Working with photographs

Joachim Schmid

The Dutch army closes down a base near Utrecht. The Utrecht city council has not yet taken a decision about the future use of all the 59 acres of military compound. Before a new town quarter will rise here, the area has been trusted to photographer Theo Bos - and he decides to take advantage of just this undefined character.

In the first place his work is a systematic photograpical inventory of the army terrain. He took a photo in every wind direction from more than 150 viewpoints, evenly picked across the terrain. These 600 photos are modest pictures of a ‘state of being’. Modest, because the for photographers usually not insignificant considerations like, for example, picture composition, did not matter at all; he just photographed what was in front of the camera. These pictures were stored on a CD-ROM in such a way that the viewer can freely ‘move’ from one point to another over the terrain, inspecting it step by step in its images. The photographer supplemented this topographical inventory with historical pictures, obtained from public and private archives, and with pictures he made during his wanderings on the terrain.

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These photos are in such a way connected with the topographical inventory, that the user of the CD-ROM can, on his or her demand, compare a picture of the present situation with an earlier view of the same location. In this way, the photo collection offers its spectators the opportunity to take an on-screen stroll through space and time. The individual photos are of little importance, they only become significant because of their relationship within the structure of the program.

So far, it concerns a simple and clearly structured documentation of a place. Like many other documentary photo assignments, it was commissioned by the municipality because this particular area, in this form, would soon cease to exist. In this way, at least a pictorial trace of it shall be preserved. Different from the usual, however, is that the photographer does not profess to offer a more or less detailed, representative and not to subjective treatment of the subject. Likewise, he did not feel like emphasising the photos with his own “handwriting” to present himself as photographer-author. Looking at the photos, suspicion could rise that the project has been carried out by more than one photographer. The artist grants the final choices from this treasure of images to the public.
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Depending on the interest of the user, the documents will be very different. One will dwell on historical details in the architecture, a second will focus on military aspects, a third will prefer photos that show almost nothing, while a fourth will choose photos which have flowers on the foreground. All this (and much more) is offered here as a potential. This abundance of opportunities, that produces such different documents from the same range of pictures, leads us to one of the central issues in our working with photograps: that of the exclusion of opportunities.
The photographer photographs this object and not another, he photographs it in a specific manner, later on he selects this picture and not the other ones (and once more an editor or curator makes a selection out of this selection, according to his or her preferences or interests). The sum of these decisions determines our world view. For us, as recipients, only the choice at the cash desk remains.
Theo Bos takes some steps back and delegates the decisions to his audience. The audience may and has to decide for itself, and by doing so, it experiences that documentary labour has very little to do with photography. It is the selection of

images that determines what the present, which soon will no longer exist, will look like tomorrow.

However, the documentarian is not only interested in what will disappear, but to the same extent in the future of the place, as well. That is why he invites the viewers of his inventory to make their proposals for the future of the terrain a part of the documentation. For this he developed a kind of photographic Sim-City. Inspired by an archive with pictures of all kinds of buildings and architectural situations, a quasi-catalogue of the current building and housing forms in the Netherlands, the users of the CD-ROM can express their preferences and thus compose a picture-conglomerate of their desired town quarter. These conglomerates always contain one of the buildings present on the current terrain, as if the expressed preferences are projected over the present situation. Although these picture-combinations do not provide an illusionistically perfect cityscape, together they clarify collective wishes: they function as the population's barometer of taste.

Which of the possibilities the citizens will actually prefer, can easily be found out by the competent planners. By placing some publicly accessible computer terminals they can ask it the citizens themselves.

To my knowledge, photographs never played part as instruments of urban planning; no matter if the latter is committed as expert matter or as 'involvement of the concerned'. We know the drafts, the three-dimensional models and in recent times almost only the computer simulations of projected space. But in reality it looks different, though. This can be seen very clearly in Berlin today. The more tangible the newly invented centre becomes, the more urban space is converted by the building activities from drafts to urban space in a *one to one* measurement, the more the shortcomings of the computer generated videos come to light. Videos that for years hold out false hopes of the new *Potsdamer Platz* as a seemingly desirable utopia. They are all flaunty simulations. Buildings seem to be hatched out of the egg only just, not one speck of dirt is sticking to the façades. The trees show off their fresh, green leaves, on clean pavements pedestrians parade and only very occasionally a car

passes through the broad streets. That according to all our experience, the green foliage from the trees will disappear, that life on the streets will not be defined by many pedestrians and a few cars, but by many cars and a few pedestrians, that the café and the book shop will give way to the game-hall and the peepshow, that after closing time only reckless beggars and bad tempered policemen will populate the neighbourhood and that all this won't go on without noise and foul smell, no simulation will ever show that.

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Compared to these simulations, photos have a number of decisive advantages. They contain more detail and they show buildings that have already been subjected to severest human use. Even a photo of a newly built city quarter will reveal considerable differences when compared to the original design. Not all the curtains will have the same colour and not all the shrubs will be of the same height. The architect has never planned the garden gnomes, nor the chewing gum machine that is somewhere on a wall, the city council had a number of traffic signs placed, in a street corner the garbage is piling up, while another is used as a 'pissoir'. To put it shortly: we can see whether a quarter is accepted in the intended form or is transformed by its inhabitants.
The obvious disadvantage, that a current picture cannot exactly reflect the place in its planning phase, seems relatively insignificant to me. A photo can be very useful in the process of planning even if it was taken at a totally different place.

By letting the public judge the pictures of already existing and inhabited quarters, and by proposing to use the urban models based on the chosen pictures as selected by the public for future planning, Theo Bos creates something that makes much more sense to me than the currently common optical illusions of building masses. Although the new Utrecht quarter will probably not match the possibilities of Theo Bos' catalogue, in all likelihood it will still come very close to some of them. Which of the

possibilities the citizens will actually prefer, can easily be found out by the competent planners. By placing some publicly accessible computer terminals they can ask it the citizens themselves.

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Joachim Schmid (1955, Balingen), artist and critic, has been working with found photographs since the early 1980s. In 1990 he founded the *Institut zur Wiederaufbereitung von Altfotos* (Institute for the Reprocessing of used Photographs) in Berlin.
His publications include *Erste allgemeine Altfotosammlung* (1991), *Art Addicts Anonymous* (1993), *Knipsen* (1993), *Bilder von der Straße* (1994), *Kunst gegen Essen* (1996), and *Very Miscellaneous* (1997).