

## Photography as a dummy

I

*Though the opposite would seem to be true, photographic images are in fact often unreliable images. They are usually more like deceptive dreams (and even more often feverish nightmares) than objective testimonies. This fairly loose relationship with 'reality' is no reason for remorse however; quite the reverse in fact. It frees photography from a languid existence dictated by the bureaucratic logic of the bookkeeper which reduces the world to objects that can be systematically arranged into categories. Photographs can do more than just collect images of the world; photographs can make the world conform to their will. Every photograph is the result of mediation between what reality shows and what the photographer wants reality to say. This fundamental impurity of photography – poised somewhere between document and pamphlet – makes the medium particularly suitable for examining the ever-tense relationship between man and world. It is the task of photographic images not to neutralize this tension by presuming a false unity where there is only chaos, but to make it clear that there can never really be harmonious agreement between man and world. Good, interesting photographs sow doubt in the spectator's mind. Not the sort of doubt that can be dispersed by a forensic investigation, but a deeper, existential uncertainty. Rather than being a means of confirming the spectator's way of viewing things, they challenge him (or her) to look at reality with fresh, new eyes. While the photographic image is often condemned because it has seemingly deprived reality of its magic (with photography in the perfidious role of a simple photocopier), the images collected here*

*aim to put the relationship between reality and spectator under pressure again. The only way to achieve that these days is to take the spectator out of his controlling, influential relationship with reality. The spectator is manoeuvred into a position in which he loses control of the interpretation of what the image shows: he is no longer master of the image, but is checkmated by the image and what it presents. In such images reality is again turned into a strange and inaccessible body. Here photography proves to be a machine which can give the world back its enchanting gloss, which can turn truth back into an alienating reality that graciously refutes all the arrogant claims to knowledge. And that is precisely the effect the images in this book have on the spectator: they arouse his curiosity by saddling him with an enigma that can never be reduced to a mere quandary.*

II

*Karin Borghouts' photographs are careful, self-confident images. The unerring precision with which she uses her viewfinder leaves us in no doubt that here we have a photographer who is not afraid of making decisions. And yet, despite her self-assured, slightly rigid presentation, we are not given lifeless still lifes whose meaning is presented to us unequivocally. What is more, the ambiguity of the image is intimately linked to the precision with which the viewfinder is used here. It is as if the viewfinder introduces a reverse polarity: its task is not to frame the picture, painstakingly marking out the*

boundaries between inside and out, but to activate the subject-matter of the image. Here the frame works as a sort of upside-down field of force, which clenches the energy within the image and thus puts pressure on the subject-matter. What is compressed within these rigid boundaries of the frame begins to lead a life of its own. And thus the frame, which should in the first instance firmly anchor the image, almost imperceptibly triggers a string of shifts in meaning which make an unambiguous reading of the image impossible.

In a compromise between formal control and uncontrolled rampancy, these images speak the cautious language of documentary photography. Concepts like clarity and accuracy are central to documentary photography: clarity in the formal visual language, accuracy in the reproduction. That so much emphasis is given to these two qualities tells us something important about the ethos the documentary photographer is expected to uphold. A documentary photographer must focus on the subject in the viewfinder with a cool head, unperturbed by emotional concerns, for in documentary photography there is no room for sentimental reflection. Thus these two concepts describe the documentary photographer as someone who deals with reality in a cool, calculating and analytical way. In other words, the documentary photographer appears here as a pure extension of his camera: his clinical look is expected to be as mechanical as the camera lens. Morally this requirement translates into the notion that the documentary image must be transparent; that is to say, it must be screened from any prejudice on the part of the photographer. By conforming to this moral requirement for transparency, however, the documentary photographer runs the risk of erasing himself from his images.

The photographer's disappearance can however also be seen as a liberation. The production of dazed images also means clearing the way for a new relationship with reality. The photographer abandons his desire to speak in the name of reality and now lets the world

speak for itself. Having reached this point, the requirement for transparency becomes the opposite however: the reality we were expecting to see so clearly, suddenly completely lacks transparency. Objects and events instantly lose their normality and change into opaque enigmas. And it is this reversal that is so brilliantly displayed in Karin Borghouts' pictures. Though nothing in her clearly lit images leaves anything concealed, they soon change into enigmatic visions from a dream. Our normal way of looking at things is not destabilized by the use of all kinds of bold visual capers; rather, a neutral, frontal standpoint makes for a balanced and stable image that does not make the spectator fear for his physical well-being. The shift takes place the moment the spectator wants to express what he really sees in those sober images. What do a town garden containing a few skeleton trees, a not very spectacular white-painted room and an accretion of rocks against a brick wall actually have in common? None of these places looks particularly amazing or spectacular.

