

Peter Herbstreuth
The Picturesque Revisited
On a theme in the work of Marike Schuurman

On the occasion of Thomas Wulffen's 50th birthday

During her residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien Marike Schuurman worked with both a video and a still camera in the natural reserve area of Schorfheide near Berlin. She roamed through sites that were abandoned years ago, between overgrown paths, hangars, an airstrip and military barracks. Walls are cracked, roofs caved in, and windows have been smashed. The interior is decaying and rank growth is proliferous, creating a terrain which oscillates between nature and the relics of civilization that we recognize from landscaped gardens and Romantic paintings. Schuurman discovered her images here, transposed them into geometrical and strictly formalized views, and presented them as extracts of beauty from a place in transition. Her deep focus close-up shots of wallpaper – peeling away from the wall after exposure to moisture – appear as if she has frozen mirror images. Her eye sought a fragmentation that emphasizes the aesthetic, avoiding reportage-style documentation and transforming the state of dissolution into a universal condition. The references inherent in the photographs do not serve to reveal a specific site. These are images of non-lieux.*¹

Primacy of the pictorial. Marike Schuurman develops her works in the tradition of the picturesque. This has its theoretical foundations in 18th century England and was revived in 1982 by the art historian David Watkin as a central aesthetic concept. His considerations are rooted in “the assumption that the theory and the practise of the Picturesque constitute the mayor English contribution to European aesthetics (...). Between 1730 and 1830 English poets, painters, travellers, gardeners, architects, connoisseurs and dilettanti were united in the emphasis on the primacy of the pictorial values. The Picturesque became the universal mode of vision for the educated classes.” *² Travelers were interested in the unknown and wanted to see it domesticated within a pictorially determined framework. Landscape and vedute painters, whose visions travelers had schooled themselves in, presented such a framework as a familiar schema.

En passant. Around 1800 the picturesque was defined in the following terms: picturesque was “every object, and every kind of scenery, which has been or might be represented with good effect of painting.”*³ What set the picturesque apart was the fact that the selected detail appeared as an echo of landscape painting. Such details could be discovered in motion – while walking or traveling in a carriage – and could thus be enjoyed, like an artwork, in a heightened mental picture –that is to say, as an ephemeral, fleeting image. The impression was formed from the interdependence between the site specificity of the images and the sensibility of the wanderer, who constructed them ‘en passant’ as products of the imagination. The image had to be discovered and required creative activity, but could, however, be rendered by anyone, in any place and at any time. The gaze was directed to the

outside. The experience of the image resulted primarily from an attentive visual focus on the surrounding reality.

Today the concept of the picturesque is divided. In popular understanding, the picturesque is represented by picture postcards of the typical, the sightworthy, and the site-specific. Despite this depletion, a reactivation of the concept of the picturesque appeared around 1970 with artists who – like Richard Long and Hamish Fulton – wandered about in remote areas. Land art protagonists also played their part, above all Robert Smithson, who substantiated his ideas in accordance with the theoreticians of the picturesque, developing his theory of representation on this basis.*⁴ This new conceptualization of the gaze would not have been conceivable without Duchamp's irony and aestheticisms. In their efforts to accentuate the aesthetic, Gordon Matta-Clark discovered the picture-orientated 'switch' in condemned houses, while critics such as Thomas Wulffen found it on the street;*⁵ both sought suitable presentational frames to mediate their discoveries. A powerful paradigmatic effect was induced by Smithson's *Mirrors* – distributed on the ground in barren areas as representations of the ephemeral.

Fictionalization of the document. Schuurman's work echoes this notion. As she exclusively shows what was actually visible in empirical reality – which thus in principle can be seen by anyone adopting a similar perspective – these images possess an inherently democratic spirit, upon which the formally trained gaze of the 'educated classes' superimposes itself. "I grew up in the Netherlands. Every square meter there is defined", she asserts in a conversation. Rank growth fascinates her, because the heterotopia in Schorfheide increasingly obscures the codings of its military history. Schuurman's approach is not that of a documentary photographer (if it were, there would be no relationship to the picturesque), but that of a poet. What she captures can be traced back to reality. The order of civilization yield to natural laws – but in a representation that emphasizes the artificial. The pantheon of American Minimalism (Eva Hesse) and Russian Constructivism (Alexander Rodchenko) unfolds behind the images.

In earlier videos Schuurman observed how a man parked a car, a woman ran to a jetty on a river, a technician climbed up and then descended a tower, pedestrians snaked through a crack in a wall in city traffic: patterns of motion without a climax, pure activity, devoid of meaning but conclusive within themselves. The context remains vague.

In 1914 (the same year Marcel Duchamp created his *Bottle Dryer*), the poet Ezra Pound developed a transformative principle that extended the active conditions of the picturesque. His idea stemmed from an observation in the subway. Through targeted cuts, he transformed what he had seen into a linguistic image whose structure he borrowed from the Japanese haiku. "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: /Petals on a wet, black bough." The fragment of reality that is forcefully extrapolated from its context alters its appearance through this explosive act. Thus, meaning is not produced by the pure contextual dislocation of the fragment into the operating system (Betriebssystem) of 'literature' in the medium 'book', but by the imaginative transfer carried out by the extrapolator.

It is less significant which individual images Schuurman photographs. The decisive

factor is the transformations she achieves through her selection and the connections the photographs and video sequences themselves generate. The time of the singular image in art has passed. What matters now are the at times conceptually calculated, at times unintentionally produced correlations that the works develop: the discreet narrative. Schuurman tends to favor images of decay and sequences of non-sense. They could be interpreted as counter-images to the assumed coding of all places in The Netherlands, but also as the project of a transnational accumulation of sites and metaphors of transition. From both perspectives time must be considered on a grand scale.

Translation-----David Hatcher

* 1 – Schuurman calls all works *Untitled*. In their presentation she transforms sites into pictorial spaces. In the process they become non-sites. Cf. Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Paris, 1992

* 2 – David Watkin, *The English Vision. The Picturesque in Architecture, Landscape and Garden Design*, London, 1982, p.VII

* 3 – Sir Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque*, London, 1796, p.37.

* 4 – Robert Smithson, *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, Nancy Holt (ed.) designed by Sol LeWitt, New York, 1979. Therein: *The Sedimentation of the Mind*, pp.82-91, and *Frederick Law Olmstead and the Dialectical Landscape*, pp.117-128. Both essays originally appeared in the art magazine *Artforum*, which repeatedly dedicated itself to the theme from 1968 onwards and in December 1968 declared the picturesque to be a 'cutting edge' category.

* 5 – In 1986 with reference to Baudrillard and Nietzsche Thomas Wulffen described a mode of vision which primarily perceives reality as an aesthetically pre-mediated phenomenon. Under a stroboscopic gaze empirical reality is scanned for equivalents in the visual arts. Kosuth, Nannucci and Sonnier may be observed in neon tube design, André in flagstones, Ruthenbeck in piles of stones on the street, Beuys in grease spots, Duchamp in mens' toilets. Corresponding to the spirit of the 1980s, the gaze was object-related. Today it is a parlor game. But it was Wulffen's essay that then offered me an explanation for the phenomenon that I had only known from the theorists of the picturesque. Suddenly it had validity in the present. Moreover this essay is a seminal text. Already here Wulffen introduces the concepts 'Betriebssystem Kunst' and 'Realkunst' that he only later systematically elaborated upon; see Thomas Wulffen, *Am Nullpunkt der Kunst. Topologie*, in: *Ästhetik und Kommunikation: Kultur im Umschlag. Musik. Malerei. Philosophie*, No. 63, Berlin, 1986, pp.75-80

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