

Die Plek

“We have a history unlike any other country: we are part of the European community but stand alone and have our specific traits. The French part of the country has always leaned towards Paris, which has a great photography history; the Flemish part has struggled with the medium. We are not a people making aesthetically pleasing things just for being peaceful. We tend towards making things in a tectonic way, meaning ground-breaking but harmonious. This is why we have great documentary photographers.”

Curator Kaat DeJonghe is discussing Belgium’s photography scene as both the backdrop and impetus for her new creative project Die Plek. Translated into English as ‘The Place’, Die Plek is an intriguing exhibition platform for artists whose work straddles documentary photography and contemporary art. Born, importantly, of “no fixed address”, the venue and specific space for each exhibition not only varies with every iteration but is rather custom-selected, enabling new relationships to be drawn out between the content of artworks and the context within which they are shown in order that the setting can potentially become an active ingredient in administering and constructing meaning.

“Rapid changes in today’s art world require solutions that upend the old models,” writes DeJonghe in Die Plek’s curatorial statement, pointing to the reasons for conceiving of this project as a necessary evolution of the challenges and opportunities to break free from rigid gallery frameworks and architecture. “Galleries and exhibition spaces must evolve to find the best ways to exhibit work that merit the artist’s expression, intent, and medium of creation and communication,” she adds, stating that the programme will be aperiodical and thus run on its own timeline and outside of the key dates in the art market calendar. “Even as the location and format changes, the conceptual ideas remain constant. Die Plek does not cease to exist when an exhibition closes, a location changes, or an address cannot be found.”

Another key premise outlined in the curatorial mission statement is that “the work will find its own time and place.” Expanding on this point, DeJonghe refers to allowing the creative process of making artwork to seep into its eventual presentation, with an emphasis on the importance of interpretation, i.e. the quality of its relation to the given context of social phenomena or material realities. “I feel that the best circumstance to show this in needs to be an interpretation as well. I want to avoid having to show work by artists when the work is not fully completed yet (galleries schedule a show months beforehand), and I want to avoid having to show certain work in an environment where it does not belong (just one address makes for a same space with every single show). In short, ideally the work would find its best way of being shown once it is ready to be revealed and Die Plek would like to cater for this.”

DeJonghe harks back to the exhibition *In The Margin: Belgian Documentary Photography* from 2011 that she initiated for Museum Dr. Guislain Museum in Ghent, a museum annex at a functioning psychiatric institution, as potentially the “first Die Plek”. The landmark show displayed some 400 works from 22 Belgian photographers, both well-known and hitherto unknown, who had been

brought together due to their shared interests and dialogues in examining subjects on the margins of society; those marginalised, overlooked, transgressive, disintegrated or unpolished. Notably, it is credited as the first to reference the four Belgian Magnum photographers at the time – Martine Franck, Harry Gruyaert, John Vink and Carl De Keyzer – to great critical acclaim and public reception. “The reaction of the press clearly showed that they had had no idea of the intangible wealth we possessed,” DeJonghe says. “The photographers in that show are all cream of the crop but too little known. One journalist put it very nicely saying *mea culpa* as pleading guilty of not putting any spotlights on the great talent in our own country before. I feel that this since then has changed and we have become more international and have started appreciating the medium of photography as a worthy form or art.”

Fast forward to 2017 and DeJonghe felt she identified a gap in photographic culture and its environments that propelled her to embark on this venture, following various conversations with different artists who “are no longer creatively stimulated by working to show in the same white cube gallery spaces every other year according to the programme.” She also recalls gaining inspiration from encountering an exhibition entitled *Black Mould* at David Zwirner’s Mayfair gallery in London from 2015 of the work of Belgian photo-realist painter and filmmaker, Michaël Borremans: “He masterfully transformed the white walls into a dark green, almost theatrically-lit experience so that the public could really see and understand the work in a much broader sense.”

