

katrin korfmann

Katrin Korfmann, Homo Ludens
Tineke Reijnders, 2012

In Katrin Korfmann's work people are never alone in the world. Her photos are usually full of people. You can't really call them groups as there is a lot of space between them. The individuals on her photos don't really belong together, and if they do then they're in small groups, in twos or threes, just like when you see people walking or crossing a square. Katrin Korfmann is often on the road, especially as she participates in international exhibitions, and from her work you can see that she is endlessly fascinated by open and public spaces with people continually crossing, gathering or passing by. Train stations, airports, streets, and squares form the background for her people.

She takes photos from above, and sometimes she hangs in a crane above the people she wants to portray. You see people from above, first the head and then a shortened version of the body that through the chosen vantage point is hardly visible. So there is no horizon, she views passers-by just like birds would observe them from the air. This time she was also hanging above her subject.

But never before had she chosen such a playful and lively one. We see children running and a ball floating. This photo (or in this case piezographic print) has been specially made for the AMC. Katrin Korfmann has the honour this year of creating a work which will be an artistic response to the human form, an assignment which is annually given to a Dutch artist around The Anatomy Lesson. And, judging by the works she has posted in the past years on her website, she has taken a giant step with this assignment.

Usually she already makes it difficult for the viewer by adopting a birds-eye or aerial perspective, as we always want to see people frontally, in daily life and because we have been taught to see that way through art history. Korfmann makes that skewed perspective even more extreme by giving each jumping or running child an elongated shadow. And there we can see at once the humour in this work. You could always see a certain degree of esprit in her photos, but a lot of the work is just too tightly structured to have that loose and humoristic feel. In the pools of black which cling to the children we can unmistakably see projections of the childlike form, but those black projections lead a life of their own, dominate the flesh and blood which is being portrayed and transform them into a team of peculiar Barbapapas. As you start to follow that spooky dance, your eye skims the whole image, up to and beyond the edge of the frame, and then shoots back and forth between the shadow and the real human form. Paradoxically that colourful figure is mostly eclipsed by the black.

We, as human observers, have developed an enormous routine in judging the human form. Neuroscientists know how that routine can be precisely located in the brain. What Katrin Korfmann achieves, however, is a deregulation of the automatic perception: her photo challenges us to actively seek, to activate other parts of the brain. We have to try our best; there is much that is new to be discovered.

Katrin Korfmann grew up in Berlin and has been living in Amsterdam since she studied photography at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie in the 90s. I remember her final graduation exam, when she struck me by her conscious and deliberate handling of the frame: what do you show, what do you allow within the frame, and what do you allow your public to see? Also other fundamental questions on photography, which after all means writing with light, were already prominent. Especially movement and the mobility of people have proven to be a permanent source of inspiration for her. Sometimes she will use the video camera but usually she analyses and transforms the moving image into a frozen composition. Her work reminds us of the human locomotion studies of the French doctor Étienne-Jules Marey, who at the end of the 19th century mounted a rotating drum with photographic film on a gun to decipher the movements of the human body. His photographed frames of human movement would be adopted later as a model by the Lumière brothers for the invention of film.

Korfmann does the reverse: she also unravels, but mainly constructs and builds in her photographic work. In this way she made last year a print which was almost six metres wide, 'Vanished Horizon', in which the activity of people during one afternoon on a square in Amsterdam-West is compressed to one coherent overview. Between 1pm and 6pm the light of course changes, but using modern technology the photographer has made that much more homogenous and designed a single composition from hundreds of images that she took and which requires extremely dynamic and agile viewing.

Korfmann would not have won so many prizes (this year she won the Swiss Rado Star Prize) if her photos has not been so open in structure. Space flows round the figures; their relation to each other is neutral. On the virtually monochromatic background, the figures act as players in a democratic, free setting. The tacit tone of democratic freedom in this AMC print has been propelled upwards to joyful shouts of free and unrestrained play.