between a state of desertion and overpopulation

the 'pictures' of frank van der salm

Frank van der Salm's pictures generate distrust. Architecture and trees are depicted as hazy, maquette-like blocks and mossy, plastic clutters; hyper-realistically represented, overwhelming architecture seems unreal. There is an alternation of unfocused and crystal-clear shots. Confusion. Deception in observation. This work hinges on perception.

What, for example, does the photograph *Neighbourhood* (2000) tell us? Bright green, grassy mounds shape the transitional zone between a path fenced off with barbed wire and a cluster of uniform residential blocks. It is hardly an unfamiliar sight to inhabitants of the highly urbanized Netherlands, yet this image still exudes something surprising.

By focusing the lens on the green embankment, Van der Salm attains an unusual depth of field. The pinkish-brown strip beneath, which should serve as a solid 'ground' for the image, seems to hover just like the row of apartment buildings above it. The blurring of these sections results in an extreme form of abstraction, the photo thus corresponding closely with a distinctively painterly tradition. The use of patches of colour, sometimes vivid, and the large-format print also point in that direction.

The ingenious interplay of distinctness and blur makes the viewer doubt the authenticity of what is photographed. Notwithstanding the movement suggested by the dramatic, blue sky, the scene seems to exist in an extreme stasis. Is this image therefore denying its photographic identity? Is it not the instantaneity of shooting a photograph that is most typical of the medium?

Within Van der Salm's oeuvre, *Neighbourhood* could be considered a 'pivotal work' between his early urban and natural landscapes and his more recent images, which sooner focus on the architecture itself. The subject of *Spot* (2000), for example, is an enormous hotel. This melting image balances somewhere on the boundary between abstraction and figuration. The viewer is once again confronted with a dubious familiarity. This 'disturbed representation' of reality is present in a perhaps even more extreme form in *Platform* (2003), where a gloomy haze renders the depicted buildings almost immaterial. The gaze of the viewer is drawn away from the subject, in order to deal with the more clearly defined elements such as colour and form. Once again, the pictorial quality of the photos comes to the fore.

While the haziness in *Spot* still affords an equilibrium, albeit unstable, on seeing *Quarter* (2002) – a similar image in terms of

composition – the viewer is overwhelmed by a robust monumentality. Depicted in detail, the building looks like a *Gestalt*, a clearly defined, three-dimensional form.[1] Remarkable once again is the apparent negation of the specificity of the photographic medium, since the flat surface is, as it were, translated in sculptural terms.

Another painterly strategy used by Van der Salm is that of the grid, as employed highly literally in *Grid* (2003). The subject of this photo is the concrete skeleton of a building under construction. The perfect coincidence of the outline of the construction site with the edges of the image generates an 'all-over' structure, which brings to mind the credo of Abstract Expressionism. This structure, which takes the form of a grid, is for Rosalind Krauss the most notable feature of the 20th-century avant-garde. In her book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, she demonstrates how the grid possesses a mythical power that awakens both a feeling of materiality (science, logic) and a desire for belief (illusion, fiction). Nevertheless, this visual pattern cannot be directly compared to the myth, since it negates every form of narrativity.[1] In *Grid*, the identity of the grid is fully ratified: the material as well as the abstract and illusory are present, and the structural emptiness underscores the lack of narrativity. The grid brings about a stasis, in the form of a refusal to speak, to express.[3]

In works like *Canvas* (2004) and *Front* (2004), this strict definition of the grid is, however (in a different manner), relaxed. In *Canvas*, the grid structure, as the ultimate exploration of the flat surface, is transformed into an uneven relief, once again a sculptural element. The green veil that enshrouds the building, and to which the title of the work undoubtedly refers, obscures the crystal-clear image somewhat, so that a painterly abstraction is again present here.

