

Painting with the lens

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The photographs of Frank van der Salm are often described as urban landscapes, but what do we actually understand this to mean? First let us consider the phenomenon of 'landscape'. The landscape is a human discovery; it is a mental construct. It comes into existence only at the instant when we consciously observe and experience our surroundings, and only then can its representation be realized. In painting it developed into a successful genre over the course of a few centuries. The close relationship between an ideal environment and the landscape then became the most important cause for a crisis in landscape photography. Because what happened? The landscape became a cliché. The term was no longer associated with one's personal surroundings, but now dealt only with the aesthetics and picturesqueness of the painted landscape.

The photographers who imbued the term 'landscape' with new meaning in the last century were the so-called New Topographers. Characteristic of these photographers – such as Lewis Baltz and Stephen Shore, who took part in the large-scale exhibition 'New Topographics' in 1975 – was that unlike their predecessors, for example Ansel Adams, they manifested a profound and detailed interest for locations that were considered wholly uninteresting, forgotten or banished from memory.⁽¹⁾ The New Topographers had a preference for the peripheral reaches of the urbanized landscape, such as suburbs and modern industrial areas, where nature and culture merge, where human influence has not yet achieved a finished form. Considered uninteresting, the fact that these places were being photographed made them fascinating again. The distanced, unemotional approach to the subject and the absence of drama that people were accustomed to in traditional landscape photography was characteristic: no billowing cloud formations and no classical composition with a clearly defined fore- and background. In this work the priority was registration, the documenting, and this was coupled with an interest for the subject that might still best be termed 'sociological': more topographic description than artistic in nature.

The work and the ideas of these New Topographers certainly had an influence on the work of Van der Salm. His landscapes, photographed with a technical camera, are everything but romantic, and often highly detailed as regards the depiction of the modern, primarily urban environment. Take the work *Class*, for example. It is precisely framed and makes a painstaking inquiry into the facade of an apartment complex. The symmetrical arrangement of the windows, the countless air-conditioning units affixed in a staggered pattern, a brightly lit window that offers a look into the interior of the complex, a schoolroom full of benches and chairs: all this is photographed with extreme precision. Yet the precision in the work of Van der Salm is in part show as well: who are the people who live in the building? Do they have an office job? Are they studying? Do they read books in a library? We can only guess. Our gaze is forced to dwell on the surfaces. The photos are also imprecise in another way: we see apartments, metro platforms and multimodal transport hubs, and recognize these spaces as places in our environment. Yet at the same time we are seeing their more neutral variant: we are looking, as it were, at a reduced, perhaps more abstract version of the form that is familiar to us. The (subtly) manipulative ability of Van der Salm means that the usual criteria in the photographic image are in fact no longer useful. The photos offer little to go by in terms of location, scale and distance, for instance. The viewer is therefore left with various questions: are we looking at Brussels or is it in fact Brasilia? Are we seeing a real landscape or is it a maquette? The viewer browses the image like a detective in pursuit of revelations, a dénouement. These manipulations of the image are always analogue: they are found in the framing, the composition, the play with sharpness and being out of focus, and in waiting for the right moment. Moreover, the pictures rarely show people, and are therefore extraordinarily

non-anecdotal. If people do appear in them, then they are subordinate to the surroundings. There is no trace of the usual activity, as if time were briefly and completely suspended. Using all these means, Van der Salm is able to manipulate the image so that a complex and enigmatic new image appears. And that new image is the crux.

Van der Salm does not simply photograph any landscape, but specifically urban landscapes. His photos reveal an infectious fascination for the urban environment of metropolises like Los Angeles, Brasilia and Hong Kong, without the slightest hint of nostalgia for the past. Despite his selection of 'cold' subjects it is also impossible to reckon him among the pessimists of the modern metropolis, for example the architecture historian Richard Sennett. In Sennett's renowned *The Fall of Public Man* he argues that the public space of our modern cities and the life enacted there is subject to a gradual but steady process of decay.(2) On the contrary, in all Van der Salm's photos you sense his fascination for the modern metropolis in motion 24 hours a day with its technology, speed, efficiency, scale and energy, the city that never seems to sleep. His photos of urban landscapes, or fragments thereof, show this newly rising city, without becoming architectural or urban photography. It does not matter whether the two-dimensional photographic reality coincides with the original function or form of a three-dimensional building in everyday reality. The photographic reality is completely detached from the third dimension and exists fully and exclusively in the two-dimensional surface of the image. The formal aspects in Van der Salm's photos are paramount in this and cannot be seen as merely the logical outcome of his theme: the use of, for example, artificial light and interplay of sharpness and being out of focus, are elements that make a necessary contribution to the depiction, not the illustration, of that metropolis.

In his photos of urban landscapes you can see an evident preference for so-called 'non-places', which are an important factor in the contemporary metropolis. These are new urban spaces that have become increasingly decisive for our lives in recent decades: transfer hubs, tollgates, station halls and metro corridors, but also office parks and agglomerations of flats, characterized by their monofunctionality and extreme efficiency. They are called 'non-places' because they are dissociated in every respect from the logic of local life and create the impression of being part of an international reality of the same, uniform counters, escalators, departure lounges, lifts, retail chains and international advertising slogans. They are places where people spend brief or extended periods of time, but they have a completely different function to that of the old village square as the social hub of a community. Spaces are increasingly redesigned on the basis of non-spatial criteria. They then become containers of information, services and amenities that are totally detached from the spatial context where they are offered. Moreover, the photos of Van der Salm expose the trend of the modern metropolis turning towards the outside: all kinds of services and industries are abandoning the city core and locating themselves around its suburban satellites. New hubs with offices and shops develop in the urban periphery, in part usurping the functions of the city heart. While the city sprawls like an oil slick, voids appear in that city itself which erode the urban support structure. Through these developments, the metropolises are increasingly becoming a component of new regions in which the boundary between city and non-city becomes diffuse. The inner city areas serve for personal meetings, cultural activities and amusement, while the rest of urban life is more and more often takes place outside: business parks and universities are migrating to the periphery.

