

Olaf Martens

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in

St. Petersburg

Bonn, August 2003. Olaf Martens keeps returning to St Petersburg. The magnificent metropolis on the Neva exerts an irresistible pull on him. It isn't just the vast supply of superlative motifs that fascinates him – camera fodder for an insatiably curious lensman. On the contrary, he senses the invisible sympathetic vibrations between the city and his chosen medium, photography, the numerous correspondences and parallels, at times the accord between them, that incessant oscillation between being and seeming symptomatic of both the medium and the city, a symbiosis of exuberant lust for life, exaggerated artificiality and white-washed decay.

What may be even stronger is the affinity between his aesthetic stance and the spirit of the old capital of the Russian tsars. Martens is a photographer, albeit one who does anything but capture on film what chance might happen to throw in his path. He prefers to intervene in what is going on. His photographic images are the result of deliberate manipulation of reality and only in this

sense are they inevitably documentary. His field is situated at the far end of a territory which begins (or ends) with documentary photography: it is the domain of fashion photography and what is known as lifestyle photography. Nevertheless, photography of this kind documents the visible consequences of staging models and set pieces. It makes transparent the 'as-if' quality of what has been staged, without ineluctably creating the impression that a fragment of visual reality has been mimetically captured on film, free, as it were, of external influences. The aim is to realize a picture rather than to reproduce. The photographer often exaggerates artificial features, doing so very pointedly, playing with the identity of the models and set pieces he stages, thus opening up all possible avenues for the imagination of anyone viewing his photographic images. Just as the spirit of this city in the very north of Russia between the Gulf of Finland and Lake Ladoga is revealed in what is occasionally flamboyant architecture as the 'irreconcilable product of imagination and art' (Felix Philipp Ingold).

'St Petersburg as an architectural unity reveals the quality of exaggeration in each and every style available. European architects worked here remote from the realities in which these styles were historically rooted in their various periods. And since these styles already possessed a time and place of their own, they developed in St Petersburg an intensification and clarification which has made the architectural greatness of the northern capital into a sort of noble copy, transfiguring it into a parody, especially against the backdrop of the marshy landscape into which Empire and Baroque from western Europe were transplanted [by dint of the legendary act of its being founded by Tsar Peter the Great – K. H.]. St Petersburg marvellously exemplifies Postmodern eclecticism.' [1] This enlightening characterisation delivered by the Russian writer Arkadiy Bartov on the occasion of his native city's tricentenary may – if one substitutes photography for architecture – also cast a diagnostic light on the structure and configuration of Olaf Martens' photo-graphic work. Photography is of itself a phenomenon revealing all marks of hybridity. A product of physics and chemistry: the hardware being a box with a mechanism whose optical laws have been known since antiquity; the software (still) technologically eye-to-eye with (Post)modernism; in history a model for the science of seeing rather than an aid to art, its images a remarkable cross between modern technology and artistic tradition. Nevertheless photography appears as a medium with a compelling inner logic, analogous to the traditional visual techniques. Martens, however, undermines what is only seemingly a homogeneous façade in photography, exploding it with a combination of contradictory details so that its discrepancies are revealed, only to recombine it in a markedly hybrid mixture. What is evoked in his photographic images and seemingly emanates from them as a unity is, on the structural plane, the visual echo of the fundamentally hybrid make-up of photography. Consequently, the photographer's shots possess a double foundation: on the surface of these images they reflect the brainstorming inspiring his handling of the art of staging, including the premises on which the medium itself is based.

Practical considerations may underlay Olaf Marten's choice of the superlative façades of St Petersburg's palaces and patrician villas as the setting for his sophisticated productions. Nonetheless, this choice also reflects his aesthetic concept. Behind these façades lurk yet more façades and behind them still more, like one of those Russian dolls which conceal a nest of other dolls. The