### III

The first question to ask oneself is whether these are real places. That is to say, spaces which because of certain qualities are seen by their users as inherently valuable. Despite their rather banal character, what these photographs show are not however so-called 'non-places', certainly not if we follow the definition the French anthropologist Marc Augé gives the concept of a 'non-place'. For him 'non-places' are generic places that have no character of their own. Airports, railway stations, large-scale road infrastructures... these Augé regards as typical 'non-places'. They are spaces which were designed to move people and goods en masse. 'Non-places' are spatial arrangements which live by the grace of the intoxication of speed, not of slower, sedentary living. They are not made to grab the traveller's attention (the motorway

is a fairly featureless road, for too much distraction would pose a danger to driver safety), but to transport the traveller as quickly and soundlessly as possible from one point to another. Non-places are purely functional spaces, geared to the travelling body. Though these are places of potentially considerable symbolic importance – they are places where people arrive or depart, where the intrinsically dramatic motion of going away or coming home plays an important role –, they try to neutralise the inherent drama of travel. They cause the traveller's body to sink into a sort of stupor: waiting-rooms in airports and railway stations strive for a complete pacification of the body by confining it to a comfortable seat. The presence of a whole succession of shops and restaurants which speak the decorative language of the familiar, are also supposed to help create a cosy atmosphere. The surrealism of bars in airport terminals decked out as English pubs, speaks volumes in this respect. Outside the decorative and purely superficial pseudo hominess, non-places are in fact characterized by an absence of qualities associated with hominess: safety, history, tradition, slowness, intimacy, etc.

Though hardly spectacular, the places Karin Borghouts photographs are not empty and insignificant either. And you cannot ignore them. The photographer emphasizes the importance of these places by making circulation impossible. You would not be able to walk through these perspective-less images, at least not according to the coordinates of purposeful movement. At most the eye is left to roam about in a confusing maze, enclosed in a movement without beginning or end, without a real conclusion. This self-revolving movement is the consequence of the restrictions imposed on the spectator. The absence of depth also plays an important role here. By depriving the image of a horizon, the eye is confined to the image. We always come up against an impenetrable background, a wall that prevents the eye disappearing into

infinite depth. So it is never possible for the spectator to encompass or to surround the space. All freedom of movement is nipped in the bud, nowhere can the spectator escape the imperative dispositive imposed by the camera. By erecting these blockades, the photographer obliges the spectator to go on scrutinizing the image. It is then that the spectator realizes that the images show more than just a dry summary of what reality contains. The more closely the spectator studies the image, the more absurd the entity becomes: a stately, antique-looking stairway is, as he will soon discover, just a little bit too beautiful (and above all too smooth) to be truly convincing. Bizarrely enough it is the detail of the damaged plaster that is intended to give the entity the authenticity which totally undermines its credibility. We are all too familiar with the greyness of decay; it is the same grey of the fake rocks which also appear in other photographs.

#### IV

The nature of the incongruity becomes clear when we take a close look at the pictures the photographer has taken in several zoos. As an institution the zoo served an important purpose as a laboratory for the development of Western rationality. It is the establishment of zoos that gave material shape to a whole series of fundamental concepts concerning the relationship between culture and nature. A look at the recent transformations of the zoo can help us understand the contemporary developments around that very crucial distinction between culture and nature. Karin Borghouts' pictures home in on a number of strategies which zoos use to imitate their animals' natural habitat. Sometimes these creations are rather ungainly – as in the photograph of a cage where the animals' surroundings are suggested by a painted reproduction of their natural habitat –, sometimes they look extremely realistic until we suddenly spot a detail that impudently shatters the illusion.

*This impudent unmasking is, however, not what these images really set out to do: they clearly want to be more than enigmatic pictures that demand an unambiguous solution. To discover the real purpose of these images, the spectator first has to ask another question. Namely, who exactly are these artefacts trying to fool? Is the intention to make the animals feel at home, or to provide the spectators with a spectacle? No clear line can be drawn between an animal-friendly approach (the wild animals are shown in their 'natural' habitat) and an emotional balsam (the sensitive public must not be allowed to be upset by the painful sight of a wretched existence in captivity). If it is not easy to work out what the exact intention of these cultivated nature scenes is, the way in which they materialize in the zoo also produces a few unexpected side effects. What is most striking is the total absence of fences, hedges and barriers separating the public from the animals. In the older zoos those barriers served more than a purely protective purpose; they were also the symbol of a society and a culture for which the distinction between cultivated man and wild animal was extremely important and had to be safeguarded at all costs. So the elimination of such ritual markers which form a threshold between nature and culture is a social development with enriching consequences. The removal of the distinction means that the border between inside and outside becomes porous and eventually risks becoming worthless. So both in terms of subject-matter and form, this stage-managed scenery leads to a dangerous blurring of borders. The evaporation seen here of the distinction between man and animal, also irreversibly affects the experience of these spaces: trapped in the shadow play between real and unreal, these places gradually lose their specific character and turn soundlessly into a new form of 'non-place'. The extinction of the distinction between real and unreal manifests itself here as the cultural counterpart of the global transport economy which only produces 'non-places'.*

