What You See Is not What You Get

The Architectural Fiction of Filip Dujardin

[DIRK LEYMAN]

Messing around with buildings, until a completely new architectural reality emerges. The photographs of Filip Dujardin explore the twilight zone between reality and fiction, often with consequences that are both mildly comical and slightly discomfiting.

Where might they be found, these remarkable structures portrayed by Filip Dujardin? Who dreamt them up and designed them? And what is their precise function? These are questions that automatically arise on first seeing his photos of strange-looking apartment blocks, desolate villas in the middle of nowhere, exorbitant but pointless bridge constructions or apartment blocks with a corner missing. Google Earth will not help you here, and an architectural catalogue will be no use either. Dujardin creates confusion in the brain with his ingenious photographic and architectural portrayals. But hang on... Do these images not challenge gravity in a rather subtle way? Are we trapped in a progressive illusion à la M.C. Escher? Or is this locational art?

It soon dawns on the viewer that Dujardin is playing tricks and has been showing off what Photoshop and other image processors can do. This does not make his images any less intriguing, however. There is something both uncomfortable and dryly comic about them. They represent the art of the impossible. At other times they look surprisingly real, as if the building style of the former Eastern Bloc has come back to life, with those grey, desolate colossuses, apparently unceremoniously dumped where they stand, without the merest scrap of town planning. And what about that mysterious villa with its closed shutters that has suddenly appeared in the landscape? Dujardin creates castles in the air which stimulate the imagination, though only rarely is there a living being to be seen. Things become even more intriguing when we learn that the photographer began by simply photographing everyday buildings in and around Ghent. Dujardin uses them to piece together a new world, not so far removed from ours, it seems. He creates 'an ironic pleasure with his surrealist juxtaposition', writes Pedro Gadanho from the MoMa in New York in the compilation *Fictions* (Hannibal, 2014), in which Dujardin's imaginary structures and hybrid creations are brought together, supplemented with more recent work. 'His "tinkerings" open up unexpected insights into the contemporary building culture and its contexts.' In creating these images, Dujardin

is surfing on the crest of a wave of architectural photography which is also a great source of inspiration for photographers such as Jan Kempenaers and Bert Danckaert.

Virtual dabbler

The art historian, architect and photographer Filip Dujardin (b. Ghent, 1971) acquired international renown with the series *Fictions*. The work even led to him being dubbed the 'Le Corbusier of contemporary photography', primarily because the series is chock-full of nods to architectural and art history.

Dujardin certainly did not develop his projects overnight, but took plenty of time to unfold his talents. He studied art history at Ghent University, specialising in architecture, and later went on to study photography at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (KASK) in Ghent. He initially earned his spurs as a technical assistant to Magnum photographer Carl De Keyzer. From 2000 to 2006 he worked as an architectural photographer, mostly in partnership with Frederik Vercruysse, building up a more than solid reputation. In 2007 Dujardin decided to follow his own path, taking on work for a variety of private and public sector publishers. This was precisely the moment that his *Fictions* project really began to spread its wings. Or, as Gadanho puts it dryly: 'He developed an interest

in architectural structures that may have conflicted with the architectural photoreportages he was creating at the time.' The photo montage would become 'the expressive vehicle of choice for the virtual dabbler'. Dujardin's background in art history would prove extremely useful to him in this endeavour.

Remote sculptures

But first there was the series *Sheds*, which harbours the embryo of the *Fictions* series. Dujardin himself gave the following account in an interview on the *De favoriet* website, where photographers talk about their favourite photograph: 'The idea for *Fictions* really started with the *Sheds* series, which I photographed several years ago. Typical Flemish sheds standing in fields, which have never seen an architect. With these "sheds", it's the farmer who builds structures in his fields; in the "fictions", it's me sitting at my computer screen building fictitious structures.' Wandering through the Flemish countryside, Dujardin's eye was caught by ramshackle farm buildings or sheds, improvised and knocked together haphazardly, simply planted there, with no aesthetic or decorative intent. They were merely a means of providing shelter for cows, hay or animal feed. *Sheds* was a testament to Dujardin's budding fascination with the absurdities and contradictions in the landscape.

