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Photography and the Photographer: How We Make Space

CMB/HRS: To start with a very simple but yet difficult and also an intimate question: What do you photograph and why do you photograph?

Bas Princen: I’m a maker, I make images, I don’t document. I studied architecture and I’m interested in how to make and depict space. I’m interested in how it is made physically but also how you can imagine space, because these questions are part of the architectural discourse. I started to photograph by trying to rearrange reality—to take elements that were already present in reality and to organize them according to how I wanted them to relate to each other. With the means of a photograph I could do it without actually moving objects or making objects. In that sense I could direct a view towards something that is already there. I could also present a different kind of view of something—for instance a territory. And that outcome I would almost define it as something new, I even would define it as an architectural proposal, or a project.

CMB/HRS: Do you consider yourself as an architectural photographer?

Bas Princen: I work with architecture; I work with built matter but I work rather with architects than with buildings. So I think there is a bit of a difference. I am interested in what space that is being made is, and how you visualize it. How do you make an image of it that transports maybe the character of the real space without necessarily making documents? When there is a building or an architectural space to be photographed and I’m asked to do it, then I like that the photographs show something that was not yet seen in order to push the process of design and of go a few steps further.

I believe there is no context in a photograph; hence a photograph can express a certain essence—of space, emotion, idea—regardless of context. That is at least how I understand it. As a photographer, you can direct the viewer; you can determine what people will perceive as the context. This is what I find interesting, this is part of making. You imagine how a certain situation could be.

If you asked me if I am an architecture photographer, I would say no, because I am a landscape photographer in essence. I photograph objects that are in the landscape—they are manmade, they are constructions, shown either through my viewing, and made by people who built something in the landscape. They are constructions of how we form, transform and make the space that we live in. This is what I am interested in: How do we make space and how do we define it.
Taking photographs: going, seeing, making

CMB/HRS: One ontological question of photography is the reduction or abstraction when creating two dimensional images from three dimensional architectural, urban or territorial situations. As an architect and urban planner and as a photographer, how do you deal with this?

Milica Topalovic: I am not interested in a kind of systematic description of an urban landscape or territory; at least this is not what I do. The work is rather about a production of concepts in a sense that they give a possibility of seeing and interpreting space in different ways. It is essential in my way of work to name or rename things. I see verbal and the visual languages for me belonging ultimately to the same form of representation. Photographs, in this sense, can make something visible which was not visible before. Everything in this way of thinking has the same function: a drawing, a photograph, a piece of text, and so on. A drawing for example can reveal a new set of relations; a new scale, a new perspective. The problem of two and three dimensions is not so important for me; rather, the central problem that occurs in the work is about the language chosen to narrate the given problematic, of a territory or a social space, we are engaging with. This is a question of concepts in relation to space—which concepts do we currently have and which concepts might be more precise, more clear, and even more democratic.

Bas Princen: This translation is my actual work. It is much more than photographing itself—and it has changed dramatically since I moved to digital photography. The file on the computer screen means very little to me; when I see my work on the screen, it does not do anything to me. Today, the majority of people consume images via a screen. I think the worldwide web and the screen are the worst places for photographs; at least for the kind of photography I am doing. On the screen, the image stays two-dimensional and does not become an object—it loses materiality, but also depth. You are continuously reminded that you are looking at a super scaled-down version of photographs; a digital interpretation of reality. I never understood it so much, but recently I have started to print my photographs bigger and bigger, on different materials, and I do the framing in a very precise way. So the actual photographic object is hyper controlled, and the image is really crafted. I craft the image to understand which elements can catch the eye of the spectator, and make him endlessly caught in the image, so to speak. And then, when you see my photographs somehow they do not remind you at all anymore of anything that you can see on a screen. Even if you have seen the image on a screen, it will be a totally different experience.

A large photographic print does something quite different than the same image printed small. In a small image, you look at the organization, at all the elements that are in the
picture. But in a large print, you are not constantly reminded of the composition of the image. If you look at a large-scale print and step back, you can understand the composition but then you have a second moment in which you are free to go into the image.

I am not so much interested in the dogmas of photography; for example questioning where the limits of the photograph are, or having to define that limit very precisely. I think the majority of art photography is trying to make sure that a photograph is constantly – and at all moments – seen as a photograph. I am not interested in this, I always wanted the spectator to enter into my photographs—to create a situation where one can have a relation with a photograph, and that is why I have to craft.

Milica Topalovic: In 2009, I was taking pictures in a village called Durunka near Assiut. I photographed a father with his sons as they posed for my photograph. A few months later, I returned with the developed image. It was hard to find the house again, but neither the father nor the two sons were there, only women and other kids. I showed the image to the women, but they were not interested in it. All of a sudden, the kids took the picture and after a few moments it was crumpled and dirty. I was reminded all over again that, in our culture, we have such an appreciation of images, but other cultures do not have that and we must be aware of that cultural difference. Our appreciation and understanding of an image is worlds apart from theirs. So the question arises: Why do we bring these images to our context?

