

Marike Schuurman

The face of the metropolis changed radically in record time: in São Paulo over 15,000 hoardings and billboards had to be painted over or dismantled within three months, the time allotted the advertisers in the city to comply with the measures decreed by the new mayor. “Lei Cidade Limpa”, his legislation for a clean city, went into effect in 2007 and ever since, all outdoor advertising has been banned in South America’s largest city. Instead of Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bündchen and her colleagues touting skin cream, handbags or lingerie on billboards and neon signs, there suddenly appeared dilapidated walls and the iron skeletons of former billboards – a naked city without make-up.

Curious about how a total advertising ban changes the looks of a city, Marike Schuurman spent a few months working in São Paulo in 2009. She has always been artistically interested in urban space, as shown in her series of *Plots* (2005–2009). There she investigates the omnipresent scaffolding and building wraps used to mask municipal construction sites. The gigantic images applied to fences and scaffolding impact our perception of the urban environment in various ways. In Berlin, they are often architectural in nature, for instance, simulating an intact row of buildings, while in Beijing, construction sites and their reality are disguised by idyllic pastoral scenes. The boundary between built reality and simulation is blurred in these pictures and generates a sense of spatial disorientation. At the same time, Marike Schuurman inquires into the medium of photography as such, and its ability to penetrate layers of reality to reveal something of which we could not be aware without the camera.

In São Paulo the crucial question was obvious: how can photographs capture something that isn’t even there anymore? Since the advertising ban, buildings with whitewashed walls have proliferated but in contrast to the mouse click perfection of Photoshop, traces of age often shimmer through. Schuurman calls her São Paulo series *Deleted*. Nonetheless, our attention is not instantly drawn to the absence of advertising; we are struck, in the series, by something else that profoundly contradicts conventional expectations of urban space: no cars are seen on the streets, no agonizingly slow bumper-to-bumper traffic; only a few people wearing leisure clothes.

The Minhocão – the gigantic earthworm as locals have dubbed the four-lane motorway that cuts through the city with utterly indifferent brutality – was originally initiated by city planners to relieve the chronically congested city streets; it now accommodates over 100,000 cars every day. The rich upper crust has long since switched to helicopters for short stretches. Built on piles and ruthlessly cutting through residential neighbourhoods, the Minhocão produces unprecedented noise and pollution. Buckling under public pressure, the authorities closed the road to traffic at night and on Sundays many years ago. In *Deleted*, we see how people take possession of the road for a few hours every day – walking, skating, jogging, lying in the sun or sitting by the roadside reading a book (page 137).

Schuurman’s photographs heighten the emptiness and are bathed in a curious stillness. Traffic is at rest – no screeching, no incessant vying for attention on façades and street corners. The city actually acquires a face because the gaze does simply not bounce off smooth, high-gloss surfaces. Ugly, crumbling façades are as much a part of the picture as a few singular, architectural pearls and interesting combinations of buildings. A peeling, grey wall becomes a surface of projection; free-standing iron scaffolding now appears to advertise nothing but blue skies.

Unsurprisingly, the advertising industry resorted to forging new tricks in order to communicate their messages outdoors in São Paulo’s public spaces. Thus, brief performances by people costumed as characters from fairy tales become mobile advertising. Schuurman presents another mobile device in the series *Gold* (pages 135 ff.), created at the same time as *Deleted*. Men wearing sandwich boards advertise pawnshops where gold and jewellery can be exchanged for cash. The artist photographed these men with respect and without showing their faces. In the midst of São Paulo’s busy downtown area, they are curiously absent and isolated, never interacting. A silent emptiness emanates from this series as well, but in this case it is impossible to overhear a long, single scream.

Andreas Fiedler

Translated by Catherine Schelbert