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The Lives of Others

Speech at the awarding of the Culture Prize of Canton Zurich 2010 to the
photographer Daniel Schwartz (Zurich, May 19, 2010)

No one knows at the start what lies ahead. Yet the biographical trajectory still seems to have followed a plan, perhaps even a commission: Greece, Istanbul, Trebizon; Iran and Afghanistan; Central Asia; China; Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam. There have been single images, reportages, books, exhibitions – and plenty more besides.

A thirty-year-long commitment, both professionally and personally – the two poles inseparable. So we are bound to ask what the young man from Olten – a place Otto F. Walter only ever referred to as “Jammers”) – what the twenty-five-year-old who arrived in Zurich to attend what was then still the School of Arts and Crafts, specifically the very same photography class that had produced such luminaries as Bischof and Burri, Binder and Scheidegger – to say nothing of more colorful characters like Oliviero Toscani – what, or rather how much of what lay ahead *the artist as a young man* intimated or perhaps even actively sought? What drove him? Had he read Sven Hedin, perhaps? Studied maps, spun a globe, or set off into the fog-bound Jura to find the world he so longed for? Who knows what stuff our dreams are made of.

In this particular case there was Daniel’s grandmother, Thêm thi Truong from Vietnam. His grandfather had gone to Southeast Asia to work in the 1920s and 1930s and there met his future wife, who on arriving in Olten – a stranger among strangers as Karl Valentin would say, or as she herself put it, “just an old bird that doesn’t know which tree to alight on, because it doesn’t understand these trees” – left the suitcases she had embarked with in the living room, *forever after*, open and ready for the return journey. When that time came, moreover, she wrote a letter of farewell: “Dear Children, When I have die I would like to be dressed in dress of my home. Quiet funeral and cremmate, no flowers, without the reverend. Throw way ashes and think of Viêt-Nam.”

Schwartz's first project after graduation was a portrait of his grandmother. One image shows an old woman of whom we see only the back of her head with an elegantly bound chignon, her gaze averted – or fixed on what we all see ultimately. The care with which every single hair is drawn – every gray one, every white one – is expressive of great tenderness, making this a magical image of a woman immortalized and ardently contemplated one last time before she disappeared forever. So now he had a photo; and with it his marching orders. Go east, young man! To Asia, to the Other. Off and away from Eurocentrism, off to other presents and other pasts, to worlds that are also ours but not always ours alone.

The work in Greece was a chance to perfect his photographic skills, a sublime exercise in translating the world of light and shade into the infinite nuances of the gray scale. It was also an exercise in persistence and privation, as much in Schwartz's private life as in his work. "In Daniel Schwartz's case," wrote Peter Levi in his foreword to *Metamorphoses*, "genius is the capacity to endure endless hardship." Yet how much greater than in Greece were the sacrifices demanded of him and the pain he had to endure in China and later in the swamps and highlands of East Asia, to say nothing of the vast landscapes of Central Asia. There, he combined the unwavering determination of a charging rhinoceros with the agility of a mountain goat, as one who accompanied him through Inner Mongolia later remarked.

Ever new paths followed, many of them into impassable, dangerous terrain. Always they were paths to the Other. As the then newly crowned Nobel laureate Albert Camus remarked in his speech in Uppsala in 1956, "we writers of the twentieth century shall never again be alone. Rather, we must know that we can never escape the common misery and that our only justification, if there is a justification, is to speak up, insofar as we can, for those who cannot do so."

That was and is as true of literature as it is of photography. The buzzword was henceforth "engagement" – a term that has been largely eclipsed by the globalization of egotism. Yet Schwartz has only ever followed that one impetus: the impetus of concern. As a kind of irregular, what Camus called a *franc-tireur*, he has always been a lone warrior, answerable only to himself. Hence his insistence on journeying on

foot, eye to eye with his fellow travellers, his shoe sharing the same patch of earth as their rag-bound feet.

