

## **Aglaia Konrad: KOPIE / CITY – Graz 2004**

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### **Daniel Kurjakovic: SECONDARY NATURE. Remarks on Aglaia Konrad's photographic scenarios**

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#### **1**

Motorways, tunnels, dams, power stations, bridges, industrial complexes... on the dark side of the *société du spectacle*, a secondary nature has taken shape, consisting of a built environment of frequently monumental dimensions. In a specific form of historical transformation that shaped the modern age, according to Nietzsche, this secondary nature has taken on traits of a primary nature.<sup>1</sup> Welcomed by the historical avantgarde with the unadulterated euphoria of faith in progress, perceptions of this secondary nature became somewhat more complex after the second world war. "Created worlds without tradition", is how the American artist and architect Tony Smith, for example, described it in the 1960s. His description of driving by night along the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike bears witness to the social anonymity, phenomenological indeterminacy and lack of historical grounding of the new structures: "It was dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial (...). The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. (...) There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it. (...) Artificial landscapes without cultural precedent began to dawn on me ..."<sup>2</sup> In the following, I wish to focus on precisely these aspects of a genuinely late modernist conception of space and put to discussion the artistic strategies by which Aglaia Konrad has addressed this theme.

#### **2**

The work of Aglaia Konrad appears to have been informed by her dissatisfaction with the conventional models of architectural photography that are predominantly iconographic and formalistic. As a consequence, she sought to break away from this tradition, leaving formalistic documentarism behind and finding or creating a new use for architectural photography. It was this new, or rather, altered use of photography that was to allow the eschewal of purely stylistic, decontextualised, non-historical and apolitical documentations of architecture. What Konrad appears determined to show instead are the polysemic social, historical and political effects, of which architecture, – i.e. different urbanistic programmes and quasi-urbanistic phenomena – is the most visible agent in the public realm. Thus, Konrad's work is not a vehicle for any dogmatic or positivist documentarism, but for a photographic analysis of what could be described as the "sub-cultural" and "subconscious" side-effects of global urbanistic programmes. These are side-effects in the sense that they concern urban areas that are not symbolic, representative or intentional. Konrad's work is not about edification, for it does not refer in any recognisable way to political, historical and social actuality.<sup>3</sup>

In a sense, we might speak of a parody of classical architectural photography. For Konrad addresses the problem of naive belief in the possibility of depicting "architecture" and, in doing so, sets herself apart from any claim to a consciousness unadulterated by ambivalence. For some time now, this critical and even parodistic approach to documentary architectural photography has been evident in her installations, which are expansive, differentiated, even confusing and disorienting in character, with visual worlds in which the unequivocal distinction between proximity and distance, representation and real space, model and physical reality, run the risk of collapsing. (The culmination of these trends, so far, was her one-woman show at the St Lukas Gallery in Brussels, where a number of different-sized pictures could be seen stretching across several segments of walls). Moreover, Konrad always made her visual worlds less easily legible by treating the actual architectural spaces, with all their specific characteristics such as corners, joints, window fronts, passageways, etc., as integral components in many of her previous exhibitions.

Konrad's work is also a parody of more traditional architectural photography in the sense that the 'correct', 'legible', 'optimum' shot is subordinated to an all-pervasive programme that is critical of visuality. As indicated above, this includes strategies that critically relate proximity and distance, representation and physical reality (what I regard as a distinctly tongue-in-cheek approach culminated in an amassment of some 80 shots of famous architects in front of their architectural models). Legibility is also hindered by the way in which Konrad's "image boards" are put together. Barely comprehensible and seldom possible to grasp immediately, they trigger processes of perception such as projection and memory. It is a deliberately ludic approach in which individual motifs appear several times or are only seemingly repeated – seemingly, that is, in the sense that the respective frames do not correspond. (Konrad calls this category of almost twin-like images "undecided frames", an expression to which deception, trickery and, with that, a certain form of parody, are not entirely alien.)

Konrad's visual programme is also critical of conventional representation in the sense that the pictures are explored in terms of such diverse aspects as frame, structure, direction of reading etc.: variation of a motif, negative imaging, images printed back-to-front, reduced, enlarged, or otherwise manipulated (particularly well formulated in Konrad's various artist books). These diverse forms of manipulation might be said to serve the purpose of relativising the reproductive function of the pictures – something the artist also achieves by means of screens that further alienate the photographic cliché. In some cases, albeit few and far between to date, Konrad has even taken this so far that the object itself is dissolved or abandoned (as in *Atlas* volume 1 and 2, 2000).