Van der Salm composes mildly enigmatic pictures with subtle manipulations. The fact that we so easily recognize ourselves in these pictures is undoubtedly linked to the fact that our own reality is also starting to exhibit increasingly artificial traits. Reality TV, for example, has become a global phenomenon. The growing demand to see and experience 'reality' live, in the flesh, is satisfied by a diversity of programmes on TV: from court cases to police chases, from rescue operations to traffic accidents, all 'live on camera'. But what is real and

what is not? The reality soap *Big Brother* has for a number of years been achieving high viewing figures in more than 30 countries. A small group of people is isolated 24/7 in a house and the viewers follow how the social relations within the group develop via TV and Internet. However, the producers have equipped themselves with a panoply of instruments in order to interfere in the group process and make emotions run high, and thus constantly manipulate the real state of affairs. Likewise, the latest development within the contemporary landscape is also termed 'disneyfication': all kinds of elements in our surroundings are presented as if they were authentic, while in essence it is about complete artificiality. Themed environments are created in response to the appetite for 'experiences', with the chief objective of enticing and pleasing. The sensation of realness, of authenticity, seems to be more important, interesting and exciting than reality itself. Existing locations are adapted and furnished, new locations are created. The ultimate in the creation of this new world is undoubtedly the theme park, which exemplifies how the service economy has become an experience economy. Shopping mall, visitor centre and airport are variations on a common archetype: Disneyland, a fantasy world where the employees behave like actors and where customers are treated as guests. Everything that takes place here is planned and structured, what people do is emphatically steered and programmed. We more and more often operate in surroundings that were designed with a specific goal in mind. Artificial and authentic are increasingly intermingled. They are no longer opposite poles, but two sides of the same coin.(3) In her collection of essays *Blinkend Stof* ('Glistening Dust'), the art critic Anna Tilroe tellingly describes that urban, 'disneyfied' landscape in Los Angeles: 'The Walk, one of the rare pedestrian zones in Los Angeles, is the ultimate in the culture of appearances, of fake. Here there are shops, restaurants, bars, theatres and nightclubs, each strikingly different in architecture, but with one thing in common: they look like stage sets. The irregular line of the colourful facades, the stepped terraces, the gigantic billboards ... leave not a single doubt about what is expected of us: play along, join in. This is paradise!'(4)

Van der Salm turns his camera on the contemporary and evolving metropolis, but he simultaneously – and this is essential to his work – consistently exploits this reality for a different, personal objective. The reality that he encounters encourages its employment, as if it were two-dimensional paint. The camera is not only an optical instrument in this, but an extension of his person: Van der Salm paints with the lens. There, too, lies the difference with photographers such as Bernd and Hilla Becher or Stephen Shore, who work much more as visual directors and factual documentary photographers. Van der Salm's work can sooner be compared with photographers like Andreas Gursky or Thomas Demand, who, just like Van der Salm, are primarily interested in the resulting singular image. Or, to quote Van der Salm himself, 'The photographic work is not the reproduction of reality, but creates the reality itself. Photography no longer provides the evidence that something has actually taken place, but only the proof of having seen something.'(5)

The viewer plays a crucial role in the work of Van der Salm. Firstly, in most of his photos there is a great deal for the attentive viewer to see: there is the wealth of different materials, the intensity of the details, the limited palette of colours and the cohesion of the surface. It thus forms a direct stimulus for a painterly experience, but what prevails is that the picture is never hermetic, always remaining open to interpretation. It is as if seeing, perception itself, is made conscious, and as if we are therefore allowed a glimpse of a world that is awaiting signification. It is down to us to project our personal associations onto the image and to complete the picture ourselves. The metro corridor in the work *Tube*, for example, is shot without people. The sharp registration of the mildly claustrophobic, low ceiling, the shiny red tiles and the bright artificial light reveal Van der Salm's eye for detail and for the aesthetics of coherence. It is an attractive, almost fairy-tale image, but the image also cannot help but allude to the more unsettling, dehumanizing aspects of our modern-day

metropolis: a location from the notorious film *Irreversible* by Gaspar Noe, for example, in which a young woman is attacked by a brutal rapist in an underground tunnel. The work *Panorama* functions in a similar way: we see a symmetrical composition of seven colossal buildings. At first glance, the picture displays a dry, precise and symmetrical group of seven massive blocks of flats at an indeterminate location. But on closer inspection the picture is making a forceful reference to an alienating film set, like that used in the 1950s film *Playtime* by Jacques Tati, which intended to sketch a picture of the city of the future where chill technology would rule humankind. All of this is 'in the eye of the beholder'.

Frank van der Salm does not display, but depicts and manipulates fragments of the urban landscape. That landscape consists of countless components that we often take as self-evident. Perhaps that is where Van der Salm's greatest strength lies: with his images he is able to make us re-examine and re-investigate these highly self-evident fragments in a world of fixed meanings. Time and again.

1. This exhibition took place in the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.
2. R. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, New York 1977.
3. J. Pine and J. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy*, New York 1999. It is not for nothing that this book by the economists Pine and Gilmore bears the subtitle 'Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage.'
4. A. Tilroe, *Blinkend Stof*, Amsterdam 2002, p. 20.
5. Frank van der Salm during a lecture at the Academie Minerva, Groningen in 2004.