

L.A. Galerie Lothar Albrecht presents:

# Case Studies

## Peter Bialobrzeski and Oliver Boberg

March 27th to May 23rd, 2009

You and your friends are cordially invited to the opening on Friday, March 27th, 2009, from 7 p.m.

The artists will be present.

*"The cities of the future, rather than being made of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood."*

Mike Davis, Planet of Slums, 2006

In their most recent works, Oliver Boberg and Peter Bialobrzeski, two veteran artists at L.A. Gallery, have both dealt with the topic of buildings in poor urban neighborhoods of the Southern hemisphere. A juxtaposition of the two workgroups thus suggested itself, and is especially enlightening since the works bear motivic and formal similarities despite having originated in entirely different ways.

### PETER BIALOBRZESKI, CASE STUDY HOMES

Peter Bialobrzeski shot the Case Study Homes series at the Baseco compound ("Bataan Shipyard Corporation Compound"), a squatter camp located at the mouth of the River Pasig near the

Port of Manila, in February 2008. This neighborhood, 300 ha of unsafe, unstable subsoil of a former dump site, is home to an estimated 70,000 people. Around 45 per cent of the more than 11 million inhabitants of Greater Manila currently live in such squatter camps and slums.

The pictures of this photographic investigation follow a strict composition. The self-made shacks of old slats and posts, covers, roofing cardboard, corrugated metal and all kinds of cloth fill out each picture in its entirety, like in a portrait. In many cases the photographer chose a slanted front view, displaying both the front and one side wall of the house. Pure front perspectives are rare, as are two or more buildings in one picture. The soft natural light of the clouded sky makes for even lighting, without stark light and shadow contrasts. Pictures showing people beside the buildings are the exception (as in one case, where a smiling resident sits in the doorway of his shack, pointing out the small size of the building; but even he can be made out only at second sight).



Oliver Boberg, "Large Slum 4", 2008, Computer-drawing, 110 x 236 cm



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Bialobrzkeski's approach with the Case Study Homes reminds one of the photographic series of Bernd and Hilla Becher, who created the paradigmatic works on the typology of "Nomadic architecture", especially industrial buildings. Bialobrzkeski, however, counters the Bechers' demonstratively objective position in several ways: The topic itself – the shack built from gathered

What is more, Peter Bialobrzkeski here as in all of his previous series uses color photography. From a Westerner's perspective the makeshift dwellings with their colorful tarpaulins and converted advertising billboards turn into works of art, they are collages of color and diversity. Despite this artistic staging it remains very clear, however, that the pictures document a lot of people's real living



Peter Bialobrzkeski, "Case Study Homes", 2008, C-Prints, ca. 22 x 27 cm

materials – defies the rule of the series or type. These buildings bear an anarchical, piratic, improvised appearance. Beyond walls and roofs, there are no laws governing the composition of a typical Baseco house. Every builder-inhabitant finds his or her own solutions for their abodes by use of what only looks like rubbish. The kind of pile dwelling typically found in Asia does seem to play a certain role, though.

circumstances. Viewers of Bialobrzkeski's earlier series have experienced this before; the artful and multicolored compositions of Asian megacities in the Neontigers (2000-2002) series, for instance, were highly attractive on a visual level, while the reality of life depicted in them alienated many a viewer. Case Study Homes in this sense complements not only the Neontigers series, but also Lost in Transition (2004-2005) and the nostalgic Heimat series (2002-2005).

The title of Case Study Homes alludes to the “Case Study House Program” initiated in 1945 by John Entenza, editor-in-chief of *Arts and Architecture* magazine. The program was aimed at developing modern single-family homes with low-priced building materials and today is regarded one of America’s most significant contributions to twentieth-century architecture. It involved



architects such as Richard Neutra, Charles and Ray Eames, and Raphael Soriano, while Julius Shulman’s photographs of these iconic buildings helped engrain them in Modernity’s collective memory. There is no doubt nonetheless that living in one of the houses in Baseco/Manila is far more binding for a lot more people than inhabiting one of those modern residences in the Los Angeles area.

OLIVER BOBERG

Oliver Boberg, too, has photographed slum houses for his new series. Before that, however, he built them himself. In a long and elaborate process, Boberg develops pictures from pictures. An extensive collection of photos of urban slum dwellings from around the world provided the basis for his new works. Boberg examines and analyses the pictures to identify the typical features of such houses. He then creates sketches and designs which in turn are the models for actual buildings that will be photographed and sometimes featured in short film sequences.

Previously Boberg concentrated on the “non-places” of his Western European environment. His pictures typically featured those familiar sights that we work very hard to ignore. He also produced short films which restaged typical eerie film situations. With this slum series developed since 2008 he has thus acquired a novel perspective on living situations beyond our immediate experience. What is also new is Boberg’s integration of Photoshop drawing, a tool which in the course of the design phases gained more and more importance, ultimately gaining autonomous status.

Boberg’s works have always centered on buildings or situations created through human building. He has been interested not as much in individual architects’ or constructors’ creative will as in constellations that have originated haphazardly. While earlier series, however, were based on collected or self-taken photographs, the artist this time used the inexhaustible resource of the internet for pictures of slums. In that aspect, the central theme is not the slum house per se, but the abundantly conveyed images of it. Boberg’s approach here is intuitive, processual, and closer to detail than Bialobrzewski’s perspective. He plays with the images already in the viewer’s head and builds collages on many levels.

The enormous Photoshop drawings that remind one of Japanese anime seem to make a lot of sense at first sight, they are almost too idyllic. We find ourselves adding ragged (but happy) children or dogs to the pictures. Boberg addresses, and makes us aware of, our visual memory, which stores and triggers images and ideas. His films, too, immediately transport a certain atmosphere without showing much of any action, while the viewer inadvertently carries on the story. Bialobrzewski’s works cause growing irritation, because his perspective runs contrary our expectations; with Boberg’s parameters, in contrast, we willingly play along at first, completing the missing details of the pictures and developing them further without even knowing it.

In the now classic catalogue of the exhibition “Architecture Without Architects” (shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1964), Bernard Rudofsky wrote: *“The philosophy and know-how of the anonymous builders presents the largest untapped source of architectural inspiration for industrial man. The wisdom to be derived goes beyond economic and esthetic considerations, for it touches the far tougher and increasingly troublesome problem of how to live and let live”*.

To be sure, Rudofsky was referring to the long-outdated building methods and shapes of traditional architecture. Nevertheless, it is worth pondering whether those slum houses, unsafe and paltry as they may be, could not also provide a source of inspiration as indicated by Rudofsky – as a reflection of the dwellers’ individuality, testimony of their will to live and to create.



Oliver Boberg, "Small Slum 1", 2009,  
C-Print, 60 x 50 cm



Oliver Boberg, "Small Slum 2", 2009,  
C-Print, 52 x 56 cm



Oliver Boberg, "Small Slum 3", 2009,  
C-Print, 46 x 37,5 cm



Oliver Boberg, "Large Slum 3", 2008, Computer-drawing, 110 x 236 cm

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## PREVIEW

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