

L.A. Galerie Lothar Albrecht presents:

# Peter Bialobrzeski

## “Lost in Transition”

September 5 to November 1, 2008

You and your friends are cordially invited to the opening on Friday, September 5, from 7 p.m.

The artist will be present.

### The Presentness of the Unpredetermined

Michael Glasmeier

We have images, literature, and explicit theories regarding the space that surrounds and defines us. To listen to these voices, the condition of space in our day, especially urban space, is steadily worsening. It isolates and alienates; it seems illegible, decaying, disintegrating at the speed of transportation and media – so goes the diagnosis.<sup>1</sup> At times distended, at times shrunken, its continual mutation and reorganization obeys the laws of the worldwide primacy of economics. It prefigures, as it were, an apocalyptic vision on earth, where we as malingerers idle over our paltry activities.<sup>2</sup>

This space – manifesting itself as sinister megalopolis, post-modernized city, desolate town – wants to be tamed and made liveable, to be historicized and humanized, in order to avert an all too catastrophic future. For this, too, we have images, literature, and explicit theories,<sup>3</sup> but above all we have the



concrete ideas and interventions of architects and urban planners, who lay down cultivated paths in the urban wilderness and stage a sense of orientation with splendid, emphatic buildings. Thus space remains in constant flux, yet without ever consolidating itself, as in the Paris of Georges-Eugène Haussmann (1809-1891) or finding its rhythm as in the film Berlin: *Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (Berlin: *Symphony of a Great City*; 1927) by Walter Ruttmann (1887-1941). Instead, its functions, purposes, and conditions are dominated by a constant and apparently anarchistic process of redefinition. The old must accommodate itself unconditionally to the new, as well as to the zeitgeist of the global economy. Urban space as a “network of movable elements”<sup>4</sup> articulates itself discontinuously in a differentiated simultaneity of heterotopias,<sup>5</sup> “non-places”,<sup>6</sup> and palimpsests<sup>7</sup> in the superimposition of multiple functions.

This instability of the urban, with its marginalization even of dwelling itself, makes every aesthetic question a political one and every act of planning social. In this way both art and theory find it easy to identify wounds, scars, and inevitabilities through the mere act of showing, especially since an abstemious urbanism is rarely in view. Just as rock bands in the late 1960s routinely appeared atop garbage dumps in their television clips, the coincidence of the undefined continually and automatically provokes a new range of political symbols to embody complex perceptions. The flickering space produces its own images; and no matter in which direction the camera points, the result is political.

The same, of course, is true of Peter Bialobrzeski’s photographs, and especially of *Lost in Transition*,<sup>8</sup> which emphatically addresses and gives visible form to this diffusion of urban space. Yet Bialobrzeski goes a decisive step further: his photographs do not content themselves with the simple appearance of transitory spaces and the incidental capture of a transitory moment – a doubling that intensifies the effect of the indeterminate and improbable. Nor are they to be read primarily as traces, as an index of reality or aids to memory.<sup>9</sup> All these factors, inherent in the medium of photography, do





play a role in the images; yet I experience Bialobrzeski's photographs rather as assertions, intensifying the improbability of the real and driving it further in the direction of decision. These images don't just talk; they say.

Documentation is of lesser concern in Bialobrzeski's photographs of the transitory. He takes his plate camera to the most unlikely places on the planet and uses it to transpose transitional spaces into grandiose visions. He photographs urban desolations as if they were the festival architecture of a modernism seeking to celebrate and represent itself. This contradiction gives rise to images characterized by precise order and compositional density, and thus to a concentrated photographic participation in the diffuse. In a kind of methodological incommensurability, the length of time required to view these pictures stands in complete opposition to the actual time we would be willing to spend in the places themselves. The latter approaches zero, for the irony of the transitory lies in its supposed meaninglessness and anarchistic lack of focus, amenable neither to lingering nor to closer observation.

