

Interview

with Andreas Herzau

"In Istanbul, the stones are made of gold"

Art Journalists Nicole Büsing and Heiko Klaas in Conversation with Photographer-Artist Andreas Herzau.

Mr. Herzau—New York, Calcutta, Bombay. You seem to be magically drawn to the melting pots of this world. You took the photographs for your new book on Istanbul in 2007 and 2008. What is it about the city that fascinates you?

I've been working for a long time now on a project called "Eureka Europe." The first chapter of this project was the book *Deutsch Land-A Journey to the Germans*. For this new book, I wanted to go to the outer limits, so to speak. A second reason was that there was a very intense debate in Germany at the time about the issue of Turkey's admission to the EU. This turned my attention to Istanbul. These two reasons, plus my personal goals for the project, led me to say, "okay, I'll go and take a look around for myself."

Did you travel more than once to Istanbul for the book, or did you spend a longer period of time there?

I went several times, and stayed there for relatively long periods each time. I started with ten days, just to see what would happen. After the first visit, I was very happy to be able to go to Istanbul several more times. In this way, I was able to get to know the city better. I spent a total of forty days shooting photographs there.

You visited very diverse parts of the city. How did you select the locations?

My kind of photography is called street photography, which is an American tradition. I mention that, because it affects the way that I work. I actually go out of the door in the mornings—I mean this literally—and take off on foot, or else I'll take the subway or bus for a bit. But I ride the bus in order to experience what it's like to ride the bus. From the outside, it looks as if

I have no aim in particular. Basically, I let myself drift, and try to react very spontaneously to the original impressions that cross my path. There was a streetcar line—I just rode it to the last stop, to see what there was to see there.

So, you didn't plan, but rather took an intuitive approach?

Yes, exactly. There are always points where things in life intersect, and you realize that they are sort of like the crossroads of public life. Things culminate and are very concentrated there.

Did other people recommend certain places to you?

I have friends in Istanbul. They told me about places, but I never actually went anywhere on anyone's specific recommendation. Over the years, I've realized that this "you should go here, you should go there" is, as a rule, not really helpful. However, it is helpful if, for example, you decide in advance to experience certain occasions, such as May 1, for example, when there are usually big demonstrations in Istanbul.

Is there a real Istanbul? Isn't the city actually made up of endless numbers of small towns and neighborhoods, which all have their own identity and their own rules of the game, so to speak?

There isn't really a very clear distinction among the individual neighborhoods of Istanbul, which have emerged out of the city's past. Some of them have been created, as it were, through gentrification. Today, the old red-light district along the Istiklal Caddesi is the "in" district, the hippest neighborhood of all. And the people who live there are rich. But there are also other parts of the city, like Fatih, which is very traditional, very closedoff.

Right away, in the first pictures, we see people with baggage, all of the buses at Taksim Square, the somewhat anxious-looking young woman at the ferry terminal. Istanbul seems to be a city in transit, a place of continual arrivals and departures.

In English, you'd say "the city is in motion." The observation is true. It's also a place of transit, or rather, the endpoint of a journey, because Istanbul draws people to it. Elif Shafak wrote that in her essay, but I'd already heard it before; in the rural areas of Turkey, people still say, "In Istanbul, the stones are made of gold." That means there is still work there, you can earn money there. At the same time, the city is, of course, a meeting place for intellectuals. Completely unlike Ankara, for instance—a far more artistic, far more progressive atmosphere.

How do you feel about always coming and going there?

Now that I know the city, I look forward to going there. These days, I can go to Istanbul for just three days, and be totally relaxed about it. Then I just sit down somewhere and let the city wash over me. It's simple: by working hard to get to know the city, Istanbul has become, for me, a town like Berlin or New York, where you go to do things and see people. As far as leaving goes, I always feel a certain melancholy when it's time to go. I've been trying to figure

out—not really specifically, but by day-dreaming—how to live there for a longer period of time. Just because Istanbul is a completely different kind of experience for a middle-class white guy like myself, very different from Berlin or New York, for example.

The structure of the photo book is based on contrasts: quiet moments are interspersed among high-energy pictures. Do these opposites reflect their experiences during the stay? After all, there is something very urgent, pulsating, about the city.

Naturally, it also seems somewhat improvised. There are two ways to look at this work. First, you can look at the individual pictures and allow yourself to get involved with them this way. But we're talking about a book here. It is a self-contained object. My ambition (and in the meantime, there are people who say that it has been fulfilled) was actually to create a feel for the city. That is, when you're looking at the book, you get a sense of what it's like to walk through the city. Alternating the photos guarantees a certain rhythm, which is, at the same time, associated with a kind of suspense. It's a little like film editing, except that the photos aren't in motion.

To return to the method of street photography: you take your camera straight to where the action is. How do you manage the difficult gap between observation and participation? Do you always succeed at roaming around invisibly in a crowd?

Actually, yes. I think that one of the most important tools of street photography is the photographer's ability to deal with society, since that helps you to decide if you've taken a valid picture or not. That means that I look for certain places or situations where I won't really be noticed. I'm not lurking around in the wastepaper basket or around the corner, but I move with the crowd and don't stand around taking pictures.

There is an exception, however—a photo, where your shadow is obviously apparent.

Yes, right, that does include me, in a way. Actually, that was a bit of fooling around, playing with form. At the same time, however, it's a very atmospheric image—due to the sun, for example. There's a very unique time in Istanbul, when it's around five thirty, six o'clock in the evening. I always have the feeling that that's when people reconcile themselves to the day they've just experienced. It's the moment when the day is over, all of annoyances and difficulties. And then this two-dimensional golden light comes in, bringing a very peaceful, conciliatory mood along with it.

