

## Lieven Lefere & Charles Verraest's photographic strategies of simulation and reconstruction

### Studio Rembrandt

The picture is called Studio Rembrandt. We can see a bedroom, in a pale but excogitated colour pallet, which is being partly lit by the natural light entering through the window. At first sight it is a perfectly normal image in an idiom we know: an ad in a folder of a furniture store. A bit tacky perhaps, but otherwise everything is fine. Or is it? Can we really trust this image?

In *On photography* Susan Sontag pointed out that we assume all too quickly that pictures "unpremeditated slices of the world", while pictures are never *objets trouvés*, but always artefacts. Pictures are 'made', they construct the reality they are depicting. Although Sontag's insight remains essential in the critical handling of photographic images and the value we attach to these images, we could say that, these days, her insight is a bit outdated. After all, today more than ever, man is capable of manipulating photographic images. Thanks to the rise of new digital technologies, and especially programmes like Photoshop, manipulating photos is no longer the privilege of a small minority with the adequate expertise and technical know-how. Photographic manipulation has been democratised in the last decades. This democratisation, one might think, would have enhanced the understanding of the fact that photographic images are 'artefacts'. Although the contrary seems to be true, Susan Sontag's theory has not lost much of its value yet. Photographic images may, more than ever, inspire us with distrust, because of the increase in technological and visual literacy, but still this sense of distrust stems from the desire for images that actually reflect the true reality. Therefore, exposing a manipulated image is usually the first step in the search for a real, non-manipulated image, an image stripped of technological interventions, that would show the true reality. The faker we think an image is, the greater the desire for the 'real' image.

Lefere & Verraest's photography responds to both the distrust about the truth of pictures and the desire for the reality behind them. Therefore, nothing in the photographic universe of Lefere & Verraest is what it seems. Studio Rembrandt may seem lifted out of an advertising brochure, but this is only partly true. They reconstructed a professional advertising picture in the same photo studio (viz. 'Studio Rembrandt'), with the same framing and exposure. It is a sophisticated reconstruction of a bedroom that does not exist, sufficiently impersonal for everyone to be able to project themselves into. Therefore, the fact that the image, at first, appears to be stripped from any history, is in fact just an appearance. The history of the image should not be sought in that what is being represented, but in the representation itself. We see a reproduction of an existing advertising image of which Lefere and Verraest have folded the one-dimensional realism by giving the objects in the previously set frame an iconographical meaning, which they did not have beforehand. Although the overall image does not change, the accessories do belong to another symbolic frame of reference, originating from the art of painting, or, to be more precise, the Flemish Primitives, with iconic references to a biblical annunciatio and still lives with vanitas motives. A more thorough observer might not only find motives from the art of painting, but also 'clues' (a bloodstain on the sheets, a pair of pincers

under the bed) evoking another register of meaning: that of the detective and the whodunit.  
'Genre walks'

In many ways Studio Rembrandt is characteristic of the process of a number of series by Lieven Lefere and Charles Verraest which they themselves call 'Genre walks'. With their pictures they want to examine how different photographic genres from the popular visual culture capitalize on their spectators' ability to see, without these really being aware of that. By acquiring the idiom of a certain genre, the photos appeal to a specific aspect of the spectator's visual literacy, in order to directly thwart the apparent familiarity with these kind of images. By means of persistent details and an intertextual play of visual references, they add several layers to the seemingly insignificant picture, turning the superficial, univoqual image into a multiplicity of images.

The series Meat, for example, is a formal paraphrase of the 'product photography' of foodstuff . The chiaroscuro exposure and the unusual form of presentation, however, render a picturality to the meat which is uncharacteristic of product photography. In the video still Ann & Mark, the codes of amateur pornography are adopted. The image has an apparent 'bad quality' – the pixalization is visible –, that emphasizes the unpolished and fleshy colour pallet. Each detail has been carefully orchestrated, not only to maximize a reality effect, but also to extend to the genre image a depth, which it otherwise lacks. The spectator is therefore invited to step away from the quick glance of a voyeur sitting in front of a video screen: although the lighting and the medium refer to amateur pornography, the composition and the theme are derived from Caravaggio. The orgasmic grimace coincides with the scream of Isaac in *The sacrifice of Isaac*. In the series Car wrecks, the pictures try their utmost to create the suggestion that they are documentary snapshots that could be used to illustrate an article on weekend accidents. The composition is simple, the wrecks are in the centre of the image. The pictures were shot at night and the only thing used to single out the cars is the surrounding light and a flash bulb. Nevertheless, these are refined stagings of accidents that never took place.