Only then can an image emerge like that of the flour-dusted miller in Iran, the telephone operator in Kyrgyzstan, the coal-stoker of Shanxi, and the calm, open face of a young man encountered on the Great Wall of China, whose picture, reproduced in *du*, Schwartz captioned with the words: “Zhu Zhengxiu, one of the men who built a fire when it was cold... who called over slopes and valleys to their wifes in invisible villages to bring water... who first saw a snake... who knew every step of their wall... who made these photographs possible.” Is this what his grandmother taught him – this respect, this empathy, this resistance to the path of least resistance?

Others in his year might have launched a paparazzi agency in Hollywood and made a fortune out of snapping celebrities; others might have gone onto the art market and had their blown-up fatuousness – “*les fabricants d’art*” as Camus called them – blazoned on the walls of museums. But as radical, as relentless, as resolute as he is, Daniel Schwartz refused to follow them down that path. His aspiration was not to be an instant artist; and because of that he became one.

Not least in opposition to what are ostensibly advances in technology. No digital photos for Schwartz – no, never. Nor any Photoshop either. He was an “anti-Gursky,” he wrote to me recently, “inasmuch as I do not generate pictures digitally, but rather work with light, producing what the two of us have always called ‘takes’ – that is, images taken with head and heart ... What is crucial is that the photographer keep the exposed film in his pocket for several weeks thereafter, and not just the film, but the picture in his head, so that when he processes it he can take pleasure in seeing it precipitate into silver, too. Digital photographers, by contrast, are so busy examining the image they have just taken on the camera’s display that they are liable to miss what is happening right in front of them.”

Color he uses only reluctantly, but then masterfully; while his equipment traditionally ranges from the medium-format Hasselblad 6x6 – deployed as nimbly as a pocket camera – to large-format cameras that work with sheet film. Then comes his own developing lab and darkroom, the sensuous depth of baryta paper, and the

precision work on the negatives, all of which are hand-selected. Surely no word can be as anathema to him as “snapshot”; for his are photos that emerge only slowly – and that endure, some of them in books whose point will be missed by those who merely leaf through them.

As for Schwartz’s resistance to all things pliant and pleasing, we might say that the language of the superficial (which as we are well aware is the only dimension at the photographer’s disposal), is an ancient, rudimentary one; for it is the language of rigorously hand-crafted form. And square format is a fundamental premise of that idiom, a geometric archetype, which in its insistence on the excerpt also bespeaks a certain implacability – considering that nature is neither square nor even rectangular, but simply unframed. The square is also a legacy of Classical Modernism, of Malevich, Graeser, the Zurich Concretists, the Bauhaus, and of that same School of Arts and Crafts that Schwartz himself attended. The square can even be credited with having played a formative role in the golden age of Swiss photography, from Werner Bischof to Theo Frey, when it was the format of choice for all those who took photos with the Rolleiflex – the Hasselblad’s next-of-kin, as it were; and if the square was the basic format, its simplest geometrical division was the diagonal.

Every single photograph is crafted with the utmost care. How cumbersome, we might think, observing how Schwartz first takes a landscape on Polaroid and only then inserts his film cassette. (There *is* a little wizardry involved – just as there was among the first photographers). The single perfect image is a necessary precondition for images in a larger context, which in turn are a necessary precondition for the penetration of the object, which is what Schwartz has always had in his sights. And now, instead of spreading out his images, he builds with them, piles them up over double pages, in triptychs, sequences, and blocks, working with juxtapositions, contrasts, leitmotifs, and across fault lines to construct complex compositions. And when not even that is enough for him, he resorts to words. These words, as we saw in the exhibition at the Helmhaus in Zurich, are at first treated as images and composed accordingly; the result is a textwork that reaches beyond the bounds of what is photographically possible and sums up the images, squeezing them together inside semantic parentheses, which in their turn have all the succinctness of a photograph.

