

Alarmingly beautiful and ominous bunker interiors

by Sandra Smets

The Eindhoven artist Charles van Otterdijk is fond of taking long walks in the vast forests of Germany, along the Polish border. A few years ago, while seeking tranquil surroundings, he came across an abandoned bunker—not one from the war years, but a more recent type. Squeezing his way through the fence, he went inside and took photographs that are now on view at Stroom: bare, sterile interior spaces containing some mysterious pieces of furniture and equipment. The makings of a nightmare. What is this? Perhaps one of those rendition centers where the CIA tortures terror suspects on foreign soil?

Because Van Otterdijk has always worked three-dimensionally, he decided to produce reconstructions of what he saw there: a kind of transmitting tower, sirens, furniture. They have the look of props from a war thriller. At Stroom he has installed them in rooms that are painted dark grey and, in order to make them resemble those bunkers, made more narrow as well. We hear an oppressive soundtrack of electronic noise, an audio file that he found on a USB stick there. Code? Espionage? On the eve of the opening, he says that friends in Germany advised him to leave the country; he was overcome by a certain paranoia. And rightly so, you think while walking through his ominous—and at the same time, aesthetic—exhibition. What do we, ordinary citizens, actually know?

Van Otterdijk's intriguing show is the start of *See You in The Hague*, Stroom's long-term program that deals with The Hague's ambition to become the international capital for peace. This is an image that the city aims to project. Most residents of The Hague have a different view of their town. Stroom wishes to contribute to discussions on the ambitions of cities. Two smaller exhibitions, for instance, are being held here. One is about the hundredth anniversary of the Peace Palace, its representation in images: political cartoons, the Madurodam version of it. Accompanying this is an exhibition about more anthroposophic plans, from 1905, to make The Hague a 'World Capital of Internationalism'. Together these presentations raise questions as to how to give shape to a capital for peace: should the stakes be placed on justice, prestige, intellect? That's the gist of *See You in The Hague* which, though it sounds like a marketing slogan, is the menacing cry that Palestinians call out to Israeli border troops. Speaking of a projected image... Van Otterdijk connects with this program as a kind of artistic Edward Snowden. *A kind of*—since artists, after all, are not whistle-blowers. They work with the imagination. When I speak with Van Otterdijk, he's astounded when I tell him I that I find his photographs less than credible—hasn't he staged them? I console him by saying that it's good that his work gives rise to doubt.

On the floor below at Stroom he has installed media photographs of crisis centers and exposed rendition centers. Along side these, 'his' bunker interiors seem to have an aesthetic appearance, but that could be the artist's photographic talent. Furthermore, why can't torture chambers be well designed? Architects and designers would be apt to do their best here too. The gas chambers were, in fact, designed by Bauhaus architects. This is what makes the exhibition so interesting: by aestheticizing the threat, he makes it both recognizable and improbable.

From: NRC Handelsblad, 11.09.2013

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