

(english)

Jelle Bouwhuis

Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani - Spelling Dystopia

Spelling Dystopia (2009) has certain features that it shares with many of Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani's photoworks and video installations of the past ten years. First of all, the main protagonist of the work is an urban or architectural space, instead of these being merely a setting to narrate events. It has that in common with a diverse range of earlier works, such as *Palast der Republik – Weissbereich* (2001), a two-channel video installation and a series of photographs featuring the then empty (and now demolished) Palace of the Republic of the former German Democratic Republic in Berlin, followed by *Radio Solaris* (2004), in which another vacant state building of the German Republic stars, and the single screen installation *The Rise* (2007), featuring a brand new and half-empty office tower in the freshly developed financial district in the South of Amsterdam.¹ An island, as in *Spelling Dystopia*, was already the topic in the series of eight panoramic photographs *L'Avventura Senza Fine* of 2000, although the rocky, uninhabited island off the Italian coast in question hardly resembles the deprived urban setting of the man-made Hashima coal-mining island near Nagasaki, Japan. The second main element in Fischer and El Sani's work is the reference to, and use of features of, films by Tarkowski, Hitchcock, Antonioni and others, usually directors who also have a special eye for landscapes and architectural or urban environments and have those play an active role in their scenarios. *L'Avventura Senza Fine* is a follow-up to the enigmatic role of the island in Antonioni's *L'Avventura*, the surrealist atmosphere and sudden appearances in the vacant communist radio broadcast building in *Radio Solaris* obviously is a direct response to the strange events in Tarkowski's *Solaris*. The same could be said of the devastating and endless climbing of stairs in *The Rise* in relation to the confusing moments and violent apotheosis on the staircase of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*.

How are these reoccurring elements explored in *Spelling Dystopia*? The dystopian of the title firstly refers to the desolate state of Hashima, as it is registered on one of the two screens of this video-installation. Long panoramic views of the island, which resembles the form of a large battleship, shot from a boat speeding around it, are alternated with a sometimes staccato montage of images of the discarded and demolished interior of the 1974-abandoned coal-miner's island, such as squares, residential areas, a school, mining structures etcetera, making clear that it once must have been a very densely populated seven acres of land. These images respond to the voice-over that recollects life at Hashima when it was still in use, as experienced by a former inhabitant, the son of a miner. The second dystopian feature is its reference to the film which story is also located on a deserted island: *Battle Royale* by Kinji Fukasaku. This science fiction blockbuster from 2000 is mainly known because of its bloody violence, its story centred around a class of 42 school children who, as a disciplinary measure, are left on an island with no other objective than to kill each other. The last kid who survives is the winner of the 'game'. *Battle Royale II: Requiem* of 2003 by the same director (and his son) is its sequel which was actually partly shot on Hashima, and so is the final stage of the 2005 computer game *killer7*. Hashima thus mainly survives in the collective memory in a spirit of extreme violence. In Fischer and El Sani's emulation of this background we see a class of school-costumed juniors from Sapporo who spell out in a disciplinary way some words and phrases, that relate to the history of the island, by their collective positions on an empty square, each position starting after a loudly yelled order by someone outside of view.

Fischer and El Sani's shift of focus in their rendering of the architectural 'blind spots' is striking. Up to *The Rise* they presented them as phlegmatic spaces, silent proofs of past ideologies awaiting a new definition, another function, gentrification or simply demolition, with no more than a camera gazing their interiors such as in *Palace of the Republic* or, as in *Radio Solaris*, hosting dreamy events and performances. In short, the architecture and whatever Fischer and El Sani made happen in there were presented as living under the aegis of liberated time, of time liberated from regimentation, either capitalist or communist². But with *The Rise* these relaxed fantasies and sense of in-between has made way for a grimmer vision of labour. There we see a bank employee incessantly climbing the stairs as a metaphor of upward career movement, which is presented as devoid of any positive connotation and utterly unrewarding.

In *Spelling Dystopia* they deliberately use the shift that the Japanese island made from the memory of individuals – people who happened to have lived there – to the collective one. From the voice-over we learn that it was a prosperous and advantaged city in the 50s and 60s, a place worthy to live in and with a certain luxury standard (the island was owned by the Mitsubishi Company). However, the images of the demolished architecture on the one projection, as well as films such as *Battle Royale* and *killer7* as referred to by the school children under command in the other projection, conceive it as a very hard place to live, a kind of Alcatraz or Blade Runner's Los Angeles – or for that matter a Japanese work camp, which it has actually been during the second world war.

Norman Klein argues that popular movies shape history and let us forget how things actually were.³ We perceive the images of Fischer and El Sani's video diptych as dystopia, but it is one that is spelled out, indeed, by filmic image and not by the history as it was experienced from first hand. Indeed, all their previous film installations use film as natural mood makers for prescribed perception. To the contrary of its documentary look, *Spelling Dystopia* not so much tells us a history of an island, but rather presents to us a history of horrification that has come in its place. In a world where capital and images are ubiquitous, on a global scale, fiction has become more real than reality itself.

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¹ A full survey of these and other works is to be found in Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani – Blind Spots (J. Bouwhuis, N. Fischer and M. el Sani, eds.), Zurich/Amsterdam/Berlin/Yamaguchi 2008.

² Inspired by Sven Lütticken, who expands on Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of Relational Aesthetics, in 'Liberating Time', *The Art of Projection* (Stan Douglas and Christopher Eamon, eds.), Ostfildern 2009, pp. 57-70; esp. p. 66-67.

³ Norman Klein, *The History of Forgetting*, New York 1997, esp. chapters 3 and 4.