

## On the Edge

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The marshes of Wondelgem are located in the north of Ghent on a terrain approximately 100 hectares in size. Contrary to their name, however, the marshlands disappeared a long time ago, having given way to garages, small businesses, warehouses and parking lots found there today. The area is enclosed by an extensive suburban residential zone in the west, the municipality of Wondelgem to the north, the oldest docks of the port of Ghent to the east, and the canal and ring road respectively that lead to the centre of Ghent in the south. In addition, a large cemetery and a psychiatric clinic are situated in the vicinity. In the nineteenth century, a booming textile industry helped shape the area of the docklands. In 2004, the architectural firm of Rem Koolhaas, OMA, presented a master plan to gentrify part of the docklands area in the attempt to revive the post-industrial infrastructure and link it with the historical city centre, countering the detrimental tendency – a tendency so typical in Flanders as well – to push urban growth and expansion to the outskirts of the city while town centres become deserted. However, the marshes of Wondelgem lie to the west of Koolhaas's construction plans and are not part of them.

In the midst of the terrain, there is a small area of fallow land roughly shaped like a triangle which was recently designated as a commercial zone, thus integrating it into the surrounding area. The shrubby site is dissected by railroad tracks, sewers and foot trails. Since clearing the remains of a Roma camp set up in abandoned garden plots across the terrain, furrows of excavation work mark the swampy grounds. Here and there, we find the relics of burnt-down huts, charred building materials and rubbish covering the fresh turf like scabs of a sore. A tram depot, large parking lots and a forensic psychiatric institute are to be built here. In the face of this rather barren state of affairs, it is difficult to assign the terrain with a specific kind of identity – instead, we may assume that it was this very meaninglessness, remoteness and neglect which caught Stephanie Kiwitt's eye, triggering her interest in the area.

For one and a half years, the photographer takes up work here. She observes the terrain, encircles it and walks across it. Time and again, she returns to the same motifs, literally taking countless photographs at every turn. During this time, the area is left to its own devices; slowly but surely, the contours of former paths and borders begin to overgrow and merge. Fruit trees and ornamental shrubs slowly grow wild, the grass grows high and the burnt-down huts fall into decay. With each passing season, the photographer's eye changes: as soon as the leaves fall and the brushwood thins in autumn, she extends her perspective into the horizon and the surrounding hinterland, while in spring the camera is kept close to the ground, focusing on the transformation and budding growth in the swampy marshlands.

Two terms immediately come to mind when considering this artistic work: that of the documentary and that of the archive. Both are readily available, yet neither seems entirely appropriate. Indeed, at first glance, Stephanie Kiwitt's organisation of her image material demonstrates a painstaking sense of archival accurateness: numbered and reproduced in chronological succession, she tends to arrange her photo series as groups of nine images per page. This presentation makes it seem like we are looking at contact sheets – and are thus viewing the entire pool of material with no omissions whatsoever. But select images are also

shown across entire individual sheets, a striking and accurate way of reliving the eye of Kiwitt's camera with each turn of the leaf. Altogether, the series of images form a comprehensive catalogue of various visual events which – removed from their surroundings like objets trouvés – are investigated and photographed. The status of the individual photograph as a document belonging in an archive of images appears at least formally intact. However, should we really speak of an archive in the context of this collection of digital images?

The term of the documentary is likewise questionable. Stephanie Kiwitt's artistic approach seems akin to the documentary: her intention is to photograph the structural change of a clearly defined piece of land over a clearly defined period of time. During the past years, this piece of land has been used in various different ways, all of which have left their traces. Now the area is to be redefined. Extensive urban planning projects and historic events provide an arena in which the photographer can stage her critical statement and place her artistic project into a greater context; historic events include the large-scale redevelopment of the old docklands as well as city celebrations commemorating the ninetieth anniversary of the death of the Ghent photographer Edmond Sacré with a large-scale exhibition in 2011–2012. Indeed, an area such as the marshes of Wondelgem could be exemplary for a kind of urban change and the ways in which city planners deal with similar blind spots; and the purpose of Kiwitt's photographic explorations might serve the purpose of creating an awareness for all that which is discarded and rejected and has temporarily found a place in such fringe areas. So much in theory – but are things truly documented here?