In the history of art, particularly in the period from Mannerism to Romanticism, attempts have repeatedly been made to imbue transitory spaces with meaning and immortalize them in painted or drawn images. Here, too, a certain model of reality – resurrection from the ruins of antiquity – inspired the pictorial invention of the capriccio and the *veduta*, which finally crossed over into the free realm of fantasy with artists such as Giambattista Piranesi.<sup>10</sup> The fascination with ruins, in which the veneration for antiquity, the passion for the bizarre, and the *vanitas* theme all played an equally important role, gave rise to images whose artistic strategies were derived from the actual formal repertoire of ruined architecture, but at the same time could be read as allegories of history.<sup>11</sup> In German Romanticism, then, the decaying Gothic cathedral became the primary symbolic locus for an architectural model of transcendental nature.<sup>12</sup> In a parallel development, the fascination with construction sites found expression in the iconography of the Tower of Babel; this theme, however, was less fruitful, appearing only occasionally and not becoming prominent until the nineteenth century, above all with Adolph Menzel.<sup>13</sup> These motifs passed seamlessly into the early history of photography and have continued to the present. While the nineteenth-century photographic fascination with ruins was motivated primarily by archaeological concerns,<sup>14</sup> the two world wars of the twentieth century shifted the emphasis to documentation, giving rise to masterpieces of the sympathetic recording of destruction and violence.<sup>15</sup>

This extremely abbreviated summary is intended to emphasize that all of these art historical elements – the documentary character of the *veduta* and of photography, the bizarreness of the capriccio, the *vanitas* theme, and archaeological documentation – are clearly present in Bialobrzeski's photographs as well. They are the *basso continuo* that automatically sets in when we direct our gaze to the transitory, or as sociologist Georg Simmel puts it in his essay on the aesthetic experience of ruins: "The ruin creates the present form of a past life, not according to its content or remains, but according to its past-ness as such. ... In these places the tension of opposites between purpose and chance, nature and spirit, past and present is dissolved, or rather, though it still exists, they nonetheless give rise to a unity of outward appearance, of internal effect. It is as if a piece of existence first had to decay in order to become so vulnerable to all the currents and forces moving in from all directions of the present."<sup>16</sup>

Simmel's "present" measures itself against the persistence of the ruins and at the same time invokes the unity into which the contrapuntal elements of the image dissolve as they take on visible form. Yet the reality of the last fifty years has produced a present that is alien to the romantic and the historical. The present itself is ruinous. The dominance of the economic and of changing concepts of work has caused the stable givens of urban structure to mutate into "unpredetermined spaces".<sup>17</sup> Factory complexes can be turned into service or arts centers, slums into interstate junctions, harbors into container parks, train stations into shopping malls, post offices into museums – or they can be demolished altogether. No change of function, no palimpsest, no destruction is precluded by the conditions of globalization. And all of this occurs with an extreme and often thoughtless rapidity from which not even the newest architectural manifestations emerge unscathed. In this pulsating present, where urban constants are continually negotiable, insistence on the heuristic value of the past seems.

Bialobrzkeski's work runs counter to this rapidity. His photos, devoid of human beings, show us the precise condition of an urban present between ruin and redefinition, between the unpredictable and the construction site. The old still exists, but the new has already been conceived. Infrastructure is discernible, but with no visible purpose. The absence of

