



other spaces

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Hans Van Der Meer: Empty realm? by **Angus Cameron** (University of Leicester)

Drunen. The man sits, arms folded, gazing past us through dark glasses, flat cap pulled down tight on his head. His pose might be defiance, it might be bored resignation, it might be hostility. Or it might be all three. Whatever it is, it is fiercely undirected. His chair is one of several set into the paving, all facing away from each other in an artfully pointless 'designed' scatter. Their commonality lies only in their brute functionality (stainless-steel, bolted-down, vandal-proof), and their location: a weed-strewn pedestrianized 'zone' also host to a bin, a few trees and one of those ubiquitously bland, immediately invisible municipal sculptures.

Hans van der Meer's contemporary Dutch townscapes capture a peculiar tension at the heart of suburban sub-modernity. The rational, structured, convenience that was supposed to free us all from drudgery has produced soulless spaces at the heart of our civic culture. These are the domains of a quiet, ordered, subsistence capitalism – low cost supermarkets, car-parks, recycling bins. Box-like retail units, vernacular housing and pastiche traditionalism smudged smooth-edged, into a single, illegible 'public private' space. It is all supposed to be drawn together by standardised street-furniture, 'designer' lighting, and soft flows of undulating block-paving: landscapes at once instantly recognisable and utterly forgettable.

The man in the chair in Drunen brings to mind an observation by Henri Lefebvre, written for some Le Corbusier-inspired development in southern France in the early 1960s:

Here, in the new town, boredom is pregnant with desires, frustrated frenzies, unrealized possibilities. A magnificent life is waiting just around the corner, and far, far away... This is the realm of freedom. It is an empty realm. Here man's magnificent power over nature has left him alone with himself, powerless.

van der Meer's images betray a similar ambiguity – or at least inspire it in the viewer. Lefebvre the big-state socialist caught himself looking askance at the empty realm of high modernity and finding in it, 'a single, monolithic platitude' (124) rather than

emancipation. How much more unsettled would he be by these later articulations of 'consumer modernism'? If Lefebvre's new town could (just) retain a dream of the 'magnificent life', van der Meer's drab suburbanism has no such ambitions. High modernity's tower-blocks, concrete and walkways at least had a go at spectacularising the ordinary – albeit failing catastrophically in most places. van der Meer's off the shelf spaces don't bother with any of that. No brutalism here, no promise, no threat, not much past, not much future. Natural materials, softened forms, trees, safe, dull, middling. The muted greys of the sub-suburban palette are only broken into by the acid tones of supermarket logos – reinforcing, rather than disrupting the pervasive drab. This is not even the conspicuous consumption of the flashy city street, but the mundane, ordinary consumption of the good municipal citizen.

But among all the blandness, van der Meer captures something else, something vestigial but peculiarly vibrant. At first sight many of the images look as though they could be pretty much anywhere. There can be few towns anywhere in Europe that don't have a red-brick and concrete corner round the back where the fire exits open out on to the car-park. But van der Meer insists that his images are 'unmistakably Dutch': at first sight a curious assertion from someone who also labels this group of images as 'Off the Shelf'. But the Dutchness is definitely there.

It is there in part, of course, because in many cases these mass-produced townscapes are overlaid onto something older and more distinctive. A palimpsest of Dutch culture pokes through the stultifying uniformity in the form of the occasional church tower (Meppel), the familiar proportions of a market square (Goes), a roofline (Leerdam) and lots of bicycles. Not much Dutchness, to be sure, but enough to suggest that the de-aestheticized globalism that dominates the scene has its limits – the local has not been completely obscured, it will assert itself somewhere. This is, perhaps, that most differentiates van der Meer's fragmentary suburbanism from Lefebvre's new town – there remains an evolved and organic quality to the spaces that fully designed modernism specifically structured out: an absence from which it suffered greatly.

The contingent specificity of these 'off the shelf' places also derives from the ways van der Meer handles the images themselves. His slightly elevated viewpoint lends the images an artificial quality that makes comparisons with earlier Dutch art unavoidable. His town-squares have an exaggerated perspective reminiscent of de Vries' (1604) imaginary townscapes (Hoofddorp). The face-on view of shop-fronts (Schagen, Boskoop) or a café (Oldenzaal) is immediately (if distantly) reminiscent of Vermeer's famous 'Little Street in Delft' (1657). The town squares bring the Breughels or Hendrik Avercamp to mind. If these images can clearly be seen to sit in this tradition, however, they do so not entirely comfortably. Their predecessors also depicted the Dutch urban bourgeoisie in its environment, but theirs was a class and a culture in the ascendant. van der Meer's Dutchness might be unmistakable, but it takes the form of a quieted,

stagnating petty bourgeoisie, any dreams of the magnificent life far behind it. van der Meer's careful placing of people, alone or in pairs – mums with prams (Nieuw Vennup), a young girl crossing a square (Mijdrecht), a man paying for his parking (Barneveld), our defiant-looking man in the cap – simultaneously populates and emphasises the emptiness of these urban spaces. Whereas Breughel or Avercamp crowded their (then) new towns with exaggerated bustle, van der Meer's are all the emptier for their sparse, fleetingly connected citizens.

Lefebvre contrasted the harshness of the ultramodern 'technological object' of the new town with the organic form of the medieval village. He compared the latter to a crustacean – the fragile, ridged shell an architectural analogue of the moving, living creature within. But the comparison was made not to suggest a Luddite adherence to the older form, more to question to the possibility of either old or new to 'provide a new humanism' (118). Lefebvre found himself stuck - physically, culturally, politically - between old and new and could see emancipation in neither.

Half a century on, van der Meer's suburban 'scapes do not offer a tidy solution to this dilemma; or at least not one that was planned. These are places that were never part of any grand modernist vision, no 'machines for living' here, but ordinary places that caught the scraps of various new urbanisms thrown up as the juggernaut passed. While van der Meer's earlier project 'Hinterland' examined the strange conjunctions that appear at the edges of places, 'Off the Shelf' does something very similar at the physical centres of our collective lives. Ultimately the strange-looking hybrid realms these conjunctions produce are not empty, but nor is it immediately clear what they contain. It is only when look more closely, through van der Meer's lens, that we realise that we are looking at ourselves.

References:

de Vries, J, 1968 [1604], *Perspective*, New York, Dover.

Lefebvre, H, 2012 [1962] *Introduction to Modernity*, London, Verso.



