

OST.MODERN

ABOUT AN ARCHITECTURE IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF ANNEMIE AUGUSTIJNS

KOEN VAN SYNGHEL

Behind every reality there is an illusion, behind every illusion a lie, behind every lie a truth, behind every truth a reality...

Between these poles of historical facts and fiction, ambition and decline, form and coincidence, a world is revealed that Annemie Augustijns has been photographing in Eastern Europe from the beginning of the 21st century. Revelation may sound a bit too solemn, and certainly too religiously loaded for an area that for about three quarters of a century was in the grip of a *godless* system. But revelation is appropriate here because the photographs Augustijns made in East Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, and Lithuania etc. are more than visual historiography. You might see them as documentary pictures that map out the end and certainly the decline and brought-down ambitions of a political culture. But they are made too autonomous for that. Or put more appropriately, Annemie Augustijns constructs images that generate an artificiality that makes every location freeze into a filmsetting or theatrical scenography because of their composition and special attention to colour, rhythm, perspective, etc.

It is true that architecture and photography find each other at times in their tense relationship with reality. Just as an architect manipulates building with geometry, rhythm and perspective or even narratives, a photographer selects, frames, and composes reality. Photographers and architects both work on constructions: the construction of an image and the construction of reality. Especially when a photographer's eye is drawn to buildings or interiors, it often happens that architecture and in particular the structuring principles that transform casual building into architecture are enlarged.

In the case of the Cultural Centre of Nowa Huta in Poland, Annemie Augustijns lends the geometry of a circular false ceiling an absolute, abstract dimension. She does this by making this ceiling the centre of the photographic image. In so doing, she not only acknowledges the geometrical substructure of this architecture but also seems to want to focus on the monumental ambition.

However, what makes this photograph so intriguing and somewhat subversive, is the fact that in this cultural centre – in which architectural ambition and craving for everlasting modernity spatters from the walls – the stuffing of the padded door has dropped down, fat-bellied like a well-fed apparatchik. Because of this, the otherwise carefully designed building becomes a trifle pathetic. Compared with the seriousness of modern architecture the door appears as being comically fat and dissonant.

While the cultural centre of Nowa Huta testifies to some humanity that took place in, or rather that took over the architecture, the photograph of the Stasi museum expresses the complete – ludicrous – failure of an environment governed by totalitarianism.

The interior can be simply described in the naked presence of red carpet, a varnished door, a cord stretched from door to door, a blue dusty chair, and a portrait icon in cold neon light against the white back wall. Is this a scene, a stage image from a play that nobody wants to recall? Or is it a poignant backdrop that the camera's eye converts to a timeless shrine of power or powerlessness?

Annemie Augustijns does not pass by such a tableau. Precisely this type of picture, just like the hand-painted backdrop – the background for a terrarium? A stuffed Siberian fox? - left unguarded between two ashtrays somewhere in a corner of Bucharest University in Rumania. This is a 'real' backdrop. And this photograph of a hand-painted backdrop, in which the illusion is looking for reality, is alienating. Because in this picture the sense of scale is lost. The ashtrays provide some foothold, but then again an adjoining door is a bit too low. Scale, but in particular its blow-ups, has always been the favourite medium of dictatorial architecture. Is it this confusion that this photograph expresses?

Backdrops. Various stages. With curtains. Orange! The colour of the sun that hardly shines through the windows...

In her photographs, Annemie Augustijns avoids people. Buildings, interiors get the star role, like architects also like to forget that man is the measure of things. Even if there are no people in the photographs of cultural centres, hotels, a gymnasium, or a museum, the buildings and interiors still seem to be waiting for figures to populate the spaces, as in De Chirico's metaphysical paintings.

But the photographs of interiors create the impression of backdrops that dictate a kind of play of life rather than 'normal' spaces in which real life can take place. Moreover, with her well-composed photographs she leaves us behind, alone with the question where those so-called characters might belong. And if the spaces she depicts comes across as a stage image, are we then the spectators of these unreal stage-managed tableaux?

These photographs are therefore also more than casual documentary images. Annemie Augustijns confronts us with the classic discord of photography, viz. the tension between object and subject, a phenomenon that can be perfectly sensed in the experience of the *uncanny*, the *Unheimlichkeit* that perhaps belongs to the unique properties of architecture. Thus with the photograph in Judetul Mehedinti in Rumania, Annemie Augustijns also leaves us to guess whether the architectural totems as symbolic city gate open the gate 'to' the city or indicate the way 'out of' the city. For this road lies there just as metaphysically empty as a theatre stage after the performance.

With these photographs of public buildings, does Annemie Augustijns precisely ask questions about that public nature? Does she therefore have the grass grow from the stands in Karlovy Vary? Even if she does not have an actual part in the growing grass, by standing in the centre of the playing field and pointing the camera at the stand and catching it in its symmetry, she makes the grass speak more than ever as a sign of unwanted resistance and decline.

In many ways, Ost.modern seems to be the story of degenerated modernity. But somewhere Annemie Augustijns also captures the beauty of a universal modernity that sticks to your bottom, like a bright red leatherette sofa.