

Reality, a perfect simulation – Some considerations on the work of Marike Schuurman

By Manuela Lietti

In a famous short story, “On Exactitude in Science,”⁽¹⁾ written by Jorge Luis Borges in 1960 the author imagines a country whose leading cartographers engage themselves in drawing a map of the empire which is so detailed that it finally covers up the whole territory, thus coinciding exactly with the points on the ground that it represents. In this fable, the territory no longer precedes the map; it is the map that determines the territory. Borges’ story with its symbolic yet prophetic tone can be regarded as the most effective allegory for today’s process of simulation. The act of simulating if seen through the prism of Jean Baudrillard’s philosophy is not just a synonym for feigning what one doesn’t have but for going beyond the limits of merely pretending. Simulation threatens the crucial difference between the true and the false, the real and the imaginary. Simulation forces people to question whether a map or the territory represented in a map is more real.

The work of Marike Schuurman – particularly the pieces belonging to the series *Plots* and that made during her 6-month stay in Beijing – is an example of the manner in which the artist portrays ready-made episodes of simulation hidden in the realm of everyday life and reflects on the ontological issue of truth. In her work, the issue of authenticity has already departed from the safe haven of rationality as disclosed in the philosophical discourse and has been assimilated into the trickier daily dimension. The photographs and videos Marike Schuurman has made during her stay in Beijing inherit her past interest in the cityscape conceived not as a definite entity, but as a fragmented tableau vivant, a ready-made stage the artist has to capture first with her trained sight and then with her camera. The recent Beijing work revolves around two main areas of focus.

The first series is aimed at portraying street banners and architectural screens, which in the case of Beijing are rather different from those Schuurman shot in other cities (for example in Berlin, where the artist lives and works). In the case of Beijing, the screens don’t portray the façades of the future buildings under construction and are usually located in front of unfinished projects; they are mainly natural motifs with trees and grass, small portions of green and nature dispersed in a more and more concrete-dominated capital. These banners are a *mise en scène* of a highly sought-after nature, sometimes well hidden, sometimes rather visible, imaginary yet real stations of transit that feed reality and modify both the city-scape and the perceptions of residents towards the city.

Schuurman’s second body of works consists of photographs the artist has taken of people looking through or literally going through the architectural barriers usually employed to encircle construction sites and used to keep clear a working place from the sight of curious and impatient onlookers. The former set of photographs is completely devoid of human presence; the screens photographed are both passive receivers of images and active transmitters onto which desires are projected and through which they are conveyed; they might prophesy the future of a site, not only anticipating and idealizing but perhaps also substituting reality since they become far more appealing to the sight than what they hide. The latter set is made of “moveable” screens activated by human presence, interfaces reluctant to being immovable barriers. Although having been conceived to separate what “already is” from what “it is going to be,” they actually represent a flexible passage, a breakthrough whose appeal merely lies in the mystery of what they hide.

Both these two kinds of screens carry special significance if seen in the Chinese context: They not only stand as a metaphor for the dramatic changes undergone by the Chinese cityscape which are consequently reflected onto human behaviours and onto the pursuit of a new notion of the natural landscape; they also symbolize the more and more blurred division line between artificial and genuine, process and result, and sublimation and truthfulness, thus appealing to the individual’s critical attitude and ability to see more deeply into things.

In Borges’ story, the cartographers made a map of such detail that it substituted the territory and made it superfluous. Will the street banners and screens portrayed by Schuurman become so real as to let people feel that what they hide is not necessary anymore? Perhaps this is a vision of the future in which truth is just a matter of perfect simulation.

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(1) Jorge Luis Borges, “Collected Fictions” (translated by Andrew Hurley), Penguin Books, London, 1999

Manuela Lietti is an independent art writer, art critic and curator based in Beijing since 2003. In 2003, she graduated from the Department of Oriental Studies of Venice University, completing her thesis on contemporary Chinese art. Then in 2007, she received her Master’s in Chinese History of Art from the Academy of Art and Design of Tsinghua University, Beijing. Since 2003 she has been involved in various projects in China and abroad as a curator, coordinator, researcher and writer.