In *Front*, the anti-narrative effect of the grid is disturbed because the borders of the photo and the photographed object do not coincide. The 'open edges' containing a dark-blue nocturnal sky, another apartment building, some greenery and a number of parked cars and trucks, do not completely preclude a narrative fleshing out of the image. The composition of this scene inevitably calls to mind Andreas Gursky's *Hong Kong Island* (1994), in which towering buildings form the backdrop for a building site strewn with all kinds of cranes and construction materials. One could also mention works by Thomas Struth, such as *Dallas Parking Lot* (2001), in which a group of skyscrap-

ers surrounds a rain-drenched car park in the foreground. The blurred, pictorial effect that the green shroud achieves – just as in *Canvas* – makes the image deviate somewhat from the clear-cut style in the abovementioned examples by Gursky and Struth, both of whom were unmistakably followers of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Though this difference between Van der Salm and his foreign colleagues, who – considering their oeuvres in their entirety – also strove for a certain degree of abstraction, must be differentiated more subtly, the work of Van der Salm is clearly distinctive for making the (partial) lack of focus into a feature of his images. This implies that the point of departure cannot be solely life-size reality, but also an artificial world in miniature. This means that the expectations with respect to what one sees are repeatedly called into question.

Meanwhile, it becomes clear that the images by Frank van der Salm extend far beyond the disciplinary boundaries of photography. In her essay 'De artistieke grenzen op het spel. Picturale aspecten van de actuele fotografie' ('Artistic boundaries at stake. Pictorial aspects of contemporary photography'), Hilde Van Gelder describes photographic works that are fleshed out pictorially, sculpturally or even architecturally – an obvious trend in contemporary photography – as 'pictures'.[4] Here she is referring to the broad, English meaning of the word; not, therefore, to the French *pictural*, which relates only to the painterly tradition.

The term 'picture' also seems especially apposite to the work of Van der Salm. By employing the 'non-user-friendly' technical camera and extended exposure times, the photographer establishes a link with the time-consuming methods of classic painting and sculpture. The 'all-over', frame-filling principle, the leaning towards abstraction, the use of colour (patches) and the generally large format of the works, which are meant to be hung on the wall, also indicate the *pictural* nature of the work. The notion of the *Gestalt*, as mentioned above, once again calls to mind the world of sculpture. Moreover, the limited editions of the photographs sooner indicate the exclusivity of a painting or sculpture than the multi-reproducibility of a photo.

This 'hybridization' can also be detected in *Intermezzo* (2003). A large surface (200 x 115 cm) offers a view of a hallway where the start/end of two escalators leading down/up are situated. Viewers imagine they are in a metro corridor. Although the hardly fresh, mildly oppressive colours (khaki green and orange-brown) come across as rather 'stuffy', the frontality and the perfect symmetry lend this interior view a clinical sterility. But

this extreme cleanliness is not the only thing that has a alienating effect. Contrary to our expectations, in this place associated with swarming masses of people, there is not a single person to be seen. What this image expresses is all-silencing emptiness: no people, nothing anecdotic, no narrativity. And yet this scene (and all others by Van der Salm) transcends the merely documentary, representational picture. The notion of the 'picture' clarifies this. The meaning of that term includes the registration of the photographed subject, but – as mentioned – by means of pictorial, sculptural and/or architectural strategies. Influenced by the confusion in genre, perception of the image is altered: the (painterly) abstraction, caused by extended exposure times that blur moving figures into quasi-invisible ghosts, results in the picture being fixed in a different, 'unreal' time dimension. In addition, the isolated (and thus context-less) representation of the subject also shifts the space-experience to a more abstract, almost transcendental level. The image becomes an icon, the serenity of which is, however, transformed into an uneasy disquiet.

A deafening silence is also present in Van der Salm's most recent works, including *Link* (2004). An extremely clean terrain, with a row of cubicles that are reminiscent of a customs posts, is the subject of this photo. The utter emptiness stands in stark contrast to the nervous bustle with which such a site is normally associated. The profusion of artificial light, intended to improve security, makes the place everything but intimate and further accentuates the chilly emptiness. This also reveals the compulsive character of this place of regulation and classification.