many doors and wallpaper-covered doors in his photographs afford a fleeting glimpse into hidden chambers and passages with new optical illusions, a cabinet of mirrors with its simulacra which captivates perception while it may be merely the offspring of a teeming imagination. Sometimes painted pictures are revealed behind windows instead of views of the outside world – or is that also trompe-l'œil? Has a fragment of reality turned itself into a copy of itself, into a Potemkin Village? A triumph of the artificial world over the reality of hard-edged facts and bitter experience? Once again Bartov: 'Potemkin Villages are not just political dishonesty in Russia but rather a metaphysical exposure of the deceptiveness projected by all culture. What is at stake is an obviousness which makes no attempt at concealing the lie it is.' [2] When, in a magnificent photograph by Olaf Martens five attractive young women wearing chic underwear and stylish stockings – in a second version they are nude – attack a sumptuous buffet laden with exotic fruit and red wine, they are posing for the camera, no matter how carefully their gestures have been differentiated and no matter how natural they may look. The last row, positioned diagonally in the picture, is looking directly at the viewer, thus breaking the illusion. Viewers feel as if they have been caught unawares in the act of lustful peeping. Two laughing female dwarfs in ballet costume, fatter than the immaculately slender models, watch the simulated feeding frenzy and one of them claps her approval of the wanton performance. Natasha, Svetlana, Katya, Ulyana and Vika are indulging their lust in a room in the St Petersburg 'House of Friendship'. The name recalls the totalitarian Soviet regime, when St Petersburg was called Leningrad. The ostentatious setting of the happening with its gold-laden mirrors shamming windows indicates that an earlier building has provided the stage. Stage? In the face of these photographic images the term evokes fallacious associations. The photographic space is shallow; the wide-angle lens used does increase the depth of focus yet it transforms the lateral extension of space into surface width. The pull into the surface reinforces the formal organisation. Despite the diagonal positioning of the groaning table, the pictorial elements are on the whole arranged paratactically. The models, both the young women and the dancers from '240-Tons-Ballet', are grouped in stringent contradiction to the 'one-point perspective' (Jonathan Crary) of the photographic pictorial construction to form a semicircular parade. Not a stage in the classic sense, nor a peep-show but rather a parade ground for variety. The show takes place right behind the footlights. Viewers' eyes flick back and forth, with the photograph refusing them any resting place or orientation point. Except for the centre of the left-hand half of the picture, where the eye is caught by the receptive glance of the model which hurls back the viewer's.

The divergence of vanishing point on the constructive plane and viewpoint on the metaphorical, the discrepancy between space and surface are governed by different dichotomies: the slender models and the generously proportioned dancers, the 'natural' artificiality of the interior decoration and the artificial 'naturalness' of the beautiful women, the bareness of the wooden window frame on the lower edge of the picture plane and the bombastic showiness of the mirror frames shimmering with gold, the performance and seduction of the viewer and the obviously narcissistic character of the show as represented as well as the past presence of the photographic representation and what might be called the fragmentary historicity of the St Petersburg ambience. Finally, the world of images behind the windows of the deceptive window that is the photograph breaks disturbingly into the highly artificial performance. This external visual world consists presumably in parts of a

tubular steel scaffold on which work is being done. A workman's trouser leg is visible, a window bar conceals the base on which it stands – and to top all this off, the whole thing looks as if it had been created by a master of trompe-l'œil painting.

Olaf Martens insouciantly quotes well-known and lesser known pictures he appreciates from art history. Although peopled with female personnel and fewer characters than his art historical models, his photograph evokes the host of Last Suppers in painting, led by Leonardo's, even though it is configured with dominant picture-building diagonals more reminiscent of Tintoretto. The sumptuous harvest of exotic fruits amassed here recalls the teeming still lives of the Dutch 17th century, symbols of delight in earthly pleasures conveying a subliminal warning in the transience to which items of food are subject, thus issuing constant reminders of one's own mortality. The photographer may also have strewn a few bitter drops of memento mori in his picture. The orange peels in the foreground, for instance, point to it, reinforced by some sexually suggestive elements. The models, on the other hand, limit themselves to devouring titbits, more precisely, pretending to do so for the photograph.