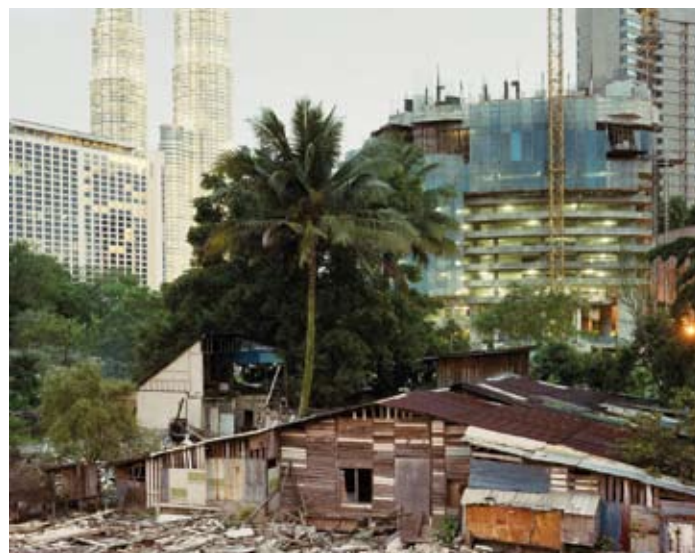
human activity or traffic makes the fallow land look like the stage for an unknown drama. Neon lights, signs, and traffic signals pervade these transitory spaces, yet we are unable to localize their meaning. What remains are large or marginal architectures as physiognomies of themselves. Marc Augé defines "non-places" as "two different but complementary realities: spaces constructed with reference to particular functions (traffic, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relationship the individual maintains to these spaces".<sup>18</sup> In the places that fascinate Bialobrzkeski, both modalities, function and relationship, are taken to their limits or done away with altogether. One can only refer to them as "non-nonplaces" – places that are planned, but that simultaneously elude control.

Bialobrzkeski's photographs provide no commentary; the scenes are marked by both an exaggerated lack of identity and a paradoxical self-referentiality. Yet these very qualities give these places of disintegration and parallel mutation – these precise moments between an undefined past and an undefined future – a clarity and momentousness that restores their dignity amid the diffusion. The photographer's circumspection, his measured pace, his care and preciseness of gaze transform these sites into conceptual spaces open to the art historical constants and experience of ruins discussed above; at the same time, however, they formulate a compositional dramaturgy in



which the transitory itself appears as a deeply contemporary aesthetic. This quality shines in Bialobrzeski's work with a clarity of vision unique to the functionless, and is likewise manifested in the self-presentation of the photographed objects, causing us to initially forget their documentary aspect.

From the prose of unstable diffusion grows a poetics of glowing objects, one that, significantly, comes to particularly detailed expression in twilight. Bialobrzeski rejects the zone system of lighting developed by Ansel Adams in 1941, which went on to become the general photographic standard. Rather, his ideal light is dusk, another realm of the transitory and in-between. It is an illumination of possibility for spaces of possibility, a light that does not impose or call attention to itself, but that nonetheless allows objects to glow in their own significance. Above all, however, the twilight restores the power of self-assertion to artificial lighting and an inner reality to objects. Dusk defines through its indecisiveness. Painters from Adam Elsheimer to Jan Vermeer to René Magritte knew this when they strove to emphasize light as a source in itself rather than, as was usual,



letting it glisten unlocalized throughout the picture.<sup>19</sup> In this way the apparition becomes concrete, earthly, and human. In the daylight, things are illuminated and robbed of their own radiant power; in the dark of night, they are disembodied as indistinct shadows contrasting with the more obvious demonstrations of light. Dusk, however, forms the backdrop for an exaggerated clarity, in which delicate surface articulations and the inherent power of specific.

In the light of dusk, the transitory can appear all the more luminous; it can extract itself from the question of location and become compelling for the photographer. In this special atmosphere, which Peter Bialobrzeski both seeks and intensifies, the self-sufficiency of diffuse urban spaces is realized as a specific statement. The transitory is articulated in the unrestrained reality of dusk. In these noiseless, concentrated photographs, we are lost in transitional spaces, transitional times, transitional light; we immerse ourselves in their atmospheric density, delicate precision, shining presence, absolute now-ness – and know that there will be a future.

