conflict between two superpowers, a conflict that extended to the division of a young German nation only recently released from the imperial grasp of the Prussian Empire.

All of which is to say that Schulz-Dornburg's work, in its extensive and specific examinations of the landscape of Central Asia, eastern Russia and the Middle East, attends to what the poet Derek Walcott has called the "leprosy of empire." Her work studies the

irreversible degradation of vice-like imperial control, and makes space for a consideration of the fractious consequences of forms of civilisation constructed on foundations utterly indifferent to the terrain in which they grow.

We might well consider her works not only as exemplary instances of late photography – a notion endorsed by her work’s inclusion in last year’s Tate Modern exhibition, *Conflict, Time, Photography* – but also imagine them as projections made before the fact, to think of them as proleptic images that reflect for us the inescapable future of our vaunting ambition. In this sense they are not late, but rather early photographs – imaginings of a ruined future that can only be derailed by a radical reformation of the status quo.

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Ursula Schulz-Dornburg, *Untitled*, from "Kronstadt, Russia" (2004)