Reality in the Guise of Its Own Lookalike
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Cobbled lanes with boutiques and huge potted plants, the aroma of fresh coffee wafting from an espresso bar, gondolas rocking gently in the water, a gondolier singing an aria – and exactly twenty-one metres above it all is the blue sky. It was here a few years ago, in the midst of the Nevada Desert, that the newly opened casino *The Venetian* presented a fully air-conditioned Venice made from copious amounts of plaster and synthetic materials. An escalator descends from the painted sky to the Rialto Bridge, the Grand Canal reeks of chlorine and trained pigeons fly at regular intervals across St Mark's Square, which is bordered on one side by US Route 91, the famous Las Vegas Strip. In this city in the western United States, engulfed by gambling and entertainment, copies of the world's major architectural attractions are all crammed in together: St Mark's Square and the Campanile, the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe, the Statue of Liberty and the pyramids. Everything is accessible on foot, effortlessly and in the shortest possible time. The promoters of the desert city talk of a second, improved reality. As it becomes increasingly densely built up in a whole variety of styles, a version of 'real life' is being created that by definition begs the question as to whether reality, compared to the copy, may not one day suddenly look like no more than a pale imitation of itself.

Las Vegas has nothing in common with the European notion, developed over the centuries, of an organic settlement as a clearly defined geographical entity with a self-evident relationship between the centre and the periphery. The fun city in the desert is a hybrid, an innately self-contradictory configuration. It has no recognisable system of forms, but is an accumulation of fragments and disjointed schemes that can never be conceived of as a coherent whole. In Las Vegas, where the look of the city is shaped by the self-promotion strategies of the leisure industry, we see rather too clearly the same phenomena that are ever more apparent in our 'museum-display' city centres and in the event culture of mass-consumption in our shopping malls. The stage management of cities today affects ever greater areas, public spaces are increasingly becoming theatrical spaces – the city is being turned into a public stage.

Daniela Keiser's series *Die Stadt* (2004–2007) comprises 150 photographs made over the last three years. Apart from the fact that these images are bereft of human beings, they present a sequence of relatively ordinary, unspectacular views, including rows of houses, streets without traffic, frontal details of facades, green parklands and isolated buildings in bleak settings. But soon a sense of unease sets in that takes the unsettled viewer captive. A massive rock on a trailer lies ready to be driven away – but shouldn't the trailer collapse under the weight of this huge load? And how is it that there is a large patch of weeds growing in a city street? And why is it that the eye is greeted not by a dark interior behind a crumbling façade, but by green vegetation?

While the photographs, that almost seem somehow incidental, hide nothing, it is not as though they ruthlessly reveal or expose anything either. This in turn prompts the viewer to turn his or her attention to details, and to seek out clues that may point in some particular direction. Time and again a steel frame or a wooden construction lets on that the façades are not entirely what they appear to be. For *Die Stadt* is shot on location at some of Europe's leading film studios. Daniela Keiser specifically

visited the dream factories of the movie industry – including the Bavaria Studios in Munich, the Cinema Studios Tabernas in Andalusia, Babelsberg in Potsdam and the movie town Cinecittà in Rome. As movie locations, all these places are formed from fragmented, complex structures that are constantly subject to change. Every movie requires a different set, every director changes or adds to existing backdrops. To the filmgoer in the cinema, the sets look like a world that people could live in. The artificially constructed backdrops and sets resonate with the thoughts and the emotions of the movie's protagonists. But without the actors and the immense work that goes into the look and the sound of a movie, these sets do not stand up as virtual worlds – and are no more than painted scenery, pure surface without depth.

This is the point where the artist sets about her photographic research. And in her photographs she does not choose the same camera angle that these sets were originally created for. Instead Daniela Keiser presents the sets as sets, as what they are and not as what they are trying to be. This is an difference has far-reaching consequences: whereas movies, as a rule, attempt above all to create the appearance of three-dimensionality, Keiser achieves a very different effect by concentrating on the medium of photography. In some photographs, the fragile three-dimensionality of the built structures is reduced to a planar pattern of light and shade. In the places that Keiser visited, everything has been constructed with the movie camera in mind: brightly painted cottages with quirky roofs by the sea – built for the movie of Popeye set in Malta; façades in various stages of decay, daubed with American writing – constructed in Rome behind the walls of Cinecittà for the movie *Gangs of New York.* In the middle of a park stands a lone street lamp, obviously too small – but which can figure dramatically in scenes shot from a particular camera angle. Daniela Keiser's pictures portray all these scenarios as they were never intended to be seen, that's to say, deserted, with not a soul in sight, and strangely silent. Everything about them appears fragile and precarious, impermanent and yet already past its best. The photographs show *Die Stadt* as though it had just come to: without make-up and still rather sleepy.

Daniela Keiser's vision of a town could be compared with a rhizomorphic system, a prolific root system where the main root can no longer be identified and whose wild side roots form a tangled web – out of control and multi-layered. This town has a topography of human experience and requires the viewer to adopt different strategies for its perception, exploration and observation. In this particularly extensive series the photographs combine to convey a picture of a fictive city made up of countless locations from a wide diversity of movies. This city has not grown organically in any identifiable manner. The structures are founded on mutually contradictory premises, and – like Las Vegas – its guiding principle is not continuity, but disjuncture.

Like other photographic works by Daniela Keiser, notably the seventeen-part series *Diese Strasse* (2002), *Die Stadt* cannot be reduced to some rigorously pursed concept. Although in both functional and geographical terms, the fact that the shots are limited to European movie sets may set a conceptual parameter, nevertheless the choice of these locations opens up a very wide frame of reference: the spectrum ranges from the closed movie town of Cinecittà, the birthplace of numerous cinematic masterpieces – above all by Federico Fellini, to the locations for countless Westerns in the desert landscape of Andalusia to a site in the Engadine with a view of the Morteratsch Glacier which featured in an early film version of Johanna Spyri's *Heidi*. Other shots cannot be identified as any

particular locations for feature films or television series. These include a house somewhere in Romania shot by Keiser on her way to the castle where Dracula pursued his cinematic abominations.

This fundamental openness and porosity is a constitutive hallmark of Daniela Keiser's photographic output. Her photographic series can accommodate both contradictions and opposites; the connecting thread cannot be easily identified, which in turn gives the work a potential that can grow infinitely. Typically, the series *Die Stadt* demonstrates that uncertainty is not only allowed, but positively reinforced. Surfaces become porous membranes, the viewer's gaze is left to its own devices and latches onto whatever it chooses in the picture, somewhere behind the scenes. And with the shots of thin, plasterboard façades, reality only finds favour in the guise of its own lookalike.

Die Stadt attests not least to what cannot be seen on the photographs, to what has been left out. For a city is of course more than a specific, spatial arrangement of houses grouped around roads, squares and parks. Cities are shaped by people and their networks, their life situations and their life histories. Movie sets and their 'buildings' are intended as the backdrop for imagined future and past worlds full of life, and have a clearly defined purpose. By contrast, Daniela Keiser photographs these places so that they no longer need to tell the stories they once served.