

Artists' Books

In between
History

Gilda Williams

Luc Delahaye, *History*, text by Eugenia Parry, published by Chris Boot, London, 2003, 16pp, 13 illus, edition 100, hb, \$1000 (includes artist-made print), 0 9542813 1 4.

There is the sense, since 9/11, of living in what Joan Didion called in January a 'hinge moment' in history, an in-between moment patiently awaiting the next cataclysm. We watch to see whether the sway of public opinion will shift towards all-out war; we speculate as to the nature of the next unexpected attack. In the meantime, lesser events continue to propel history forward, making the hinge last longer. Afghanistan is attacked, the Taliban removed, the West Bank under siege, the World Trade Center memorialised. Milosevic is tried, and Iraq inspected. There are endless talks at the United Nations. Bigger and smaller events occur, all perceived as in-between steps before the next Big Move, awaited with dread. The recent invasion of Iraq (which shortly followed publication of this book) seems in this light an impatient move finally to shift history out of this brief window of relative stagnancy, of relative peace.

In the artist's book *History*, French photographer Luc Delahaye turns his photojournalistic eye to document 13 of these in-between, hinge events that took place 2001 and 2002. Originally presented as giant, 1.1m x 2.3m prints exhibited at Ricco/Maresca Gallery in New York, the images themselves are beautiful, very 'contemporary'. Gursky-esque panoramas sweep across a scorched desert landscape filled with hundreds of tiny, well-defined figures (*Taliban Surrender*, 2001). Silvery shades of grey ranging to deepest black are punctuated by the burning orange heat of an exploded car (*Genoa G8 Summit*, 2001).

Delahaye's formally accomplished portfolio forms in many ways a quintessential iconography of the situation since 9/11. For one thing Delahaye is a photojournalist, rather than strictly a contemporary artist. He spent the 80s and 90s in Lebanon, Rwanda,

Luc Delahaye
Taliban Surrender 2001



Chechnya and Bosnia, which signals a professional and personal commitment that strengthens our belief in the author. Delahaye has, moreover, obviously put to good use his long on-site experience in accessing, rather fearlessly, his eye-of-the-hurricane locations. As a former war photographer for *Newsweek*, Delahaye is adept at capturing immensely readable, topical images which are, at the same time, riveting. What do those inspections look like? (Ugly air-conditioned coaches parked outside bunker-like modern architecture in a landscape which, in all probability, was until very recently a vacant desert lot. Added to the scenery are dozens of overheated, short-sleeved foreigners, taking pictures, writing notes, milling about.) What about the room where Milosevic was tried – what does it look like? They become like the photographic equivalent of Dexter Dalwood's unseen places, but of course, as real photographs, they lose any of the painting's comic edge, becoming fascinating in another, deadlier way.

In short, Delahaye is a documentarist. In that light it was a surprising formal decision to use an extra wide, practically cinematic format, making it all look like a movie – like the sequel to this conflict's Hollywood-worthy beginning. Grand desert landscapes are worthy of *Lawrence of Arabia*, while the dry, empty prairies and distant mountains in *US bombing of Taliban positions*, 2001, could believably open a western, with 'injuns hiding in them there hills' instead of frontline members of al-Qaida. An exception to these filmic compositions is the more photographic *Taliban 2000* (also the image selected as the accompanying loose print). Here, a dead soldier, tossed in a ditch and looking straight at us, connects Delahaye more to the great 19th-century war photographers he hopes to match, from Roger Fenton to Matthew Brady – as well as Boris Mikhailov's contemporary portraits of the urban homeless, sprawled and dying in the Ukraine snow.

Faced with the uncomfortable irony of a pricey collectable documenting a conflict located in the words of Slavoj Zizek, 'in the context of the antagonisms of global capitalism' and with the guilty awareness moreover that, to quote Susan Sontag, 'to find beauty in war photographs seems heartless', we're left asking ourselves whether we trust *History* or not. Delahaye is to be admired for getting there and bringing it all back home, particularly the real deaths in Afghanistan that went, for the most part, unseen. However, the images of real war (of soldiers, of death) are all in faraway exotic locations, effectively imaging Colin Powell's promise of a war without deaths (on our side, anyway), with bloodshed restricted strictly over there, not here. To quote Zizek again, 'It is surprising how little actual carnage [in the World Trade Center images] we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people ... in clear contrast to reporting on Third World catastrophes, where the whole point is to produce a scoop of gruesome detail [...] Is this not further proof of how, even in this tragic moment, the distance that separates Us from Them, from their reality, is maintained: the real horror happens *there*, not *here*.'

Although Delahaye has inadvertently fallen into the trap Zizek describes, the task of creating an image in such a loaded historical moment is a conflicted, if not impossible brief. The burning towers, the live footage of their imponderable collapse: how does an image-maker continue to document a war that began so photogenically? *History*, with its emphasis on the less dramatic, dangerously forgettable events where history continues to be made, away from the glaring light of the mass media, is a bold attempt to do so – flawed, but courageous. ■

Gilda Williams is a writer and commissioning editor for contemporary art at Phaidon Press.

florence trust studios
St Saviour's
Aberdeen Park
Highbury
London N5 2AR
Email: gallery@florencetrust.org
www.florencetrust.org/gallery.html

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