

Steven Baelen and Drawn Space

The Higher Institute for Fine Arts (HISK) in Belgium was initially located in Antwerp and is now in Ghent. For the past ten years, I have paid them an annual, three-day visit to talk to the artists who spend two years there as residents of the Institute. A number of years ago, during one of my yearly visits I got to know Steven Baelen, the illustrator, the crazy illustrator, who to me seemed more like a figure from a story by Borges or Perec than a resident of a Belgian art academy.

Steven Baelen draws his surroundings using the finest, classically schooled and yet strangest crosshatching, and the small, everyday world in space that he has spent years manically applying to paper, line by line, emerges into the light, right out of the thicket of this shading. This world is, and is not. It is emergent effacement, emergent obliteration. Born of the state of being in the space, each line of ink or pencil transfers the space entirely to the imaginary level of a possible space and – if we didn't know otherwise – totally effaces the real, three-dimensional space with the fourth dimension of the drawing as it is completed, thus keeping it within the plane of the image alone. A creative destruction.

Steven Baelen succeeds, in his own peculiar way, in interlinking appearance and disappearance in a gestural process and, with each mark on the paper, evokes a constellation with reality, which Alain Badiou – in reference to drawing in general – describes as the “paradoxical link, being and not being”. It is as though Steven Baelen had carried out a swift graphic inventory of the space and the things determining it, only to enable a differentiated impression of that space as such to emerge on the walls and the floor, on tables, chairs and the beds. The abundance in his drawings thus takes on a vampire-like aspect, as the space is sucked dry and the drawing undertakes a truly existential transposition. The gaze touches the space through the hand; the hand surrounds the materiality of the space, existentially challenging that space as a cadaver.

A number of years ago, Steven Baelen had exhibited photocopies of several of his notebooks, which he carries around with him like his handkerchief, thereby adding a further kink to the process of “transmission”, of reproduction. With his “to_copy-box” developed in Berlin, and the digital drawings that emptied space animated in the void, the notebook sheet takes on another, shifted dimension of the space. What is happening here? The deposition of a view, a perspective, is fragmented into lines, into strokes of time, and consigned to observation for supplementary reproduction. The making of the copy is part of a two-fold process of the nihilation and genesis of the translation of the space. The sheet, captured, chiselled and shaded, then scattered again into emblematic traits in retrospective phases of genesis, only acquires its genuine significance in the photocopy – unique and of a sheerly infinite diversity.

Considered this way, and Steven Baelen thinks with his hand, the dissolution of the line becomes the dissolution of space, and the illustrator a nihilist.

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