Bas Princen: The action of photographing is as simple as this: It is going, and seeing and seeing with your eyes and making. I do not go out there to provoke. It is a world that is visible, and I think this visible world is so complex, it will tell us much more than we already know. Photographing for me, not being a trained photographer, is a way of looking which only occurs when I have a camera with me. I do not have lists prepared beforehand or pre-described images that I want to make. I do not work with typologies. Images are happening in a very direct way. I see something or I recognize a potential image, because it connects to another image I have seen, or made before. But it happens instantly at the spot. Later, when I am developing the image, I try to go back to the moment I took the photograph and return to the atmosphere I saw taking the image. Any kind of manipulation I do is primarily used just in order to get the image as close to what I wanted to show in the process of taking the image as possible.

CMB/HRS: You, as a designer, work with images, namely photographs. What images exactly do you work with and how do they relate to space, which is essential for urban and territorial research and projects?
Milica Topalovic: Generally, I use photography because I am interested in untold stories. More specifically, I am interested in discussing aspects of urban space and urbanization processes that fall into what has been called blind fields—the various socio-spatial practices and situations which for cultural, political, and other ideological reasons are not “seen” or are not prioritized in a given social context. Therefore, what I strive for is to bring into the realm of the visible something which is intrinsically out there and yet has remained invisible for our eyes. At first sight. This can be done through the written word, but I do believe much more through images, through photography. Photography has the power to convey such issues because it can project a contestation—for example by showing an alternative view of a city, in relation to some mainstream type of photographic representation of the same space. That is what photographs are for me; and this visibility is a kind of issue that is about politics, democracy and so on and it all comes together in an image. Seen in this way, the question of visibility is the question of politics of urban space, and this translates into the photographic image.

Bas Princen: The photographic image is generally meant to show a view of a person standing, an image from the lived world, an image you can relate to. This is not the Google Earth image, not the airplane image, not the kind of image devoid of any relation to the place. It does not matter if there are people shown in the image or not, but it needs a certain closeness. So, you can understand that this is a view that you would have when you stand in this place or in front of this object; you can discern it as something created in a moment of seeing.

CMB/HRS: You were talking about the photograph used as a tool to make things, which are not visible, visible. Is that through the knowledge of the spectator or is it a second or different look or a gaze with a parallax onto the actual image? How does the invisible become visible through the photograph, which ontologically is an object of visibility?

Milica Topalovic: It is often asserted that the world today is highly saturated with images, but I think that is a kind of an illusion. The lived space and the image space of this planet are highly fractured, uneven, in manners that reflect political or power relations. There are areas which are more image-saturated or more thoroughly represented through photography—in particular large cities—and other which are less so. Hence they are less visible. So, the question that is central in my work becomes “what if we allow that there are alternative realities to be discovered, seen and made visible, in the fringes of our familiar image space/s?”

Bas Princen: I travelled twice the Nile Valley, which is completely different from Cairo—but it would also be a mistake to talk about the two separate entities, as if there are completely different and unrelated processes at work. On the one hand you have Cairo with its limits – even if they are being pushed outward every single day. Nerveless, the city has its limits. When you drive from Cairo southwards, you follow an almost 1000 km long stretch of territory of the Nile Valley. You drive for days and almost nothing changes. There the question arises: how do you depict landscapes, or let’s say transformations of lands, that are so vast, that you cannot understand only by just looking at them. This understanding of scale is interesting for me. I’m working on a book which is going to be called Nile Valley or just Valley. I don’t want to mix it with Cairo—as I said before that they are two completely different things. One is a limited entity and the other one is a condition of endlessness. The book is going to be an attempt to show territory as a kind of repetition. I don’t know how to do it; I only know of one example of a similar attempt by Allan Sekula with his project on the space of global shipping “Fish Story”. He tried to describe a territory that is so big, so indescribable and, somehow, he managed.

Photographing, researching and reflecting territory
Photography and territory

CMB/HRS: What is territory for you?

Milica Topalovic: Jean Gottmann wrote that territory occurs at an intersection of space and politics. Other philosophers understood territory as a space of social practices—a space that enables social activities and processes, but one that is also being shaped by them. Along these lines, Andre Corboz wrote that territory is not merely a passive physical object, an object of construction, but an active subject that contributes to the stability and the reproduction of social relations. Thus, we can see it as a space around us, continuously changing and transforming. It is a concept with a huge intellectual pedigree, where different schools, the French, the German and the Italian in particular have made their contributions to understanding territory.

In formulating a work or a project, I find understanding that territory can mean so many things rather liberating. For instance, all aspects of social work are incorporated in the territory.

