

# NEVER FREE OF IDEALOGY

On Changing Fascinations for Places

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**The big empty wing of the future home of DasArts has been stripped bare. Floorboards are missing or lie scattered about the room and wires hang from the ceiling. In this ravaged building, artist Claudia Bosse was invited to make a context-specific work with the students as part of Talking with Places. Which raises the question of what makes vacant industrial complexes and weather-beaten buildings so attractive, in fact? Why do we like to roam around in them so much, and why do we feel the urge to register decay and put it on display?**

The assignment: Investigate the significance of the empty, stripped-down space of a laboratory that has fallen into disuse. The questions of who had previously been housed here (the Shell Oil Company's Research and Technology Centre) and what the future allocation of the building is (the new accommodations of DasArts and several other departments of the AHK and the Theaterschool) were easy to answer. But artist Claudia Bosse wanted to know more: had the building also had other tenants, what is the building's monetary value, what sort of business did Shell conduct here, did the company ever fall into discredit, when and how did the building fall short, and what function does it have in the North at present?

The students were challenged in this assignment to investigate how a space, in its present physical state and its lost functionality, can fulfil the role of co-author in an artistic work. Bosse herself has over the years developed a sensitivity for the spatial, ideological, historical and utilitarian aspects of the places where she makes her work. Her exhibitions and installations are performative interventions and spatial compositions which are accurate reflections of this.

## **Against the Establishment**

Since the second half of the 20th century, many vital artistic projects have taken place on industrial terrains and in rundown buildings. There are countless new



## The epicentre of the prevailing order may be the fringes

### Authorship

Recycled within commercial hype, little is left of the critical potential of such projects. But the term ruin porn also threatens to undeservedly become a stamp for everything associated with ravaged locations. In order to correct this tendency, sincere and constructive action must be recognized and valued. Arjen Oosterman, architectural historian and chief editor of the architecture and design magazine *Volume*, points to the many initiatives – also in Detroit – of a mixed population of artists, architects and sociologists, all of whom want to take action. 'This development is also leading to a different interpretation of the concept of authorship and ownership. Many projects are developed collectively, so no one can claim authorship. This way of working is fairly usual amongst hackers and in the digital world, but in the traditional arts it is still less customary. Ruin porn is an undervaluation of what is really going on.'<sup>4</sup> The term indeed explicitly refers to the mass medium of photography, whereas such small-scale projects typically have little exposure.

Bosse emphasizes that her current work does not revolve around the external and at times aesthetic decline of the 'churches of industrialization', but that her motivation stems from a desire to expose underlying power structures. Involvement with the space and dialogue are the central focus. 'In a city, space always means power. The people who administer the space are the ones who are the bosses. So, producing work in such a space first of all means investigating those power structures. This entails 'activating' the space within the architectural and cultural-social narrative. Within the conditions set by the space, I seek a confrontation with the space that goes beyond its designated functionality.'<sup>5</sup>

### New Work Terrains

The function of this sort of rundown space continually changes, among other things because of the attractiveness it holds within the framework of the rapid process of gentrification for media companies like MTV, for instance, or advertising agencies. A 'World without Objects', Oosterman calls this. He explains that companies have adopted the aesthetic attitude, which assumes that you can work wherever your laptop and your smart phone are. Within these conditions, it is interesting to contrast hypermodern technology with a raw environment like nature or, indeed, an industrial area.

Both Oosterman and Bosse indicate that fascination for rundown industrial areas is declining amongst artists, as it also is amongst the public. The nasty aftertaste of commercialization and the rising prices of real estate certainly play a role in this. Bosse has the impression that young theatre-makers are again taking refuge in conventional theatres, partly because they don't want to trip themselves up on the spatial conditions of deteriorated buildings. As possible new work terrains, Oosterman mentions 'non-places' like airports and squares: 'These types of locations are harder to conquer. Non-places are a big challenge because at first sight they seem ordinary, but when seen through the eyes of an artist, they can become interesting again.'

### Critical Possibilities

New critical possibilities can be found at locations that no longer embody the power structures of the past, but are designed by current political, economic and social agendas. The epicentre of the prevailing order may be the fringes. Perhaps artists can create the proverbial fringes in public space – or create spaces of the imagination, like floating bubbles of oxygen that can thrive anywhere.

DasArts will occupy Shell's renovated laboratory within a year. At the same time, new buildings are rising all around: a hotel/club/conference centre, a mega accommodation for over a thousand backpackers and next door to that, a multimedia tourist attraction for the deluxe world traveller. These buildings will be built with an eye to an energy-neutral future, but are not devoid of ideology. Although they won't have the charm of an old building, these new highrises and renovation projects will embody the many-sidedness of the cultural, social and economic narrative which is now being created. They will act as a provocation perhaps, a possible platform, a partner for a project, or all of these at once.

1 The Lonely Planet, USA. Fifth edition [2008], pp. 598. /

2 Chayka, K., 'Detroit Ruin Porn and the Fetish for Decay'.

In: Hyperallergic, January 13, 2011. / 3 Eugenides, J.,

'Against Ruin Porn'. In: Boat Magazine, 27 March 2014. /

4 From: Transcription of roundtable discussion within the framework of Talking with Places led by Willemijn Lamp, with Frank Alsema, Claudia Bosse and Arjen Oosterman. November 4 2014 - DasArts. / 5 Ibid. / 6 Ibid.