

## **Spectacular City**

Focusing on the City

Spectacular Photographs to Reveal Beauty and Strangeness of our Urban Reality

The exhibition *Spectacular City - Photographing the Future* on display in the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI) in Rotterdam from Saturday, September 23 2006 to Sunday, January 7 2007

This fall, the NAI will explore the urban realm from the perspective of the best contemporary photography. Spectacular photographs, ranging from one to nine meters wide, will portray the beauty and potential of urban landscapes, iconic buildings and deserted streets. It is the first international survey exhibition of this work. Through these photographs, we will see how the images of our cities are changing. This photography tells us about that process and in so doing makes a specific contribution to the aesthetics of our time. These photographers do not just record their subject matter but manipulate, construct or reconstruct it. In so doing they give us a glimpse of things that may well have escaped our gaze, but are latently present in our rapidly changing world. Each of these photographers is engaged in his or her own way in photographing the future.

### Photographers

For *Spectacular City*, the NAI has gathered the best work by twenty-nine prominent photographers and artists from home and abroad. They include Olivo Barbieri, Oliver Boberg, Balthasar Burkhard, Vincenzo Castella, Edgar Cleijne, Stéphane Couturier, Thomas Demand, Andreas Gefeller, Geert Goiris, Andreas Gursky, Naoya Hatakeyama, Todd Hido, Dan Holdsworth, Francesco Jodice, Aglaia Konrad, Luisa Lambri, Ine Lamers, Sze Tsung Leong, Armin Linke, Taiji Matsue, Karin Apollonia Müller, Bas Princen, Thomas Ruff, Frank van der Salm, Heidi Specker, Jules Spinatsch, Thomas Struth, Michael Wesely and Edwin Zwakman.

These photographers use the urban landscape as a palette from which they derive images. In these works, photographers do not necessarily want to produce documentary evidence. Rather, they are engaged in creating and composing imagery and thus produce interpretations. The products show us that the photographer today no longer produces images but visions in which we recognize the authentic reflection of things and that teach us how to look and interpret. Just like architects, photographers compose imagery we can inhabit. They blur some aspects of that environment, compose visual paradoxes digitally or construct a paper reality in order to reveal the sense of the image. These visions, which tend to be detached and apolitical, are the most effective instrument we have for discovering the meaning of our urban environment.

### The Exhibition

The photographic works to be presented in Gallery 1 are large in format, ranging from one to nine meters wide. They represent the best examples of urban photography from the last ten years. The exhibition will highlight the varying personal approaches and (in some cases literal) perspectives that one may have on or in the city. These photos are generally emptied of all human presence; at most, people make chance appearances in them or form an indistinct mass. Their faces are never distinctly visible. These photographers are not interested in the swarming inhabitants of cities, but in the marks they leave on the context as unequivocal traces of their obsessions and habits. While all these artists use the metropolis to compose images, we can recognize three distinct approaches: some of them are interested in the iconic representation of the essence of the city, others in research into visual aspects through an analysis of the urban fabric, while yet others work on perceptions of the image of the city itself.

In the photographs of Stéphane Couturier the surface becomes the main subject. The façades of buildings become spectacular abstract compositions, but if we examine them more closely we see that they provide a close-up view of the life taking place behind the windows. Thus the image becomes charged with complex micro-narratives. The work of Thomas Struth, by contrast, depicts the city emptied of any human presence, but at the same time reveals its emblematic qualities and brings out its concealed features. In an extraordinary recent series on Lima, each image appears as a fragment that is capable of embodying the essence of its structure and atmosphere. Of quite a different nature, however, are the works of artists who engage in a reflection on the photographic medium. In the works of Edwin Zwakman the city, reconstructed as a cardboard model in his studio, becomes a staged reality which questions our perception of reality. The reference to the image actually perceived becomes confused with the overwhelming question of whether these images of the world really match our expectations.

#### Open air projection

In conjunction with this exhibition, the NAI is presenting a ten meter-wide open air projection on its building. A selection of the best recent videos on the urban realm will be displayed here while *Spectacular City* is on display.

#### Symposium

On September 24 from 14:00 to 19:00 hrs. the symposium *Spectacular City - Representing the Metropolis in Contemporary Photography* will be held in the Auditorium at the NAI. It will include contributions from leading photographers such as Thomas Struth, Bas Princen, Francesco Jodice, Stéphane Couturier, Jules Spinatsch and Geert Goiris and will be enriched by the critical perspectives on the topic by art critics Steven Jacobs and Jean-François Chevrier. Moderator: Bart Lootsma (architecture critic)

#### Educational program for secondary school pupils

Pupils can take part in a guided tour of the *Spectacular City* exhibition and can explore the NAI Building in search of spectacular places and views. After this trip, they will be given a photography assignment. They will have to photograph something in the designed environment outside the NAI, thus giving their fellow pupils glimpses of an exciting city.

#### Publication

A book exploring several aspects of contemporary urban photography in essays by Aaron Betsky, Jean-François Chevrier, Steven Jacobs and Emiliano Gandolfi (ed.) will accompany the exhibition. The book contains works by all artists in the exhibition and is published by NAI Publishers 

#### Press Preview

We hope you will join us at the press preview on Friday, September 22 at 11:00 a.m. Aaron Betsky (director NAI), Emiliano Gandolfi (curator of the exhibition) and the photographers Frank van der Salm, Bas Princen, Ine Lamers and Dan Holdsworth will be present at this press preview. Please let us know in advance by e-mail ([press@nai.nl](mailto:press@nai.nl)) if you wish to attend the event, by Wednesday September 20 at the latest.