For example, in one of our recent projects we focused solely on earthworks and what they might tell us about the urban space and urbanisation. The form of land can be understood as an artefact shaped by human activity—it can tell us about urban politics, economy, relation to history, ecology, nature, etc. The other aspect of earthworks is sand trade and sand
hinterland, which we investigated and described. Hinterland is an important concept in our work, which considers the problem of the relationship of small towns and territories, near and far, which support the cities through the supply of labour, resources and so on. So, we tried to reverse it. We always consider territory from a central point, from the city-centric perspective, but what if we think it in the different direction? Countryside is a similar notion—it creates an alternative history, not an urban history, but a history of territory, told from the perspective of “the outside”: hinterland, countryside.

Bas Princen: Talking about the Nile Valley, I just want to add one aspect. The territory for the people living there is different than the one we experience. We were able to travel from Cairo thousands of kilometres, and that gives a particular view.

CMB/HRS: Have you photographed Holland?

Bas Princen: I only trust photographers who made their first big works in their home/own territory, which is the territory they know. If you are a foreigner you do not know a lot about the local circumstances, you filter automatically and your view becomes more abstract by default. So, the first book I made was a work on manmade landscape of Holland — how landscape is being used and how we define artificial landscape. Such a work is possible if you have a knowledge that helps you understand how to filter the elements of the landscape, or a territory — for example, how you want to name what you are interested in, what you can work with and transpose into photographs. It is not about an actual situation, but much more about trying to understand something more opaque, which is there on the surface but which is not spectacular, not the story that is in the news at the moment.

CMB/HRS: You are also a foreigner; how do you work in a different cultural setting?

Bas Princen: I was photographing in Suriname and in Indonesia — two countries in which the Dutch have a terrible history, but also two countries which have been — and still are — described extensively by people from Holland. Looking back in time, there is a lot of knowledge and a lot of material, including photographic archives that can be found in Holland. The tradition of documenting and archiving has been based on understanding that these territories are part of our history. This is something I find important and interesting. For example, Egypt has been described many times through photography — this fact makes it now legitimate for me to go there and try again. The same applies to my work regarding volcanoes in Indonesia. There is a plethora of material in Dutch archives on these landscapes —all historical materials, but nothing contemporary. I find this interesting and legitimate.
It is always in my mind, that being a foreigner I have a special status photographing there. I do not feel too bad about it, but I have to admit that it is always in your mind when you are there. Still, my position as a foreign photographer is different in Egypt than in Indonesia — Dutch is still a language there.

CMB/HRS: Have you had an exhibition in Egypt? Were you “giving back” in terms of showing your work?

Bas Princen: Yes, I did. I believe that we constantly have to update documents which were already made.

HRS/CMB: Could you say something about the role of photography in teaching and research?

Milica Topalovic: We try to introduce photography as a medium and as a way of looking, which is equal to a drawing, a sketch or a piece of text. We ask students to make an argument with the photographs, in a similar way that one can make an argument with a text or a drawing. We try to show the students that their daily use of the smartphone camera might not be the best approach to take when they work; each chosen camera actually allows them a different understanding of the photograph and of the landscape. We send the students out to take photographs, and we also offer lectures where we discuss different topics. New Topographics, Bechers, Fischli and Weiss and many other artists have created photographic projects and photographic languages that can be taken as purposeful and helpful for the work of an architect. Recently, we worked with photo grids, which give a possibility to describe landscape in a manner of serial photography.

Bas Princen: My understanding of photo grids is that they are usually done by artists using photography, and not by photographers. When an artist uses photography they quickly do grids and they make the most interesting ones. They are not so obsessed by the individual quality of an image; they are interested in a narrative.

CMB/HRS: What makes Cairo and Egypt interesting today?

Bas Princen: It is about describing the territory. The Nile Valley is extremely large and extremely homogeneous. There is no specificity: any village can be the next village. Also, it is a very minimal landscape; there is almost nothing there. In that sense, it is unlike any place that I have seen. But Cairo is different. When I was there the second time, I stopped photographing it. It is so spectacular and at the same time unbearable, because the human
scale somehow disappears, everything is so large and endless. At the same time, Cairo is so saturated in photographs, and I find it more difficult to photograph it.

**CMB/HRS:** *What distinguishes the act of taking a photograph in Egypt and elsewhere?*

**Bas Princen:** The act is not so different. In the case of the Nile Valley I was going through a territory which I did not know before, but you have to get familiar quickly and you have to decide what you want to photograph very fast. We had less than one week and we wanted to take photographs of landscapes. There are landscapes in different forms, and there are villages in which you go very close to the material, the matter. You can see that they are not uniform, and they are very dense. Then there are the pictures of the night, which came for different reasons. Travelling for a week, you are mainly driving at night, because during the day you are photographing. It gets dark quite early, you then eat something and then you go by van up to 200 km depending on the condition of the road. So, until 11:00 pm or midnight, you are going through that dark landscape. The only elements in the landscape which are lit are the minarets; this becomes apparent after a while. With this phenomenon I thought, let me try to photograph it. I did it right from the moving car. It was a way, an attempt, to describe the landscape also through a certain abstraction. For this upcoming book, I thought I needed different types of landscapes; or let’s say it once again shows a different understanding of the landscape.