*These images make it clear that these days the clash between culture and nature is no longer thought of as a radical rift, but as a succession of gradual differences. In one image the grey colour of an imitation rock mass is sustained when the feigned habitat turns into the austere decor of the cage, while in another image a simulated rock with a solitary cactus in the background is accompanied by a painted mountain landscape. Now that the transition between nature and culture is no longer seen as a transgression, well-defined borders have become a taboo. The two areas are inextricably entwined. In this way the places captured by Karin Borghouts become a perfect illustration of the current unwillingness (or is it perhaps incapacity?) to think about that distinction between culture and nature. The photographer makes it clear by the way she portrays these spaces that these are not spaces which highlight the distinction, but that they were created precisely to postpone this distinction indefinitely. Like the generic spaces in airports and railway stations, these are places which seem predestined to be lost to indefinability. At the same time an opportunity emerges from that indefinability to explain the relationship between man and world in another way. These both over- and under- defined creations put pay to a moral distinction that has troubled humanity for millennia. Because these artificial worlds constantly postpone the distinction between 'real' and 'fake', they also call into question the moral hierarchy that normally exists between these concepts. These spaces are neither real, nor fake. They are something in-between. They are hyper-realistic - sometimes in a hopelessly naive way.*

*So there is no point in reading these photographic images as a critical and malicious unmasking of a 'fake' reality. Rather, their relationship to the reality they depict is that of an almost naive desire to believe in the illusionistic bluff these simulated habitats trigger. As in the picture of a 'garden' with baby trees whose real size you only*

*begin to suspect after a while (once you have figured out that the lavender in the background is a bush, the tree at the front comes into its 'right' perspective). But however much the photographic image may wish to convince us of the 'genuineness' of what we see, eventually any act of faith clashes with the damned precision of the camera. The camera is a machine which constantly hovers between creating and destroying an illusionistic representation. That is both the strength and the weakness of photography. With this work Karin Borghouts seems to be looking for a position from which to show both these irreconcilable qualities of the photographic image at one and the same time. Such a tricky balancing act between enchantment and disenchantment is however extremely difficult to achieve. In allowing the inherent strangeness of a part of everyday reality to emerge, the photographer must avoid allowing his image to become enveloped in a surrealist dream atmosphere. The spectator has to be tossed to and fro between belief and disbelief without ever being allowed to come to rest in one of the two positions. This restless toing and froing ensures that once the image has been deciphered, there remains not a banal residue (because the image has now been fathomed) but an image which addresses the spectator with a mixture of incomprehensible realism and fiction.*

V

*How the photographer manages to bring about this constant toing and froing and maintain it, is apparent in the striking opening image. At first glance it seems to be no more than a banal photograph of a window in an otherwise unprepossessing wall. But all too soon we notice that there is something strange about this window. To begin with it is painted milk white, thereby destroying the window's whole raison d'être as a transparent medium between inside and out. What should be transparent is opaque, what should be seen through is reflective. The window changes into a screen in which the*

*vague contours of a Flemish street become visible. Reflecting surfaces are often used to give an image more volume or to destroy a scene's spatial unity, but neither of those two things is happening here. The reflection in the window has very little consistency and so has neither the strength to give the image more volume nor sufficient presence to break up the space. The fragile reflection is used here to bring about a much more fundamental transformation. The opaque window looks like a screen on which reality presents itself as a phantasmagoric representation. What is revealed in that illusory depth of the window, is the threatening quality of reality as it appears in photographic images. This image reminds us that the relationship between photographer and reality is never unambiguous: the photographic image is not only a joyful stage set for an encounter between world and photographer, but also the fountainhead of an uprooting experience. What is suggested in that wafer-thin projection, is that people and world find themselves in an impossible relationship: subject (photographer) and object (reality) can never become one. Both are doomed to constantly throw each other off-balance. Reality only shows its face to those who approach it with the appropriate hesitation: in other words, from the humble realization that it cannot be possessed. That at once disquieting and liberating revelation is brilliantly displayed in this book.*

Steven Humblet. July 2004

English translation: Alison Mouthaan-Gwillim

Steven Humblet (°1970) studied philosophy and anthropology at the University of Leuven (KUL). He is currently guest lecturer in Photography Theory at the Hogeschool Sint-Lukas Brussels. He also writes about photography in the De Tijd newspaper and in De Witte Raaf magazine.