The black-and-white photographs of famous Istanbul photographer Ara Güler (born in 1928) defined the characteristic image of his hometown. Have you studied his work much? Did you meet him in person?

We've met. Of course, I knew his work. If you're in Istanbul, you'll run into it, anyway. Our meeting was very standoffish. He is naturally a kind of pasha, who obviously thought I was a student who wanted someone to critique his work. He didn't understand at all what I wanted from him. I thought that was really too bad. In the book, after all, there's a mix of black-and-

white and color. I included these black-and-white photos, because they represent a part of the city that you can still see today; it's the same as it was during the era when Güler was taking his pictures, in the fifties and sixties. You still get flashes of that now and again. At times, this part is simply there. And, naturally, he is very important to the atmosphere of this city. Otherwise, to put it rather bluntly, the book is actually the antithesis of Güler's work. Actually, I should say, Istanbul definitely does not look like that any more.

The city is obviously ready for Europe. For a few years now, it's seemed as if many of the more endearing qualities of the city are being lost. Is the old Istanbul disappearing bit by bit? I am not nostalgic. I'd say that's the way of the world. These are topics of debate in every city. Had I encountered them, it would have certainly played a role. I didn't deliberately leave it out, either. But that's the way things go. Twenty or thirty years ago, Chelsea or Soho were also unfamiliar areas, or were in the process of being discovered.

Let's go back to the black-and-white and color photographs. Most of your pictures are in color, but sometimes you prefer the classic black-and-white photograph. How do you decide whether to use black-and-white or color?

For me, there's color photography and colorful photography. Color photography is distinguished by the fact that color is an additional creative element, and that it contains an extra level of information. Black-and-white, as I've already mentioned, is—especially in Istanbul's case—the link to what is old, to the past that is still visible. I think that it's also interesting to observe people's reactions when they leaf through the book. They register the black-and-white pictures, but after the book's been closed, people seem to forget that it contains black-and-white and color photos side-by-side. You could say that using black-and-white is like a kind of "historic blink."

Many of your photos feature individuals looking out pensively at the sea. The people who live in this city seem to have a certain melancholy, a tendency to pause and look inward.

The Bosphorus as such plays a very big role in the lives of Istanbul's inhabitants. When I was there, I was told that it dominates the atmosphere of the city, and looking back, I think this was confirmed. The color of the water changes from day to day. That means that every day, there's a different color atmosphere in the city. There is something meditative about that. Right at the end of the book, there is a picture of two cars, with a pair of lovers standing in between them. Behind that is the Bosphorus. A lot of people might just look at that image in a superficial way, and see a kitschy love photo. But if you live in Istanbul, then you know that there's not much room there. There's nowhere for a pair of lovers to be by themselves, in peace and quiet.

Tell us something about the cover photo. Despite all of their festiveness, the colorful balloons also emit a sense of wistfulness and *weltschmerz*. In what respect do these balloons symbolize the fundamental tone of this city, for you?

The cover photo is of a shooting gallery. It was below the Galatasaray stadium, on the water. It looks like a surrealistic installation. The man who operated the shooting gallery sat somewhere in the shadows. He wasn't present at all. You can shoot at the balloons, at the cola bottles, or down, at the little water bottle caps. I also took photos of it while people were shooting, but that completely demystified it. It's a very cryptic image. But in a certain way, it also represents this city. There's this provisory aspect: the plain, the simple, but also the poignant. The owner has just this one bag, and everything fits into it. When he arrives in the morning, he pumps up his balloons, ties up the strings, hangs the balloons on them, and in this way, he has a shooting gallery during the day.

Istanbul is changing at a speed that is almost unknown in Western Europe. For your book project, which description is more apt: is it a declaration of love, or a visual farewell letter?

I would tend to say that it's a declaration of love, because there would be no reason to publish the opposite of a declaration of love as a book. It is, however, also a confrontation, also with respect to the general debate about Turkey's admission to the EU, which I feel is stupid, and extremely one-dimensional on both sides. And it is really an attempt by someone who was socialized in Germany, in Central Europe, to tap into it and come out of the production smarter than he went into it. I also want to offer a way to look at this city differently, perhaps. When it comes to Istanbul, most people hang on to their preconceived images. And then they want to have confirmation of the familiar pictures from their own experience, from television, from magazines. Which was an advantage for me: I took pictures of all kinds of things, but not the blue mosques and other tourist attractions. In this way, I discovered the empty places in Istanbul, where I could vent as much as I liked. So I was able to explore the other aspect of Istanbul that still exists beside the tourist routes. In this respect, it was more of a declaration of love, because a declaration of love is always a very personal, subjective affair.

So, through this book, are you deliberately taking a position on Turkey's admission to the EU?

I think so, yes. Because through these images, I'm saying that this is a great city: it pulsates, it's interesting, modern. It has a past, and people preserve it, also. But people on the outside will just not admit that Istanbul is also modern, because that doesn't fit into their clichéd notion of it as a vacation spot. Sixty years from now, they will probably still be wanting to preserve the big bazaar in the same state it was in in 1950—in the most desperate case, by hiring extras to act there, even though nobody has traded there for a long time. By that, I'm simply trying to say that it's a big city, a metropolis, like many others—but with a unique character, all its own. And Europe can only survive when it can peddle this open spirit, which stands for Europe in the broadest sense, and in the cultural sense, too. The book is a plea for people to keep their eyes open. It's awkward, because it doesn't show these tourist attractions, but maybe it's also important, every once in a while, to consider Europe as something else besides a series of vacation spots.

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