

Recording with a Camera Obscura

Address on the occasion of the virtual opening of the exhibition KOLKATA BLACK & WHITE on 2.04.20

One peculiarity of photographs is that they detach themselves from the place, from their maker, and lose themselves in the darkness of time. But unlike memories, they have not faded when they are brought back into the present.

The camera obscura photos to be seen here, a selection of 500 images in 6 series, have never been shown publicly before. They were taken between 1994 and 2008 in South Kolkata. They are documentary, depicting places in repeated shots over many weeks, mostly taken from the ground. Local people allowed me to place my camera obscura wherever I deemed it appropriate.

The trigger for the first series ("Gariahat Road", 1994) was an early morning taxi ride through the city. Everywhere on free stretches of the pavements there were people sleeping, wrapped in or covered by blankets. During the day, the same sections of road are the living and working spaces for the very same people. They collect waste there, sort and sell it, they cook their food there, and at night they sleep in the same places again.

In my images of a 200 meter section of road, objects appear like thoughts: stoves, baskets, piles of cardboard, plastic bales which partially concealed the murals of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which dominated Kolkata for decades. But – and this is important – the people living there are not on display.

The series are complete, no longer repeatable. Rapid changes have left their mark everywhere in Kolkata. The potters' series was taken in a winding craftsmen's neighbourhood on the Tolly Canal. After an underpass, one had to climb over concrete blocks and turn into a small alley behind to reach it. I found the place again using Google Maps: it is still a dense conglomeration of tiled roofs. On the other side of the canal however, a massive block of high-rise buildings projects far above all those roofs.

Technically, photographing with a camera obscura is simple: light passes through a needle-fine hole onto an unexposed photographic surface; the camera records the photographed space from front to back equally and without distortion. The exposure time is long, considerably longer than that of an SLR camera; it can range from about five seconds to two minutes, depending on whether negative film or photographic paper is exposed. This produces a pronounced depth of field, but movements of people and vehicles appear blurred.

A conventional camera focuses on one specific point in space; a fraction of a second, at best a decisive moment, is then stored on the negative: speed is critical. With a camera obscura, however, one steps back and has time to look around. One chooses the place, determines the direction and releases the shutter. This is easy, and it is obvious to repeat the procedure. Day after day I went out, looking for places, the right times of day, lighting conditions, viewing angles – and took pictures. In the evenings I developed the negatives in my hotel bathroom and was able to quickly assess whether the positions and angles were right.

There is something satisfying about collecting pictures in this manner. The initially constant feeling of being overwhelmed makes way for increasing familiarity. From day to day new constellations appear:

clearly drawn objects next to faces in resolution, soft transitions, fleeting movements in front of the massive pillars of the flyover bridges.

All there at the same time and in varying intensity. Like the disconcerting but successful attempt to summarize a song in one image.

I spent hours putting together possible series of pictures. My view changed, moving further and further away from additive series of attractive pictures towards a renewed imagining of this place in variations. Like a network of overlapping, multiply-exposed images that could be stretched out further in various directions. This sounds complicated, but it is how it came about. Different sequences running parallel on three screens in the exhibition do not mean that one has to keep an eye on them all and bring them all together. One can linger or wander, carried by sounds in space.

A more effective presentation of the images than by means of projection and in conjunction with the treasure of sounds, voices and songs collected by Thomas is hardly imaginable: this constantly changing mixture of chance and setting, sound and image, polyphonic, sometimes exotic, demanding, then again light and wide; black and white, rarely pure white, occasional deep black shadows, mostly a warm, rich abundance of grey in all its nuances.