

Retina SX-70

In 2009, the photographer Marike Schuurman got on a plane to São Paulo. In 2007, São Paulo was the first city in the world to ban advertising in public spaces, and now it was a stripped city of concrete, a kind of urban biotope, where even the signs of small shops had been removed. Previously, Schuurman had documented the use of huge advertisements mainly in Berlin and Beijing. In Brazil, every snapshot made with the SX-70 Polaroid camera resulted in one abstract picture after another, without any reference to what the camera had been aimed at. As if the old lens and the long expired film – one of the last available ones for this medium, threatened by extinction –, with a view of an entire city without any visual noise or clues, had been hit by a final blackout.

The deliquescent, exquisitely colourful images, destroyed by time and saturated by the chemicals in the instant camera, are mysterious commentaries on their own disappearance. Blown up into a large format, due to the lack of film grain in the Polaroids, they have kept their smooth depth; only dust appeared during the scanning, which Schuurman erased with the aid of Photoshop and presents as a kind of extract in the complementary *Dust* pictures. Apart from this, the Polaroids bear few traces of what normally characterises photography: no marks of time and space, no *mise en scène*. The film she used is called “Time Zero”, as if it were announcing its own zero point right from the start.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the zero point of the human eye had already been announced. As we learn from Paul Virilio’s *The Vision Machine*, the introduction of gaslight in the cities was seen as a threat to the visual sense. People thought that the eye would lose its ability to adapt, that it would be overexposed. At the same time, the birth of photography took place: an artificial eye that complemented the human one and could capture a view forever. From its very beginning, the history of photography has been a history of the acceleration of exposure time and capacity. Indeed, today the eye cannot keep up with the increasing flood of images; memory is increasingly shifted to hard

disks and has become a logistic question of index searches. In this context, Schuurman's *Expired* series seems almost like a short circuit. The camera keeps going, but what we see, synthetically distorted, is above all reminiscent of the impressions of a retina that is no longer able to perceive images and transport impulses to the brain. A machine with amnesia, in whose insides chemicals run amok. In this regressive state, however, regeneration begins: new colours blossom, an unexpected aesthetics emerges from the apparatus. São Paulo, too, might remind us of such a state. A naked city where one's gaze needs to orientate itself before images can once again stick to the retina.

Anne Ethelberg, 2012

Translation: Wilhelm Werthern