As Steven Jacobs amply explains in his book 'Horror Vacui: Photography and the Deserted City' the strategy of the void is a *Leitmotif* in the history of urban and architectural photography.[5] This motif, often applied for the sake of clarity and legibility of the image, finds its precursors in the *città ideale* of Renaissance and Modernist urban designs, in which a perfect order throws overboard all details that are not strictly necessary. Initially still a result of the technical limitations of the medium, namely the long exposure times, the empty cityscape – so it seems – increasingly became a deliberate choice.

It is remarkable that Frank Van der Salm uses precisely those technical 'limitations' from the pioneering days of photography in order to achieve a specific aesthetic, a specific way of dealing with reality. Emptiness becomes a photographic strategy to evoke a feeling of alienation and unease in the viewer. In contrast

1 The notion of the Gestalt in the context of urban and architectural photography is also mentioned in Steven Jacobs, Horror Vacui: Photography and the Deserted City, exhibition catalogue, Ghent, Witte Zaal, 2003, p. 12.

2 Rosalind Krauss, The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 12-13.

3 Ibid., p. 158.

4 Hilde Van Gelder, 'De artistieke grenzen op het spel. Picturale aspecten van de actuele fotografie', Obscuur, 6, 17 (October 2000): pp. 23-32. Van Gelder explores the notion of the 'picture' in greater depth in the article 'Disturbance as Art: Tracing Realism in the Photographic and Video Tableaux of Philippe Terrier-Hermann' in P. Terrier-Hermann (ed.), Internationales (Amsterdam: Artimo Foundation, 2001), pp. 52-55, 65-71.

5 Steven Jacobs, op. cit. note 1.

6 Ibid., p. 62.

7 Ibid., p. 18.

8 Ibid., p. 20.

with Renaissance drawings of antique structures, Van der Salm's 'grid buildings' do not give the impression that they can be 'mastered' by humans. Yet it is that apparent elusiveness which seems to fascinate the photographer. Through his eye, that miniscule instrument, the colossal volumes – in reality hardly stimulating, dead structures – are constantly transformed into a three-dimensional vessel replete with pictorial opportunities with which the bustling dynamic within contemporary urban culture can be visualized.

Works such as *Spot*, *Quarter*, *Front*, and *Gallery* (all from 2004), however, indicate that the photographer does not fully subscribe to the tradition of 'empty urban photography'. Light behind windows, parked cars, billboards and so on do, after all, often betray a human presence. These indexical signs combine the oppressive feeling of emptiness with the equally alarming impression of over-population and the associated anonymity. The uniform office and apartment blocks accommodate hundreds of individuals who are swallowed up in the masses.[6]

The sporadic physical presence of minuscule human figures – notice, for example, the badminton players in the blue-lit space at the bottom of *Gallery* – further amplifies the effect of monumental grandeur, which is often coupled with the motif of emptiness. Emptiness indexes – just like darkness, solitude and silence (all elements that we encounter in the work of Van der Salm) – a certain deficiency, which is associated with the romantic notion of 'the sublime.'[7]

That 'romantic' shortcoming, projected onto the images by Van der Salm, does, however, raise the suspicion that behind the profound faith in modernity lies an awful Utopia. After all, the common identity of the residential tower block flattens every expression of personality. Proceeding from Jacobs, it could be argued that the gigantesque built structures externalize contemporary societal power structures with Van der Salm, too.[8] That new urban dimension also exposes a breach between the human race and its indomitable, uncontrollable habitat. Moreover, this phenomenon seems to be universal, since Van der Salm's photographs have been shot in every corner of the world (from Brazil via Europe to Hong Kong). Each image by the photographer can thus be understood as a symbol for contemporary rational, as a modern-day icon.

Maquette-like representation versus realism, emptiness versus over-population, photography versus traditional artistic disciplines: the crux of Frank van der Salm's oeuvre seems to lie in this series of dualities. The essential question here is how exactly his images relate to reality, though it is impossible to answer unequivocally. The photograph, the photographer's orchestrated rendering of reality, literally performs as a medium, as a mediator between reality and perception.

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