For its inaugural exhibition Die Plek presented the work of Belgian photographer Eva Vermandel in Rossaert, a former hat shop for sailors located in Antwerp’s red light district. Now, currently on display as part of Die Plek’s programme is a selection of works from eminent British photographer Peter Fraser under the title *Whatness*, this time sited in Constantin Brodski’s remarkable 1970 former headquarters designed for the CBR cement firm in Brussels. A jewel in the architect’s modernist legacy, the building is located in the Sonian forest at the limits of the city yet just a mere 10 minutes from high-end shopping street Avenue Louise. Noted for its facade made of 756 convex oval concrete modules that belie the highly-functional interior spaces within, the unusual sculptural form of the building makes optimal use of ample lighting and offers panoramic views of the surrounding landscape. Up on the eighth floor 15 works will be presented in total as an abridged version of Fraser’s retrospective at Tate St Ives in 2013, drawing on various discrete projects – *12 Day Journey* (1984), *Deep Blue* (1997), *Material* (2002), *Nazraeli Series* (2006), *Lost for Words* (2010) and *A City in the Mind* (2012).

Within the medium of colour photography, Fraser has been a trailblazer since the outset of his career. His is a highly-idiosyncratic and artistic approach that pulled away from the tropes and trappings of documentary, reportage or satirism that largely preoccupied tendencies within the UK during the 1980s. Instead, the photographs operate as poetic encounters, charged with the ferocity of vision and perception, as if to offer up moments when the world around him declares itself ‘ready’ before his camera. Observed within definite reach to create a strong sense of proximity, his *modus operandi* echoes Garry Winogrand’s famous maxim that “there is nothing so mysterious as a fact clearly

stated.” Evidently, understanding what the world looks like photographed is a driving force behind Fraser’s motivations to make pictures. Yet at times his photographs seem akin to the natural dynamics of vision, while in other instances they transform the world through the use of flash, choice of vantage point or an emphatic framing, and so on. What prevails, across the various different series and subtle permutations of his intimate style, is his consistence of enquiry and aestheticism that are in service to the art; namely the surrealness and beauty of the visible world at the level of the everyday, anticipated with tremendous intuition yet also with an unerring clarity of focus and precision.

“The colour, the shape, the tactility are radical and extreme,” DeJonghe says of the images’ strong emotional resonance. “At a closer look it is highly vulnerable work. The themes are sometimes fragile and at times highly charged with the necessity of the contemporary life and society and the materials that come with that. Then, not unimportant to me, I find the work funny. It confronts you as a viewer with your own ignorance and silliness. For example you don’t go down on your knees to look at some bright blue door with a chewing gum stuck under it, but seeing Fraser’s work makes you wish you had and wonder why you haven’t.”

DeJonghe also explains how the process of pairing the artist with this specific locale came about: “The CBR building had been on my radar and once I got the approval of using the space for Die Plek, I needed an artist whose work could stand up to the monumental concrete architecture and visually dominant surroundings. The moment I saw *Mathematics*, Peter’s latest show in the Camden Arts Centre, London, in 2018, I knew he would be the best and, in my eyes, only candidate.”

With an eye to the future, the next scheduled exhibition will be a group survey since the owner of the building in question has expressed a preference not to be exclusively linked to one individual artist. “I like this way of working as it means you cannot force any element into the equation,” DeJonghe admits. “You have to allow for the work and the space to be and be submissive about it.” In terms of other long-term plans and directions for the Die Plek project, DeJonghe states that she intends to stage exhibitions in non-traditional settings beyond Belgium. She has also expressed the desire to create a network through which the artist “can step up with work to then ‘create his/her time and space’ together”, wherein Die Plek will provide an architecturally distinctive backdrop and produce an exhibition, not to mention creating commercial avenues to sell work. Similarly, DeJonghe hopes that like-minded people with remarkable spaces can work in collaboration to jointly present exhibition projects or establish commissioning opportunities bespoke to the location. “I am happy to feel that the medium of photography has a moment in the contemporary art scene,” DeJonghe concludes. “And I can only work with Die Plek towards maintaining and strengthening this position.”