In the *Fictions* series, Dujardin bends architectural reality to his own will. Art assumes the upper hand. The urban landscape is turned on its head and a diversity of architectural atmospheres are juxtaposed in an unfathomable interplay. Starting from photographs of existing buildings, Dujardin creates highly innovative new structures. A slab of shabby Belgian dwellings or soulless flats is transformed into a striking example of modernist architecture. Very ordinary buildings – usually depicted against a filtered, grey sky – are transformed into remote sculptures. But older buildings too are stripped bare and relocated, completely rebuilt, as it were. All done with Photoshop. The absence of win-

dows also often creates a sense of alienation. 'The typical disarray of a city backstreet is reproduced with a disconcerting realism, in which only the absence of windows betrays a fictitious element', records Gadanho. On another occasion, Dujardin appears to create a building which, by contrast, contains a full complement of every possible window imaginable. An image in which everyone breaks away from the shackles of the collective residential block with its strictly defined ideology, and follows what their heart dictates. All mixed with tightly configured Mondrian-like motifs which add a touch of colour. Now and then, the images stop you in your tracks. Gentle humour remains one of the trademarks of Dujardin's photographs.

Boundary between reality and fiction

Dujardin is mad about collage and composition, and he has undoubtedly drawn on the architectural visions of the Russian constructivists or Mies van der Rohe, as Gadanho makes explicit. 'Fiction becomes a critical tool for examining architecture.' And of course there are the very obvious references to Le Corbusier's *unités d'habitation*, giving rise to a sort of 'mathematical lyricism'. Dujardin gives his fictitious buildings extensions, balconies and extra storeys. They are not so very far removed from real, existing buildings. One only has to look out of the window of a train riding through the Flemish – and, by extension, European – landscape to see residues or derivatives of Dujardin's photos.

The fact that the photos are untitled is also interesting. Dujardin leaves us to guess and puzzle for ourselves. No neat keys are provided to explain his images, though in an interview with Stefan Devoldere he does lift the veil a little: 'I focus on the intrinsic quality of the urban landscape. What is a city, and how does one city define itself compared to another? What is left if you take away everything that is typical? I create a more universal image of the city.' And, he contends: 'I play on the boundary between reality and fiction: is what you are seeing real?' Dujardin deliberately throws the viewer off balance and refines

our gaze. He himself says that he is continually reacting to the Belgian context: 'I see examples every day of that "knocked-together" residential fabric. The backs of the buildings are interesting from a formalistic point of view because there's a sort of untamed architecture going on which eschews any planning rules.' He also sheds light on his working method. Starting from actual buildings, he begins by making models using Lego blocks, before later switching to computer models. He adheres to a set format and ensures that the perspective is accurate, so as to retain the 'realistic' element. First comes the design, and only then the photos and the processing. One might suspect otherwise. 'My images sometimes have a very "high-tech" starting point but a "low-tech" outcome. I find that tension interesting.'

Universal resonance

Yet the question that keeps on popping up is whether Dujardin's buildings really are entirely imaginary and technically impossible constructions. It is a question which also intrigued Nynke Vissia. On the website *De Optimist* she presented the photos to the architect and architectural historian Cornelis van Wieren. 'I have looked at almost all the buildings, and I see little that would be impossible to build', was his response. 'Sometimes illogical, but not impossible. Just because something appears to be made from concrete, doesn't mean that it actually is. There might be a steel structure hidden beneath a (thin) concrete cladding, for example. That makes large spans possible. And as long as the facade with its differently dimensioned and distributed door and

