

Marike Schuurman

After the ice had melted, it left behind its traces: fertile ground moraines, hilly end moraines, large fields of sand and enormous pieces of rock. Vast areas of Lower Lusatia (*Niederlausitz*), a region in eastern Germany that reaches to Poland, was formed in the Ice Age during the two-million-year-long Pleistocene period. The forces at work must have been gigantic: rocks weighing tons were transported over great distances by glaciers and finally dropped as debris. Thus boulders ended up in areas where they could not possibly have been formed geologically. This caused a problem for the scientific world view of the 18th century, as after the period of Enlightenment this enigma could no longer be attributed to giants throwing rocks. Today, a clear explanation for the origin of these boulders exists – but their obvious incongruence in the countryside remains.

The boulders that Marike Schuurman photographed for her extensive workgroup titled *Kohle* (Coal, money) also appear to be strangely foreign and misplaced in the landscape. The accurately carved-out texts suggest that they are memorial stones. For example, “The village of Wanninchen was located here until 1985” is one inscription on a dark stone that lies somewhat lost on the bank of a lake. Carved into another boulder sitting in a strangely empty space is the simple text “Sao community 1474-1971”. The Dutch artist, who lives in Berlin, explored the Lusatia in search of such boulders with her instant-photo camera. The stones commemorate villages, some of which were founded hundreds of years ago, which disappeared suddenly at some point in the 20th century. Villages like Scheibe, Jessen, Wanninchen or Sao were dug up and, in the literal sense of the word, buried. The boulders are at the same time both memorial stones and gravestones.

The Lusatia, with its rich brown coal deposits, was an important motor for the industrialisation of Germany. In the GDR, which for years was the largest producer of brown coal in the world, this natural resource became a primary economic force. In the Lusatia, brown coal lies very close to the earth’s surface, which makes open-cast mining the most practical and economical solution for retrieving it; but at the same time, its extraction has a major impact on both its natural and human environment due to the immense land requirements of surface mining. Countless towns found themselves at the edge of sandy pits or in the middle of moonscapes with torn-open wounds. Over the decades, well over one hundred villages in this region were dug up and then disappeared completely. Their remains lie at the bottom of artificial lakes, filled pits and cultivated mine dumps.

Similar to the boulders that were pushed through the Lusatia and torn out of their geological context during the Ice Age, the former inhabitants of these villages were pulled out of their accustomed environment, uprooted and replanted. They had to leave the developed structures of their villages and come to terms with unfamiliar,

foreign lives in new, often faceless settlements. The memorial stones that Schuurman photographed clearly manifest both a very distant and at the same time very recent past. They connect the most divergent periods of time and history and, as silent witnesses, serve as a reminder of that which is now history, which has disappeared and is now lying just below the surface.

This is exactly the point where Marike Schuurman applies her particular technique within this work group: she uses a no-longer-produced “peel-apart” instant film, which provides the standard colour-positive image, which for her needs is no longer relevant. Instead, the artist works with the initially almost invisible negative found on the black part of the film which has to be revealed by using an ordinary bleach. This negative is then scanned with transmitted light and printed. This specific method allows the photographs to appear somewhat washed out and yellow on the colour scale. First and foremost, these photographic works reference that which is missing, that which no longer exists. This aspect was also central for one of Schuurman’s previous work groups: a few years ago, she travelled to São Paulo, where all kinds of outdoor advertising have been banned since 2007, for a photo series titled *Deleted*. She took photos in the public spaces of this city of millions, focussing on that which was no longer there: instead of the giant signs and illuminated advertisements that often shape urban space, one can see run-down and poorly whitewashed building walls, empty yet filled with a strange silence in the cityscape. Similar to this work group created in South America, in her series *Kohle* Schuurman also approaches “that which is missing” through her photographic methods. Photography becomes a precise instrument to show what has vanished, making it visible once more.

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