By giving superficial images stratigrafic depth, they want to sharpen the gaze of the spectator and impose a new regime of looking. The multitude of images that flood us every day has made us immune to the impact of these images. It is not mainly about exposing the unconscious and therefore dangerous manipulations of the mass media. Their work is more about playing with this subject: they explain a number of rules derived from commercial photography, and go on to disorganise them and use them beyond their normal range of application. In that way, their method is both related to and different from the appropriation art, which was popular in the 80's. Related, because codes from an existing genre are being adopted and mastered, but also being eaten away at from the inside. Different, because less emphasis is put on a critical reflection on the overpowering dictatorship of the image, from which we are said to be suffering.

## Reconstruction

The images of Lefere & Verraest rarely offer room for coincidences. The reality to which the photos seem to refer at first sight only exists by the grace of the image itself, even though the elements in the picture are usually existing elements or events. They say the following about that: "Even if we do not believe that photography is capable of depicting a reality or a truth that is not an interpretation, we think it's important in our method that we show everything that was really there. If we want to make a variation on an existing advertising image, we search for the place where that image was made and reconstruct a new image. If we portray an orgasm, then this is not an acted orgasm. If we adapt a symbol, then we fashion a new symbol. If we want to show a car wreck, then we do not smash up a bought vehicle. The initial value of reality is crucial." For that reason techniques like digital photography or Photoshop are seldom used.

Lefere & Verraest's sense of staging adopts almost epic forms in General Assembly. For the 'Genre walks' of political photography they started from the ultimate example of the political platform: the General Assembly, in which all 193 member states of the United Nations reside. We can recognize the platform with the marble backdrop against which the world leaders address the General Assembly. We recognize the platform and familiar background against which world leaders address the General Assembly: the marble stones, the golden wall, the green-grey carpet, the UN emblem. Still, this picture must be fiction: the water jug that is always next to the Secretary-General, has collapsed. Everything is covered with dust and debris. United Nations is actually an image that should not have existed. Except for the house photographer, photographers do not have access to the General Assembly, which means that, on the one hand, the room is a free zone in an otherwise overmediatized world, and on the other, there is absolute control over the images that are shot in this room. For their picture, they made a simplified 1/1 reconstruction of the podium with both platforms to show their view on this symbolic place: the political centre of the world is in ruins, the architecture of power is a ruin.

## Simulations

In their recent work Lefere & Verraest's approach shifts. While in the first series a certain photographic genre was simulated, they now photograph places and objects which are simulations themselves. In rehabilitation centres they shoot the orthopaedic instruments on which patients simulate daily movements (such as using the stairs) in a protected and controlled environment. In training centres of the fire brigade they find so-called 'fire houses', where the precarious situations are simulated which firemen have to deal with when putting out a fire. These houses are crammed with imitations of kitchens, furniture or classrooms, which are then set ablaze in a controlled manner. The pictures of fire houses and their sinister 'interiors' are not documentary, they are not explained or put into a context. Without documentary guidance, the focus shifts from the photographic look of the possible meaning of the picture to the objects themselves. As always, Lefere & Verraest's images have a strong pictorial overtone. Although these are pictures of simulations, still their force lies in evoking a world that is not connected

with the fire stations they were taken in.

As is the case in almost every of their image, the lack of human figures is notable. Nevertheless they constantly refer to the essential human activity that is simulation. The fire houses clearly show what this entails: simulations should rule out the unexpected, subdue the danger, control the uncontrollable. The urge for control thus always evokes its opposite: that which cannot be controlled and it is this suggestion that is in fact a constant motive in the work of Lefere & Verraest. All their photographs, even when they tackle popular image genre, are ultimately contemporary meditations on the image as 'memento mori'.

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