**Text and photos from the book:**  
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**All works are c-prints, 123 x 150 cm**

1) For a helpful compilation of relevant texts from René Descartes to Paul Virilio, see Jörg Dünne and Stephan Günzel, eds., *Raumtheorie. Grundlagentexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main, 2006).  
2) See especially the work of American science fiction writer Philip K. Dick (1928-1982) and the films based on his novels, *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), *Minority Report* (Steven Spielberg, 2002), and *A Scanner Darkly* (Richard Linklater, 2006).  
3) Marc Mer et al., *Translokation. Der ver-rückte Ort. Kunst zwischen Architektur* (Vienna, 1994).  
4) Michel de Certeau, *Kunst des Handelns* (Berlin, 1988), p. 218.  
5) Michel Foucault, "Von anderen Räumen", in *Dits et Ecrits. Schriften in vier Bänden*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), pp. 931-42.  
6) Marc Augé, *Orte und Nicht-Orte. Vorüberlegungen zu einer Ethnologie der Einsamkeit* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994).  
7) The rhetorical concept of the palimpsest is particularly current in literary and cultural studies; for a more precise definition, see for example Gérard Genette, *Palimpseste. Die Literatur auf zweiter Stufe* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993).  
8) The title makes obvious allusion to the film *Lost in Translation* (2003) by Sofia Coppola, which explores typical experiences of fundamentally untranslatable strangeness as two Americans in Tokyo (Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson) come together in a hotel for a certain period of time.  
9) Philippe Dubois, *Der fotografische Akt. Versuch über ein theoretisches Dispositiv* (Amsterdam and Dresden, 1998).  
10) See for example Ekkehard Mai, ed., *Das Capriccio als Kunstprinzip. Zur Vorgeschichte der Moderne von Arcimboldo und Callot bis Tiepolo und Goya*, exh. cat. Wallraf-Richartz-Museum (Cologne, 1996); Peter Dreyer, ed., *Vedute, architektonisches Capriccio und Landschaft in der venezianischen Graphik des 18. Jahrhunderts*, exh. cat. Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin, 1985); Norbert Miller, *Archäologie des Traums. Versuch über*

*Giovanni Battista Piranesi* (Munich and Vienna, 1978); Annelie Lütgens, *Giovanni Battista Piranesi. Bilder von Orten und Räumen*, exh. cat. Hamburger Kunsthalle (Hamburg, 1994).  
11) Jeannot Simmen, *Ruinen-Faszination in der Graphik vom 16. Jahrhundert bis in die Gegenwart* (Dortmund, 1980); Michel Makarius, *Ruinen. Die gegenwärtige Vergangenheit* (Paris, 2004).  
12) Makarius 2004 (see note 11), pp. 133-140.  
13) Michael Glasmeier, "Verteidigung der Baustelle. Zur Situation", in *Üben. Essays zur Kunst* (Cologne, 2000), pp. 88-100.  
14) See for example Carl Aigner et al., eds., *Tomorrow For Ever. Architektur, Zeit, Photographie*, exh. cat. Museum Küppersmühle Sammlung Grothe (Duisburg, 1999).  
15) See for example Gerhard Paul, *Bilder des Krieges. Krieg der Bilder. Die Visualisierung des modernen Krieges* (Paderborn, 2004).  
16) Georg Simmel, "Die Ruine", in *Philosophische Kultur. Über das Abenteuer, die Geschlechter und die Krise der Moderne* (Berlin, 1983), pp. 111-112.  
17) Ulrich Schwarz, "Entgrenzung der Architektur. Überlegungen zur Moderne", in *Haus der Architektur Graz*, ed., *100% Stadt. Der Abschied vom Nicht-Städtischen* (Graz, 2003), p. 86.  
18) Augé 1994 (see note 6), p. 110.  
19) On Adam Elsheimer, see Reinhold Baumstark, ed., *Von neuen Sternen. Adam Elsheimers Flucht nach Ägypten* (Munich and Cologne, 2005). On Jan Vermeer, see for example Daniel Arasse, *Vermeers Ambition* (Dresden, 1996). On René Magritte's impressive painting *L'Empire des lumières* (1954) and its variations, see René Magritte, *Die Kunst der Konversation*, exh. cat. Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Düsseldorf, 1996), pp. 130-134.

## PREVIEW

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- ARCO, Madrid, Spain, February 11-16, 2009

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