Examining the work closely, three different lines of sight characterise Stephanie Kiwitt's photographic footage: most frequent is the line of sight that is level to the ground, creating flat and quasi-abstract images; then there is a central line of sight establishing images around very little dimensionality; scarcer still is the straight line of sight that stretches out to the horizon or sharply upwards, opening the composition vertically. The series of images show how the photographer shifts her perspective ever so slightly, how she enlarges and extends it, or how she encroaches upon her photographic motif. However, the countless images that are thus produced neither provide an overview of the entire terrain, nor do connections between the different areas (photographed separately) become clearly apparent. We rather get the paradoxical impression that there are countless other images in every picture's blind corner, which would be just as vital for us in order to gain an overall impression of the terrain – but which were left out for unknown reasons. That which is depicted in this way does not only constantly alternate between order and chaos, but the series of images seem to suggest that, if at all, then this is about an archive that is working against itself. The temporary cohesion between the 'quality' of various different materials collapses and dissolves from one image to the next; during the brutal period of decay and half-life, dissimilar substances melt into one: the fluid and the solid, the organic and the inorganic, the wet and the dry, the hot and the cold, the living and the dead. However, the more the eye attempts to grasp these fragments, the more the chaos makes it impossible to create an overall picture – the terrain remains impenetrable. Now at the very latest, it becomes clear that the photographer's mission is neither documentary, nor archival. Instead, Kiwitt seems to be portraying the precarious condition of a terrain vague in the form of a post-industrial, apocalyptic idyll, an arena staging a wide range of short-lived processes of growth and decay. The project abruptly stops at the very moment when the clearance of the terrain and the building works begin.

Kiwitt's work does not seek to document the reclamation of a wasteland as little as it intends to pick up the traces of those who inhabited the terrain, narrating 'their story' so to speak from the pitiful remains of their existence. On the contrary, precisely when the images depict personal belongings or clothing, it is their exclusive and unsentimental focus on matter and

materials in the process of decay which is accentuated. The democratic treatment of all matter creates an element of shock which is utterly provocative: it makes no difference whether a crutch or a branch go under in a pool of mud, if a beverage container or a photo album rot. The archival search for the 'who, what, where, when, why?' no longer provides sufficient clues, because this terrain has never been the site of a noteworthy chapter in history – and, in any case, life, when marginalised, cannot be documented retrospectively. What we see are nothing but an array of disparate remnants testifying to lives lived under the poorest of conditions: children's toys, splinters, shards, clothing, packaging waste, mattresses, timber walls and beams, plastic tarpaulins, scrap metal, a car wreck, a shoe, laminated wood, litter, secretion, debris and destruction, corrosion and decay. Over time, this alternative kind of archive will itself become overgrown and gradually be absorbed by the inners of the earth – illegible in the thick layers of oil-infested slurry, it will sink, compress and decompose. Then, over the course of another year, the scarred surface will be flattened, levelled and sealed with asphalt.

Image after image, we witness this breathless transformation, the stages of overgrowth, decay and decomposition that all material goes through. The photographer's fascination for an aesthetic of ruin becomes clear: the greater the decay and chaos, the more beautiful the images become. Inevitably, Peter Greenaway's film *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985) comes to mind, in which the twin zoologists, obsessed by morbidity, study the deterioration and decay of various different life forms using a camera (and not on film – even when a video camera is used, they create still shots!). The act of capturing decay as a compressed sequence of shots becomes an authentic photographic moment.

Ultimately, it must be said that the condition of the precarious, central to Stephanie Kiwitt's work, evades the terms of the documentary as well as that of the archive. If we read her work along these lines, then all that remains as a tangible certainty is its starting point: the clearly outlined geographic terrain and the digital markers which come with every image. However, the immense body of material which is excluded in every archival storage borders upon the documentary – from the other side.

Translated from German by Dr Ariane Kossack