

SPACE IN PHOTOGRAPHS

"My aim in photography is to reveal another reality within the reality surrounding us"

(Marike Schuurman)

In recent years Marike Schuurman has taken photos of the 'banners' that screen off building sites or hang from façades undergoing renovation. It struck her that this phenomenon was becoming increasingly common in her home city of Berlin. Everywhere in the city these monstrous hoardings block our view of an empty piece of city or a building site. They are banners consisting of huge images – sometimes they consist of advertisements or else they may be photos of the building planned for that site. But sometimes too there are images without any obvious 'sender' that make you wonder whose fantasies they are – a piece of motorway with a coastline or a city quarter with a horizon.

In her recent series of photos that she has titled *Plots*, Schuurman appears to have taken a new direction. In her previous work she showed herself as someone with a special sense for emptiness in the cityscape, someone capable of discovering in the triviality of the everyday a beautiful image with an unexpected degree of drama. In her recent photographs however the emptiness is blocked out and removed from view.

In *Plots* something else happens to the banners than when you come across them on a city walk. They have become a motif that the photographer has zoomed in on, so that one only gets a partial view. This has resulted in photographs where the perspective is out of sync and the credibility of the image becomes unstable. Crinkles in a blue sky or seams in a clump of trees indicate that something doesn't make sense here. And yet, just as in Schuurman's earlier photos, they are forceful images in terms of their form and her feeling for generous lines. Where the *Plots* relate to her earlier work is that they are about space, about the spatial or three-dimensional effect that can be achieved using photography. In this case *fake* spaces play a role and this makes this work different, even confusing. It looks as though it cannot be true, although the photos have simply been taken in the street and nothing has been staged. It was the reality that the photographer came across that was staged.

"Through the act of taking shots of these oversized photos that include part of our surrounding reality, the world appears to consist of separate fragment of images – a sort of collage, as though the world has been photo-shopped. How far can one take such a process? Can you make a city that consists entirely of photographs?"

In fact Marike Schuurman's work is always about photography. What reality are you dealing with at the moment you are looking at a photograph? This plays a role in her recent urban images, but also in her earlier work. It is not its lifelike quality that makes photography so interesting for her, but precisely the difference from life within the resemblance. When effective, photography shows something that you wouldn't have seen this way without a camera.

In the series *Plots* you see a reality with welds and hiatuses, one with hardly any real depth. Even if perspective is suggested, everything ends up in a single flat dimension. And in Schuurman's opinion, that is as it should be. This is what photography can do. A photograph succeeds for her if the medium puts its own stamp on the image, if it creates its own reality instead of claiming to be a neutral replica.

In Ghent, still earlier in her career, the artist took photographs of a shopping street with large mirrors hanging on the walls outside. They are impressive with their monumental simplicity – motionless images taken with a feeling for minimal form and a special eye for detail. This gives everything a powerful feeling of repose. Here too however the question arises of what you are actually looking at? What are these mirrors doing there? The photos are taken using a view camera in such a way that the photographer remains out of the picture.

Many of Schuurman's photos have been shot in the city. At the same time there is none of the normal bustle one associates with urban life. It is only in her earlier work that one sees any people, but there too one wouldn't speak of any activity going on. You see one or just a few figures at a moment of waiting, caught in an activity that has been interrupted. The artist isolates them in a spatial field so as to draw attention to them. They become places where the city is still for a moment, or where some specific detail with dramatic potential is highlighted. And within the emptiness of the scene there are details that lend excitement to the image, that provide food for the eye or suggest a story.

In 2003 Marike Schuurman took photos on the Schorfheide, a former army terrain near Berlin. It is a deserted area left behind by the Russian army after the fall of the Wall. The buildings are dilapidated and have fallen prey to nature and to the vandals who have their parties here. In the photographs the artist zooms in on details. She was not so much aiming at a documentary survey as exposing the visually incongruous situation she found there.

Take the close-up of a white-plastered panel abandoned by the side of the road. Formerly it conveyed a political message. Now the wall is white and stands there looking strikingly useless like a stone bus-shelter in no man's land. Elsewhere on the terrain she has

taken a shot of a smashed window in dark blue light. Any explanatory context has been excised. All you see is the window and the suggestion of a black depth behind it. The photo could just as well have been taken somewhere else.

During a stay in Finland Schuurman made a series of photos of snow. Once again these photos don't offer any overall view that would give one a coherent picture; they are head-on close-up views with a curious atmosphere of urgency. They show cars almost entirely hidden in snowdrifts or snowflakes falling against the backdrop of a dark evening sky. We see many varieties of snow, but with little context. You would think that it hardly counts as a subject, and yet there is plenty to see in the photos. Here too the photographer displays her natural feeling for the beauty that lies hidden in a trivial detail. She has approached her motif as though it were an obstacle. That is true not only of her photos of snow, but also of the shots of banners that she recently took in Berlin. They are motifs you can't ignore.

Schuurman works in series. Her subject-matter varies over the years but whatever it is she gives it a like-minded attention. It often begins with curiosity about a specific spot. She casts her eye around patiently, taking her time, and finds something that stands out, something that looks incompatible in the street scene. This may be because it is beautiful and absurd, implausible or otherwise attracts notice. She uses the camera as an extension to isolate that awkward aspect, to capture one's attention and bring things to a halt. She shows something that other people might pass without noticing and sets it in a space that is only entirely true as a photograph.

Jurriaan Benschop

© 2007