Nevertheless, Konrad's work is a far cry from conventional notions of a programme that is critical of visuality in the sense of *l'art pour l'art*. Instead, the artist's scepticism with regard to the image and the limitations of representation seem to go hand-in-hand with her constructive curiosity about places and architectures that exude an air of the provisional, impure, hybrid, anarchistic and even entropic: ambivalent zones at the point of transition from city to periphery (see *São Paulo*, 1998) or urban formations inscribed with volatile structures of settlement and migration, formed in uninhabitable, seemingly boundless and irrational landscapes (as in the "Desert Cities" group). Moreover – yet another facet of content – there is a distinct interest in forms of architecture that are mobile, nomadic, temporary and transient. Finally, more recently, there are signs that what might be described as 'intermediary spaces' – built structures whose interiors can also be exteriors and vice versa – may represent a further heightening and consolidation of some of Konrad's key interests.

### 3

Ultimately, what Konrad is exploring is obviously not so much the specific orders of architecture or the 'look' of architecture as some of the generative principles of human production and expansion in an age of global capital, expressed in built form. The visual equivalent of this expansion is to be found in monumental structures that thrust very deeply indeed into non-urban spaces, increasingly occupying them, restructuring them, hollowing them out from within and transforming them into an illusory nature (as observed particularly impressively by Konrad in Japan).

Sprawling motorway networks, endless tunnels that wind deep into the earth, gigantic dams and monumental power stations, bridges and industrial complexes as far as the eye can see. In short, this is a secondary nature, consisting of a built environment of the kind generated by "hot societies" (to use the term coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss) with the advent of industrialisation and, nowadays, within the globally extended assimilation of space. It is interesting to note that the artist presents these vast, architectonically demarcated areas as a kind of endless ornament expanding in all directions. What is the meaning of this ornament?

Konrad's accumulated visual worlds exude a mix of terror and fascination, cold fear and hypnotic seduction. One is tempted to wonder whether her work is an indication that it is no longer sociological analysis that prevails, but speculation of an anthropological nature. This highlights the attitude of humankind to a space fundamentally refashioned by technology. If, for instance, we were to take Wilhelm Worringer's anthropological theories on various notions of space, we could regard Konrad's study of anonymous, alienated spaces dedicated to transit as a symptom of active involvement with what Worringer called a "spiritual dread of space". As Worringer put it, "Now what are the psychological presuppositions for the urge to abstraction? We must seek them in these peoples' feeling about the world, in their psychic attitude towards the cosmos. Whereas the precondition for the urge to empathy is a happy pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the phenomena of the external

world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of a great inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world; in a religious respect it corresponds to a strongly transcendental tinge to all notions. We might describe this state as an immense spiritual dread of space."<sup>4</sup>

Admittedly, this may seem somewhat far-fetched. Moreover, Worringer's words, penned with Greek art in mind, cannot be applied directly to Konrad's oeuvre. Yet surely Konrad's work does indicate active involvement with a specific "dread of space". A "dread of space" spawned by an alienated and anonymously constructed environment generating a secondary nature that brooks no individual identification (empathy!). Indeed, Konrad's play with architecturally "anonymous" languages and the rhizomatic arrangements of her images (which, incidentally, she takes from her own constantly growing archive) create the impression that her visual worlds of a constructed secondary nature could well be past, present, future and timeless places. Perhaps they are relics of a past bled dry, or structures of a future that is not quite legible yet. At any rate, we would seem to be dealing here with a secondary nature whose menacing components should make us think and whose potential seems to promise a still unknown bliss.

### Footnotes

1. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, translated by Adrian Collins, Macmillan, New York 1957 (1874).
2. Samuel Wagstaff Jr., 'Talking with Tony Smith', in: Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1996 (1968), p. 386.
3. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy. A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, translated by Michael Bullock, London/New York 1953 (1908).
4. Konrad is also able to draw positive aspects from the alienated environment and anonymous megastructures, especially in terms of civilian society, "to put it simply, it is because anonymity is more important to me than social control, which is conducive to petty bourgeois morality." (The artist in conversation with the author.)