

Maxine Kopsa

What is natural?

The simultaneous effect of Frank van der Salm's photographs

A concrete block up close and personal. No, a concrete block cadred and cropped up close, showing off its cold exterior and there is no horizon. That's better. A few lights are on, it must be about 7 o'clock on a summer evening, or then again it could be early morning in the winter. It's hard to say. There's a kind of unspecified specificity to the whole, one which tells specifically about the balconies of each flat, about how many concrete bars each one has, about the size of the main entrance and its unimpressive position in the building's natural hierarchy, about the type of repeated window frame of each apartment and the thickness of their exterior columns. It shows who is home and who is probably not, who has plants and who doesn't. Above all, it illustrates the uniformity of the block, the sovereignty of its homogeneous design and, with it, its unrelenting will to order. And that's where the unspecified takes the upper hand: this overpowering will to show order in detail is one so insistent that the details themselves become of secondary importance. The lives of the persons inhabiting these homes can only be guessed at, as a result. It is as if our binoculars are frustratingly too weak to reach the interiors and so our vision remains focused on the surface.

Van der Salm relieves the specific, making it at best a vehicle for depicting the impersonal and so heightens the impact of the unspecified, the 'artificial', if you will. He shows the specific and the unspecified at the same time, creating from the specific real a (new) unspecified, average. Not that his images are average in the dull sense of the word; they are just the opposite. We see buildings and landscapes and we observe their barrenness and neutrality; we recognize these buildings and landscapes as ones similar to those in our own surroundings and at the same time we understand their barrenness and neutrality. What makes these images anything but dull is the fact that we see, recognize and understand yet cannot accept. It is as though we are being alienated by the sheer 'logic', by the sheer 'neutrality' of these banal images while our mind incessantly runs around in circles, wrapping itself up in the (to it) irrational equation specific + unspecified = artificial.

Let me for a moment quote old news.

According to Rosalind Krauss 'the copy [is] the underlying condition of the original.' Meaning that, in short, we recognize a 'picturesque' landscape because we have a prior example of it stored in our minds. It is upon this previously stored notion of the picturesque landscape that we base further visions of real landscape. So when we're looking at the authentic or the original or the picturesque outdoors, we are in actual fact looking at our idea of what the 'authentic', the 'original', the 'picturesque', in a word, the 'real', should be like. In our minds we are therefore constantly testing the reality perceived outside with the notion of reality we have compiled in our head. Only when these two match do we say: this is authentic. The authentic is therefore the copy at the same time.

So, sticking to the problematic of the real as put forth in Frank Van der Salm's photographs and following Krauss' testimony of the copy vs. the original, one could say that Frank Van der Salm creates his image based on the real, but that this real is his (our/the public's) perception of real. Or/and: he depicts the original, meaning he does the reverse. His photographs are therefore pictures of an idea of 'real', real being really the copy of the notion of authentic. If this is true it would imply that the landscapes he shows are not real or, differently put, that they cannot be found in reality (going back for a moment to pre-Kraussian notions of the word reality, to 'reality' as everyone else means it to be), hence are artificial.

But this is not true. Frank Van der Salm uses a 4 x 5 inch camera to photograph his landscapes; the only thing he tweaks is its focus. The do-you-paint-what-you-see-or-see-what-you-paint? line of reasoning thus cannot be applied because we are dealing not with a subjective medium like painting but with a camera, a registrant of fact. On a literal level therefore, we know the whole above theory doesn't hold water because we know that Frank Van der Salm doesn't stage his subjects, but what about on an abstract level? Until recently I had been convinced this was the case, that theoretically Frank Van der Salm's works came across as confusingly artificial because of their allusion to the copy/authentic quandary; I was satisfied with this argument until, that is, I took a better look outside. In the train not too long ago I watched a real Dutch landscape move past my window and what I saw – at the same time – was one big Frank Van der Salm photograph in motion. How could that be? In a triptych called Connection (1997) we see a valley photographed at night, its dark mountains only visible here and there in the spots where houses or roads are still lit. In the distance, at the mouth of the valley, there is a large city emitting a yellow and green and blue radiance. This intense illumination outlines the base of the mountains, where hill and city meet. In the darkness above, a road distinctly curves through the hills, coming down from the right, and is marked by a continuous line of the headlights of travelling cars. It connects with a road below – far busier – which stretches towards the city. Gradually, as one nears the city limits there is an intensification of light: houses, large industrial buildings and roads all converge into a sea of, above all,

luminosity.

Do we live in this world?

