

Jacobs Steven, 'Skinning Architecture: the Generic Tactility of Dirk Braeckman'. A-Prior N-7 (periodical, Brussels (BE)), nr.7, 2002.

It seems almost absurd to call Dirk Braeckman an 'architectural photographer'. Even so, the greater part of his work since the early 1990s has involved images of interiors or buildings. Braeckman himself speaks of his 'architecture' or of 'portraits of interiors'. [1] Sometimes his work shows outdoor scenes with clearly identifiable architectural motifs: a concrete garden wall, a block of buildings fenced off in metal, a high-rise block concealed behind a dense network of branches, a façade built from glass panels or a suburban home looming up from behind a shrub. But usually his work is as much about interiors or, more accurately, fragments of interiors. His photographs show us floors, walls, ceilings, corners, tables, beds, doors, chairs, armchairs, settees, cupboards, carpets, wall coverings and curtains.

Braeckman keeps a firm hold on architecture by employing these fragmentary glances. Indeed, he hardly seems to be interested in architecture per se. His photographs do not illustrate any kind of tectonic value, urban-planning context or spatial plasticity, but, rather, appear to point our noses towards the tactility of the building material, decoration or interior. Here architectural space breaks down: in poorly lit hallways and hotel lobbies, it is sucked out into the wainscoting, padded walls, tiled floors or rugs. Floor surfaces are disrupted. Mattresses, beds and bedspreads stretch out to create landscapes. In another shot, the room has been almost claustrophobically reduced to a tiled wall, a glass surface, a piece of wallpaper or a curtain. In the first instance, Braeckman's photographs register surfaces. This interest in the surface aligns itself perfectly with a modernist Greenbergian formalism – a side of Braeckman's work to which Frank Vande Veire has previously alluded. [2] By evoking a particular space with reference to its surfaces, the inherent tension in photography between spatial illusion and two-dimensionality becomes thematic.

The surface character of these photographs is even strengthened by displaying a noticeable preference for grid patterns. The grid motif regularly appears in Braeckman's carpets, mattresses, floors, walls, bedspreads, racks or glass curtain walls. In an often quoted text, Rosalind Krauss indicated that grid patterns in modernist painting not only define pictorial space but also flatten it, consequently strengthening the autonomy of the work. [3] Furthermore, Krauss underlined the schizophrenia of grids. Their simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal forces do not merely create a type of all-over structure but also calls one's attention to the edges of the artwork. Without any centre, grids stretch out infinitely with the containment of the artwork being independent on the subject and

thus all the more dependent on the decisions of the artist. Braeckman's photographs hypostasise their concern around the edges of the image surface. The artist speaks of 'defined framing'. 'The image is made from the edge', states Braeckman, 'I never just look straight to something. I'm always looking at the edge, playing with that edge. I'm always looking at it from that perspective even without a camera; an ongoing tendency to be occupied with what is right next to the image.' [4] In other words when combined with arbitrary cutoffs, the grid patterns strengthen the spectator's paranoia when viewing the large-scale prints of Braeckman's photographs. The grids suggest that the tiles, wallpapered or paved world extends beyond the edges of the picture and completely encloses the spectator.

Such a reading of Braeckman's grids is equally one-sided and detracts from the complexity of his work. Indeed, the grids not only correspond to the logic of the image surface but also constitute an inherent part of the world that Braeckman represents – the world of modern architecture and decoration that appears to be supported by all manner of grids. They crop up everywhere: in the tiles for floors, walls and ceilings, in sheets of wallpaper, in the rhythm of wooden laths or printed textiles. Moreover, these grids are never shown from a full-frontal perspective but are instead subjected to distorted perspectives that correspond with the visual expectations of the viewer. Instead of the timeless and spatially abstract structures of Piet Mondrian, Ad Reinhardt or Agnes Martin, Braeckman's grids reach out into a concrete and tangible world.

