

THE NATURE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Reflections on *HET HUIS, an exhibition by KARIN BORGHOUTS
at VILLA DE OLMEN vzw (Belgium)
8 September to 6 October 2013**

**[Dutch for 'The House']*

Prelude

One particularly important feature of photography is *stillness*. A photograph is always a snapshot in time. Silent. Motionless. A world of infinite delay. Time, space and movement have all been fixated, frozen. So photography is *frozen time*.

These metaphors aptly suggest the quintessential purpose of photography. Rather than setting out to prove *that* something has happened, as Roland Barthes emphasises, the photographer chooses moments to intervene, to interfere so as to congeal, freeze, fixate and at the same time transform the visual information.

Although hardly perceptible, the photographer's intervention is highly relevant and produces a paradox: the photographer's absence is also their presence. Or, as Edmundo Desnoes eloquently put it in Liz Wells's *The Photography Reader* (London/New York, Routledge, 2003), "The existence of the photographic camera allows man's intervention to be reduced to a minimum, but at the same time it forces him to impose his presence at the moment of creation, to establish a living relationship with the subject, and to initiate a hand-to-hand struggle. *He disappears behind the keyhole but he cannot separate himself from the door. His absence is his presence*" (p. 310).

Tribute to absence

The photographer disappears behind the keyhole but cannot separate himself from the door. The photographer's absence is their presence. Karin Borghouts, more than anybody else, is aware of this paradox, and indeed embodies it. Over the past fifteen-odd years, she has silently but steadily created a uniquely individual photographic universe that could be characterised as a *tribute to absence*. From the very onset, she has had an eye for things others pass by thoughtlessly because they usually only serve as a background or an empty shell. Vacuous, anonymous, ingenuous space. Unheeded objects cared for by nobody. Things that, being in view, yet tend to go unnoticed, remaining beyond our attention or focus. Things that are conspicuous by their absence, their silence, their discrete presence(!).

So in Karen's works, absence is primarily reflected in the photographed objects themselves. Strolling preferably along interiors, museums, zoos, fun parks and streets, she typically pauses to photograph passages, traverses, stairwells, banisters, winding stairs, empty shop windows, storage rooms, dome-roofed spaces etcetera. Perhaps the most archetypical instance of her approach is that of the empty glass

display windows, one of her best-known works from her 2008 exhibition *The Show*. Everything in these photographs points to something that is not there: the museum space, the anonymous display cases, the improbably uniform and inviting light. Everything shown here usually serves as a background to an exhibition. But that which is usually exhibited, is conspicuous by its absence, literally. The effect of this is a transformation of photographic focus. The background is brought to the fore, and the shell becomes content and is given full attention, transforming into something elusive, something mysterious, something sublime!

It is through this transformation of photographic focus that the photographer's presence becomes imperceptibly manifest. It is she who decides on what to excise, how to frame and where to delineate. In doing so, she resembles the archaeologist who excavates and reveals different layers of reality – showing, as it were, that which is not shown! It is only at this stage that the visitor realises just how unfamiliar the surrounding objects and spaces are. It is a discovery that brings about a sense of alienation, of the uncanny. It is as though the visitor is drawn into this indefinable, sublime space, which at the same time inspires a sense of fear and trepidation.

The house

The human figure is absent from the works of Karin Borghouts. They are likewise utterly devoid of any kind of anecdotal, documentary or narrative qualities. After her parental house had been ablaze on March 13th, 2012, Karin Borghouts felt a photographic reflex that was at odds with how she was used to work. All of a sudden, she wanted to preserve the charred items of and in the house by recording them photographically. In this case, her photography suddenly moved to its more traditional function, namely that of recording that which was before. But there is more. Here, her photography also suddenly brought her very close to the story of her own life, her childhood memories, the intimacy of the home where she grew up and where her mother had lived until the day of the fire.

In his *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, Mass., Beacon Press, 1964), Gaston Bachelard dedicated several wonderful pages to the house. To him, the house, from basement to attic, is a kind of reservoir of the human soul. The house in which we were raised gathers not only our memories but also the things we have forgotten. In any case, the parental house is nothing more, but also nothing less, than the residence of our soul, the pre-eminent domain of our intimacy, a sanctuary of our early-life daydreams, of our growing self-awareness. Hiding places such as the basement, the attic, an odd corner play a major role in this, as do intimate spaces such as drawers, a suitcase, a wardrobe, a cradle. All this lives on inside of us like a secret identity, a kind of indelible string of memories.

The metaphor of the house has a double meaning here. Firstly, there is the house, *Villa de Olmen*, serving as an exhibition area – from basement to attic, to quote Bachelard. This context is not without relevance, for it literally 'houses' the

photographical works, creating a new spatial dimension in which the visitor can move (or stroll!) about to discover or unveil from constantly varying perspectives. Secondly, there are the photographs of the *parental house itself*, through which Karin Borghouts has undoubtedly tried to retrieve an almost lost identity. The most striking example of this is her self-portrait, her own reflection in the destroyed house, which is on display here in the drawing room. The portrait is pregnant with meaning, for as far as I know this is the only self-portrait she has made in her 15-year career as an art photographer!

Photographical exploration: from materiality to the sacred

And yet the exhibition is more than a mere reconstruction of the past, a quest for the self through the burnt, smoked and partly charred remains of the parental house, an attempt to rebuild the ruins of the past. It is also, and this will be no surprise, an examination or exploration of the possibilities of photography. This is where Karin Borghouts remains remarkably loyal to her usual photographic approach. The non-places that we know so well from her earlier works, such as passages, staircases and hallways, re-appear, but this time they loom up in shadow-dominated chiaroscuros, in a kind of subdued, elusive Rembrandt lighting.

Also striking are her still-lives, which she has staged using burnt objects such as dishes, teapots, candlesticks, coffeepots, jars, Holy Mary figurines etc. There is something unnatural and alienating about these still-lives, a feature reminiscent of her earlier works. Some of them have grown into full-blown paintings in which composition and colour make for a sense of timelessness. An example of this is the still-life of her mother's bedroom, which at the exhibition is shown in the bathroom.

To conclude, one special aspect of this exhibition is the photographer's examination into the materiality of decay, the very special skin or texture of charred walls and objects. All photographs explore in one way or another the depth and intensity of the scorched material, the burn marks, the branding of the house, the scars that both contain and hide the beauty of things. In some photographs, the picture becomes an exploration of the invisible, the gasping and silent emptiness in, through and behind the objects. It is in these photographs that the blackened dish or the scorched surface acquires an abstract and at the same time sacred dimension: a tribute to an absence that conjures up a mystical presence.

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HET HUIS

Karin Borghouts

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Saturdays and Sundays 11 am to 6 pm

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