In his photographs, Van der Salm's stress on form is far too important to ignore, nor can it simply be seen as a derivative of content. The emphasis he places on artificial lights, on blurriness or movement in his nighttime scenes and the prominence of clarity, and see-all motionlessness in his daytime images, are factors which point not to the maker's moral stance on our fabricated landscape but to his utter sympathy with the sociological implications of our new metropolises, our new 'non-places'. Despite his choice of cold, often disheartening subject matter he cannot be tagged a warrior of the watch-out-we're-doing-badly-our-cities-are-cold-and-barren party line, instead one could say he depicts our new mutated city in all its detached glory. He depicts it and is a product of it. At the same time.

Next to an advertisement on compulsive disorder in the L.A. Weekly of August 13-19, 1999 there's an article on Frank van der Salm's photographic images. The ad assures: 'There is an answer ... obsessive-compulsive behavior can be treated.' While at the same time the piece on Van der Salm defends: '...an apartment structure in which people knowingly or unknowingly act out consecutive realizations of little art-life dramas. And I had to think: this apartment building he photographs, this landscape of urban emptiness he so often chooses, this is the location which breeds compulsive behavior, this is the place we have created and this is the place where we suffer from our own compulsions.' I read on: 'Obsessions (repetitive and intrusive thoughts such as washing, ordering, counting, checking) are symptoms, and may cause marked distress in your daily routine.' Our daily routine is ordered by these locations; it is set into motion by the structures we have chosen to surround ourselves with.

The point here is not really society's increasing hang-ups but rather the way my mind zapped between these two bits of printed material: I connected the contents of the ad with the subject matter of Van der Salm's photographic images in a seemingly random manner, one parallel to the way in which our urban landscape is being built today and most importantly, one parallel to the manner in which Frank van der Salm photographs his landscapes. I made use of the different information I received as though it were all of the same import; I decentred my source and so unravelled its hierarchy, much as the new urban landscape is decentred and diffuse and much as Van der Salm's images are, in all their clarity, unspecified and indeterminate.

That my manner of thinking is vital to the way in which I see my architectural surroundings and hence crucial to my analysis of Van der Salm's landscapes, is nothing new. Aldo van Eyck spoke of the emergent city in terms of its connection with changing communication processes as early as the 60s, saying that 'we have to accept the dispersal implied in the concept of mobility and to rethink accepted density patterns and location of functions in relation to the new means of communication... This new sort of society needs a new sort of environment. An open society needs an open city.¹ This is a statement which may stem as far back as 'the era of second modernity' but is one which only now can truly be applied to and reflected in the new city. Just as before zap culture was either shunned and termed superficial or, the opposite, praised for its freshness, today it has finally become an integral – perhaps the integral – form of present thought-making and image-building. In other words we're beyond a moral labelling of zap culture and generic architecture: both have simply become fact.

So for me to say that Van der Salm's photographs are so intriguing because he shows that our landscape has become artificial, would be to assume a moral position towards the artificiality (note the negative connotation) of our urban landscape. It would also be ignoring all of the above. But taking the above into consideration we could deduce that the fascinating characteristic of Van der Salm's work lies in its connection to the new urban landscape and the ideas which construct it – the so-called 'at the same time quality' as I have been calling it – and not in any ethical bearing on our (cultural) (waste)land. Simultaneously his images are both real and illusory, specific and unspecified. And like the matter of fact status of zap culture – a culture most certainly based on horizontal simultaneity – these images show the matter of fact status of 'zap' (generic) architecture matter of factly.

The manner of growth of the new city reflects both our manner of communicating and its speed, which we have come to feel as a necessity. We find ourselves now able to view the dislocated, the unconnected and the diffuse simultaneously. Everything is in focus. Frank van der Salm's urban landscapes show, or rather praise, this new emerging city, and with it, our new perception of the real. Everything is in focus, all elements share the same hierarchy. And while the so-called 'Disneyfication' of our cities – a term denoting the discrediting effect the quickness of the growth of the suburb has on the slowness of historical centres – may be an observable fact in his landscapes, it is never their subject. His portraits show no trace of nostalgia or search for lost sentiment. They depict the 'passage' or the 'non-place', and pay tribute to urban transformations such as diffusion, new development and increased mobility.² It is not therefore that we are viewing a 'picturesque' landscape based on prior notions of the authentic all saved up in our minds eye, it is slightly more complicated: Frank van der Salm is photographing our real urban landscape, our new mutated city in all its decentred glory. These portraits

are therefore perfectly truthful. They are of things we take for granted, parts we learn to 're-see' only after the photographer has shown them to us (again). And because he's one step ahead of us, he's also defining our notion of what authentic landscape will be. Until we catch up, his photographic images will remain real and unreal at the same time.

1. Team 10 Primer, Alison Smithson, ed.(Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), p. 61, in: Rem Koolhaas a.o., Mutations (Barcelona: Actar, 2000), p. 414 ff.
2. Mutations, p. 416.

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