

PLAYING WITH PERSPECTIVE

ROBBERT ROOS

Hans Wilschut is obsessed by the city. Wherever he goes – in Africa, Asia, Europe or South America – he seeks out places where the reality of everyday life interacts with the built environment. It is a kind of ‘social architecture photography’. Architecture is of the essence – the main and most immediately obvious subject – but it is *functioning* architecture, architecture that both conditions life in the city and that symbolizes – or reflects – the social construct that constitutes that life.

In a statement he has written about his work for the Van Wittel project, Wilschut says:

‘The urban landscape is variously defined in my photographic works by stillness, abstraction, reflection and movement. [...] Each photograph is first and foremost a stand-alone work, but also part of a greater whole. I avoid repeating the same idea, but seek a unique motivation for each photograph. I see the photographic exploration of the subject as a dialogue with the city. I look for situations and try to capture them in the most effective way possible. The final image is often preceded by sketches and test shots. I use optics and selected vantage points to control the perspective of my images. To achieve this, I use existing locations within the area, cherry pickers and sometimes aircraft. My pictures can be seen as urban still lifes, achieved by positioning myself in the right way and more or less arranging the reality on which I draw.’

In the way he captures the dynamism of the city within the pre-existing architectural setting, Wilschut is akin to Caspar van Wittel. The latter’s oeuvre is based on two main pillars: the most accurate possible representation of the urban environment – the essence of the veduta – and the depiction of street life within that urban setting. This second pillar is the aspect of his art that resembles genre painting. Both components – realistic representation and scenes resembling those in genre painting – are



Hans Wilschut, *Piazza del Popolo*, 2019, archival print, 87,8-150 cm



Hans Wilschut, *Darsena*, 2019, archival print, 128,5-200 cm



Hans Wilschut, *Piazza Navona*, 2019, archival print, 141,5-200 cm



Hans Wilschut, *Salute*, 2019, archival print, 47,7-80 cm



Hans Wilschut, *Piazzetta*, 2019, archival print, 125,5-200 cm

firmly rooted in the tradition of Dutch seventeenth-century painting from which Van Wittel emerged. Echoes of that same tradition can now be perceived in the work of Wilschut.

To bring Wilschut and Caspar van Wittel together by way of a photographic commission in the context of ‘Maestro Van Wittel’ is therefore to bridge a gap of three centuries – time that has passed not just here, but also in Italy. Like a present-day photographic vedutista, Wilschut visited places that Van Wittel repeatedly painted. He was not seeking to illustrate them by effectively reproducing Van Wittel’s paintings, but to reflect on Van Wittel’s compositions in stand-alone new interpretations of the same topography.

In Rome, his programme included Piazza Navona, Piazza del Popolo (the square that greeted Van Wittel on his arrival in Rome and the first place he ever painted in the city), the Colosseum, and views of the Tiber. In Naples, he photographed the Darsena (the old harbour basin) (page 2/3) and the Riviera di Chiaia. In Venice, it was the mouth of the Canal Grande (with the church of Santa Maria Della Salute on the left) and the Piazza San Marco, seen both from the basilica looking towards the lagoon and from the water.

Time has left its mark but also stood still. Piazza Navona is virtually unaltered. (page 188/189) So are the mouth of the Canal Grande (the Salute was completed only a decade before Van Wittel painted it) (page 190/191) and the Piazzetta San Marco (with the Palazzo Ducale on one side and the Biblioteca on the other). (page 192) Piazza del Popolo has changed quite considerably, although the obelisk and the ‘twin churches’ still stand proudly in its centre. (page 1) But the Ripa Grande beside the Tiber in Rome – the slipway – has disappeared. The Riviera di Chiaia in Naples is no longer an open boulevard beside the water, but has been hedged in by new high-rise blocks. And, here and there, views have greatly changed as trees or other intrusions have come to obscure the open vistas of Van Wittel’s day.

Amersfoort is a different case. Van Wittel painted the town decades after he left it and did so in a small format, based on a casual sketch. The result is actually a ‘veduta ideata’ – an idealised townscape, in which only the Onze Lieve Vrouwetoren is accurately represented, together

with one or two buildings and the general pattern of the river and the town walls. Oddly enough, Van Wittel's gouache omits the Koppelpoort gateway – a prominent landmark ever since the Middle Ages. Wilschut's photograph of Amersfoort sets the real alongside the imagined.

In his series of interpretations, Wilschut has generally selected a raised vantage point. He has perched on the wheelhouses of Venetian ferries, climbed buildings and hired cherry pickers. The high viewpoint is likewise a distinctive feature of many of Caspar van Wittel's works. Wilschut is also interested in playing with perspective in his photography. 'I manipulate perspective', he says in an interview. And that is what Van Wittel did too. In a way it was easier for him. Using his pencil, pen and brush, he could trace the broad expanse of his panoramic vision, looking – as it were – first to the left and then to the right, and finally merging the two perspectives to produce a single image on paper and canvas. Wilschut has to achieve the same thing with the 'reality' of a camera lens and the consequent relatively limited range – a challenge he finds interesting.

In the statement on his work Wilschut writes, 'I see myself as the outsider forced to take a fresh look at things and breathing unexpected new life into an all-too-familiar, deadly boring reality.' And, he continues, 'I focus on the city as an architectural space and a social arena and on the tension between the two. And then I look for themes like globalisation, migration, urbanization and world economics.' Wilschut is fascinated by the setting in which urban life is lived. He shows it both with and without the actors, although the traces of those actors can often be seen or sensed, even when they themselves are not directly visible in the image.

Wilschut's photographic works place him in the tradition of the vedutisti, but he is more emphatically in search of the social element. In his photographs, as in Van Wittel's work, people are – one way or another – part of the scenery. But there is a difference: in the eighteenth-century vedute the figures engaged in apparently casual everyday activities are mere staffage (albeit with personality), while in Wilschut's photographs they are part of a commentary on society.



Hans Wilschut (b. NL, Ridderkerk, 1966) produces photographic interpretations of Caspar van Wittel's vedute in Rome, Naples, Venice and Amersfoort.

Studio Hans Wilschut
www.hanswilschut.com

The autonomous work of Hans Wilschut can be seen in the 'Cityscape' exhibition at Museum Flehite from 9 February to 6 May 2019 running parallel to 'Maestro Van Wittel'.

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