A bit exclusive for sure, just as he himself is, this Schwartz – “Love me, or leave me.”

He has “complex stories to relate” he tells us programmatically, and admittedly a little gruffly, in one of the many laconic sentences in *Travelling Through the Eye of History*. Yes indeed, which is why it is only a matter of time before he comes up against the limits of his medium and the painful realization that much of what drives him cannot be expressed in photography at all. The surfaces of phenomena are simply not enough for one whose “work is in the history of places.”

He was always known as the one who invariably had a newspaper tucked under his arm – where possible an English-language one – and who prepared for each new venture by studying books and maps with an almost maniacal attention to detail, as anyone who ever visited him at home can attest. And almost all those journalists who ever joined him on his travels were mortified to discover that their photographer was insultingly better prepared than they were.

That when Schwartz the writer finally emerged from the seclusion of his study he already had a thousand pages to his name is just one of the many challenges he poses. But then as Goethe observed and Schwartz would undoubtedly concur, “only oafs are modest.” And since he really did spend years of his life buried in books and folios, and really did become the one who knows more than almost anyone else far and wide about the three-thousand-year-old history of a region whose elementary geography alone would leave most of us stumped, his thousand-page-long travelogue of three thousand years of history is not without justification and could not be anything other than the monument it is. Bravo! Once again, Schwartz refused to play by the rules, by those behavioral norms that require authors to take account of their publishers, of paper consumption, printing costs, booksellers, readers, and shelf space before writing so much as a single line. No, here too, Schwartz does what he believes he has to do.

His tendency – or rather compulsion – to produce total works of art, as also the consummate technique and aesthetic of his photography, his biographical disposition, and the historical instant together conspire to bring forth what can only be called

essence. Returning to where we began, therefore, what we are talking about here is life, about the artist carving out a life for himself and about that life in relation to the lives of others. It is about solidarity; that is where the bar is. But what is life? “On an ordinary day” is one of the many answers that Schwartz gives us – and one of the many clues that alerts us to the larger context of his photos. On an “ordinary day” he meets ordinary people, as we know both from his photos and from a long list – one of many attempts to gather up experiences that are as widely dispersed in time as they are in space – of “Encounters over the course of the years”: encounters with beggars, border guards, brick-makers, camel traders, warriors, cotton-pickers, drug addicts, grave-diggers, nomads, pilgrims, shepherds, shamans, smugglers – in other words with fellow human beings, of whom those of us here in this room know precious little, even though they make up the majority of humankind. And in telling of them, and of all the countless others like them, fearlessly, and without let-up throughout his thirty-year-long career, Daniel Schwartz has come very close to the *essence* of what it means to be human.

Towards the end of his most recent photobook there is a triptych comprising three color photographs of the Taklamakan Desert. They show female workers shoveling shifting sand off a road through the desert. In the background a telegraph line extends all the way to the horizon, from somewhere to nowhere. We are reminded of a scene from Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The first of the three images is a medium long shot showing five people working in isolation. The second is a close-up of a pair of bare feet under lacy-edged white pants and a beautifully patterned skirt and next to them a blurry shovel-full of sand captured in mid-flight. The third image shows the abandoned tools – the shovels and a kind of broom – and a mound of shoveled sand. It is a history of humanity. Of dogged determination, of never-ending, repeatedly resumed and constantly undercut *toil*. Three photos. One world history.

Schwartz’s triptych reminds us of Sisyphus, whose labor consisted in having to start all over again the moment his work was done. Which brings us back to Camus, whose fascination with Sisyphus was focused on the man himself at the moment he walks back down the hill: “That hour like a breathing space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness.” And then: “All Sisiphus’ silent

joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing.” Which is why, Camus tells us, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

As Daniel himself said just recently: “After so much desk work, it’s time to put on my boots again and go out into the world.” Yes indeed! And without being flippant or insincere, we wish him a great rock to roll – out there in the world.