What the photographer has fitted together in his picture is just as much of a hotchpotch as the architectural panorama afforded by the city founded by Tsar Peter the Great, described as long ago as 1902 by the painter and art historian Alexander Benois as 'grand' and 'beautiful'. He apostrophises it as 'picturesque': 'The style of the houses, churches and palaces, the plan – all that was entirely original. All the elements were naturally derivative: the columns, decorative pediments, pilasters and later the Neo-Classical bas-reliefs, attics and vases were borrowed from France, Italy and Germany. Nevertheless all this was *svvo* originally configured that ultimately something magnificent and entirely unique emerged.' [3] These sentences, in comparable distillation, also hold for Olaf Martens' photographs. Their hallmark is heterogeneity, the montage their 'symbolic form' (Erwin Panofsky) and the methodological principle informing them. In so far his pictures are (Post)modern in the extreme. No wonder that the photographer has also eclectically blended his visual genres, for instance the social portrait and the fashion photograph. In many of his group pictures people are acting like models without being models. Sometimes this is not even noticed, for instance, when a high-society dame who is bored stiff has sneaked into the ranks of professional actresses during casting. Sometimes the result is a deliberate inconsistency. In one such case tailor's cutters and sempstresses are posing in clothes worn for the camera, thus moving out of the background of their usually dreary workplaces into the glare of the spotlights on stage. Sometimes it's the photographer's team. Martens suffuses the entire scene with a dream-like ambience so that viewers have to subject these pictures to intense scrutiny to notice that something isn't right in them – certainly when they are measured by the standard conventions governing fashion photography as a genre. In the early 1960s Richard Avedon dared to be similarly bold. Unlike Martens, however, in order to denounce fashion photography, whose rules he so consummately mastered, thus subverting beauty with ugliness. The German photographer has taken the opposite approach. In his picture world of St Petersburg (and not just here) everything is beautiful and picturesque in an artificial way. In any case, not every frog can turn into a prince.

Nevertheless in his pictures spheres are incessantly being interchanged, interlocking as if they were not sharply demarcated in reality. Are they really? The realm of fashion, young, original and exuberant in Russia, variety, still of an exceptional standard, a remarkable legacy of Soviet cultural engineering, the ostentatiously opulent settings for the nouveaux riches, the workaday world of the masses – and the decaying empire of the Russian navy. A fashion show in a submarine. In Olaf Martens' pictures the unthinkable becomes reality. A stringent will to create art pervades the whole, holds the disparate elements together. If Olaf Martens, who trained as an architectural draughtsman, were not inspired by this incisive wish to create art, the grotesque would be in danger of becoming risible. Yet there is no trace of anything risible here. The photographer even integrates the unforeseen in his aesthetic calculations.

As in the city's architecture, history is manifest in his photographs. The analogies are striking: 'Even their diversity attests to a unity of thinking and acting,' as Dostoyevsky (who is buried in St Petersburg) described the architectural congeries that was his city. 'Those buildings in the manner of Dutch architecture recall the era of Peter the Great. This building, in the taste of a Rastrelli, recalls the era of Catherine, that in the Greco-Roman style a somewhat later one; taken as a whole, however, they commemorate the history of European life in St Petersburg and all Russia.' [4] Martens is content with historical episodes. He enjoys using the former palace of Prince Yusupov as the setting for his frequent yet not always elaborate forays into staging. Its former owner deliberately intervened in the course of history in 1916 by murdering the monk and adventurer Rasputin, who had gained enormous influence over the imperial court and, as the Prince and his fellow conspirators saw it, was ruining Russia. Feudal Russia was, however, beyond redemption. The figure and the deed have always interested the authors of popular novels and cinema auteurs more than they have historians. Yet in their mainly fictitious accounts, scarcely touched as they are by the facts of the events, just as much history has been deposited, cultural history – just as it has been in Olaf Martens' photographic images. History, contemporary history, is concealed behind the masks and façades in these pictures, refracted on many planes and reflected but occasionally showing its face.

[1] Arkadiy Bartov: Präsentiert uns etwas vor. Nach den Jubiläumsfeiern in St. Petersburg. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2 August 2003, No. 177, p. 33. [2] Ibid. [3] Quoted in Felix Philipp Ingold: Moskau ist Don Quijote, Petersburg der Hamlet. Vom Rollen- und Ränkespiel der russischen Stadtcharaktere: Die Stadt an der Newa als literarisches Kulturmodell. In: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 22 July 2003, No. 167, p. 36. [4] Ibid.