window frames is not load-bearing, that too is something that could be built in reality.' While it may not be Dujardin's ambition, it is a fascinating idea that fiction drawn from a photographic reality could perhaps actually be implemented in practice. Dujardin balances on the cusp of possibility and impossibility. And the purified simplicity of the visual narrative finds a universal resonance. That is also evident from the number of places where his work is shown. A selection from *Fictions* was displayed for the first time in 2008 in the BOZAR Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels, during the *IMAGE/CONSTRUCTION* exhibition. He quickly found an international response, with exhibitions in South Korea and San Francisco. Recently his work was also purchased for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC and the MoMA in NYC and in San Francisco. His photographs can now even be found on postcards, in any number of magazines and publications and of course all over the web.

In the compilation published by the Flemish publishing house Hannibal and the Flanders Architecture Institute in Antwerp, we also discover the new horizons that Dujardin has been exploring in the recent period, with photographs commissioned by cities such as Guimaraes, Deauville and Middelburg. In the Portuguese city Guimaraes in 2011-2012, he approached the historical context and the castle that symbolises the birth of the nation with great irreverence: 'I created a bad restoration of the picture postcard that is Guimaraes. The message was: what you see isn't real, but a political, romantic reconstruction.' Dujardin intervenes and falsifies with secret pleasure. But he also quietly sets

about building himself, as in the Z33 House for contemporary art in the Belgian town of Hasselt, for the group exhibition *Atelier à Habiter*. And he has also turned architect again: between December 2013 and March 2014 he erected a plinth, a screen and a prefabricated wall, using 3-D installations and photomontages. Cool brick interventions in bare, empty spaces. But they heighten the emphasis, 'introduce corrections to the architecture of the building', as the accompanying text puts it. 'They sharpen the awareness of the visitor of its existing condition and make an alternative visible, whether sensible or senseless. The sections of brick wall nestle and sprawl like parasites in, on and over the folds of the building and insinuate what could be, what could come …' Dujardin derives a devilish pleasure from this: 'Pimping or upgrading wholly banal things is something I really enjoy. Put a column somewhere else, or put it next to another column, and it loses its power.' Or, as Jan De Vylder from the architects' firm architecten de vylder vinck tallieu comments in the book: 'A small definition for architecture. Perhaps that is what architecture should be seeking out; the same thing that Dujardin is seeking. Lessons in differences.'

In any event, Dujardin is now a much-in-demand photographer and imaginary builder. He was also asked to develop a new vision for the upgrading of the open-air heritage museum and Flemish tourist hotspot Bokrijk, and to capture the results in a photograph, which is even available as a poster. He opted for a typical 'Dujardin structure': 'I used the wooden skeleton technique to build a tower', he says at the museum site. 'What's interesting about the tower is that the lines of the timber skeleton define both the graphic elements and the relief of the structure. Within this tower structure you can observe an evolution in abstraction, from the bottom to the top. At the bottom, the authentic Bokrijk

buildings can be clearly seen, gradually transitioning into purified volumes and ending in an open structure, as if the tower is awaiting completion.' And he talks of the 'openness that refers to the transition that Bokrijk is currently undergoing', seamlessly binding together past and present.

Photographer? Architect? Theoretician? Art critic with images? In reality, the epithet doesn't matter much. This is in any event clever photography and installation art that you can continue looking at attentively for a long time. It is an oeuvre which subtly removes architecture from its pedestal and at the same time brings it into sharp focus. The fact that Dujardin aligns *en passant* with the Belgian surrealist tradition whilst subtly commenting on it is an added bonus. What's the betting that, after looking at the *Fictions* images, on your next road trip through Belgium you will also find yourself looking out for potential subjects in the buildings you pass? ■

www.filipdujardin.be

Translated by Julian Ross

FURTHER READING

Filip Dujardin, *Fictions* 2007-2014 (Hannibal, Veurne, Architecture in Belgium A +, 2014), texts by Jan De Vylder, Stefan Devoldere, Pedro Gadanho.