Although Braeckman's grids emphasise the surface character of the photographs, the surfaces depicted never appear to be such purely cerebral constructions. The two-dimensional nature of the photograph is immediately disrupted by the 'un-flat' character of the surfaces. They are swollen, dented, serrated, pleated, blistered or crumpled. His world is made up of grainy walls, corded materials, bubbled glass, creased wallpaper, nicked tiles, cracked paintings, woolly carpets, folded sheets or quilted bedspreads, which evoke the grain of a piece of wood, a map of the world in relief or the bronzed skin of a belly. With the help of a photographic flash that is almost always emphatically present, these surfaces never appear perfectly smooth but are instead things of a concrete, material and careworn nature. Emphasising them makes them vulnerable and human. Braeckman's dingy rooms with their clammy sheets, messy bedspreads, smudged walls and grimy shower tiles constitute an opposite to customary architectural photography that forever provides us with images of pristine interiors. Braeckman is clearly more interested in elements that conceal architecture: tiles, carpets, wallpaper, wainscoting and false ceilings. His interiors belong in a modern world in which the ideology of architectural modernism – openness, transparency, honesty in construction, the abolition of ornamentation – has never become firmly established. Like a new, wily Potemkin – when we consider the detailed analysis of Viennese architecture by Adolf Loos in *Die Potemkin'sche Stadt* [5] – Braeckman indicates that the thirst for disguises seen in today's man-made

environment is no less avid than in the ostentation of the 19th century. It is simply that the plasterwork pilasters or the cement-moulded garlands have been replaced by modular cladding structures manufactured from industrial materials. Conduits and steel or concrete elements used in construction, considered examples of modernity's ugliness in the 19th century and hidden away behind plaster ornamentation or voluptuous draperies, are now concealed from view behind some of the other miserable products of that same, now deteriorated, modernity.

Braeckman's fascination with this thirst for disguise and with the multiple layering of architecture also came to the fore in an installation in which he departed from the photographic medium as such. For the exhibition entitled *Over the Edges*, Braeckman provided the peeling side façade of the neoclassical Ghent Academy of Fine Art with a coat of gloss paint. Instead of photographing a false wall, he created one on site to cover the psoriatic façade. The building, with its grimy exterior, appeared to assume the sheen of a Braeckman photograph.

In Braeckman's world, architecture does not only appear to be concealed but, more than this, appears absent and redundant. Braeckman's rooms never look 'designed' and the subdued dull shades of the photography strengthen the generic, interchangeable character of his interiors. In other words, Braeckman's rooms reflect the lack of centrality in his grid patterns. These are spaces without a place. The genius loci is smothered beneath the cladding: his rooms can be found everywhere and nowhere. An interior captured by Braeckman immediately calls forth an association with a hotel room, the humble cocoon of the modern nomad.

Their anonymity is, however, never cursory. Braeckman's rooms not only appear to be the opposite of a clean and clinical modernism but also of a trendy, postmodern flux of signs. Without being nostalgic, Braeckman's unmistakable fascination with deterioration and patinas evokes the tales and memories that have crept into the mattresses, the joins of the wallpaper or the points between the tiles. In contrast to their anonymous character, Braeckman's rooms contain countless relics. Braeckman denounces the bourgeois world of panelworks and cheap paintings, yet his rooms bear a strong affinity with 19th century bourgeois interiors in which, as Walter Benjamin mentioned, the inhabitants felt the need to leave behind traces in every spot. [6] Even in the comfort of the traditional middle-class interior, which attempted to ignore the unheimliche of the modern big city, everything was concealed with the aid of cases, sleeves, carpet strips, lids, covers and boxes. Everyday objects were principally clad in plush and velvet, materials on which the slightest touch became visible. Even the floors and walls were covered in textiles. Braeckman's stuffy interiors make it clear that this thirst for disguise has survived the avant-garde's utopian vision of a living environment that is transparent, rational and collective. A bourgeois predilection for packaging has found itself a snug nesting place in the neutral grids and the industrial materials of a now faded modernism. At the same time, it is shown that the cheapest, meanest, most worn out of begrimed architecture is, nonetheless, able to house stories, memories and dreams.

Footnotes

[1] In a conversation with Erik Eelbode in the monograph Dirk Braeckman z.Z(t)., Ludion, Ghent/Amsterdam, 1998.

[2] Frank Vande Veire, 'Blind self-reference: Dirk Braeckman's light in photography', De Witte Raaf, 80, July-August 1999, pp. 14-17.

[3] The essay 'Grids' (1979) was included in Rosalind E.Krauss's, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass./London, 1986, pp. 8-22.

[4] See footnote 1.

[5] 'Die Potemkin'sche Stadt' originally appeared in *Ver Sacrum* in July 1898 and has been included in Adolf Loos, *Die Potemkin'sche Stadt: Verschollene Schriften 1897-1933*. Vienna: Georg Prachner Verlag, 1983, pp. 55-58.

[6] Walter Benjamin's meditations on the interiors of bourgeois homes have been included among *Gesammelte Schriften* (7 vols., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974-1989). Of particular note in this regard are 'Das Paris des Second Empire', 'Erfahrung und Armut' and the passage 'Das Interieur, die Spur' from *Das Passagen-Werk*.