The Weight of the World

In 2001 Mariele Neudecker ordered the partial construction of 2 domestic houses and a church which, upon completion, were drowned in the Tiggelsee/Steinfurt artificial lakes near Munster in Germany. *Das Versunkene Dorf* or *The Sunken Village*, at first, seems untypical of this artist. It is on a scale that is very different from all her other works and it is a permanently sited public piece, as opposed to the more intimate experiences of her tanks or films. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that it extends many of the central concerns of Neudecker's art and provides a link between the objects and films that characterise her practice.

The Sunken Village taps into a fairytale otherworldliness, the surreal revelation of another dimension in a familiar landscape. At the same time it has an unsettling psychological edge. In the novel *Austerlitz*, by the German born author W. G. Sebald, there is a chilling description of a Welsh village lying beneath the waters of a reservoir which captures this haunting quality:

> Elias stopped the pony-trap on the banks of this lake and walked out with me to the middle of the dam, where he told me about his family home lying down there at a depth of about a hundred feet under the dark water, and not just his own family home but at least forty other houses and farms, together with the church of St John of Jerusalem, three chapels and three pubs, all of them drowned when the dam was finished in the autumn of 1888…I imagined all the others – his parents, his brothers and sisters, his relations, their neighbours, all the other villagers – still down in the depths, sitting in their houses and walking along the road, but unable to speak and with their eyes opened far too wide…At night, before I fell asleep in my cold room, I often felt as if I too had been submerged in that dark water, and like the poor souls of Vyrnwy must keep my eyes wide open to catch a faint glimmer of light far above me

For Sebald, the sunken village serves as a metaphor as the novel's main character struggles with long forgotten childhood memories that surface later in life to transform his cultural identity. On a wider level, it also describes the 'almost perfectly functioning mechanism of repression' that Sebald identifies in a post-war Germany that was 'blind to history' and to the traumatic destruction the country suffered at that time. Mariele Neudecker understands this interpretation of her country's history and has also spoken of the need to recuperate landscape traditions that were monopolised and perverted by the Third Reich. However, her works go further than any national agenda to explore ideas common to the entire western tradition of art. In one sense, for example, *The Sunken Village* is emblematic of all of her works in tanks, as it emphasises how all her tank landscape are 'sunken'. This is at once obvious and a forgotten fact. Our ability to suspend disbelief allows us to read the tank landscapes as virtual environments, related to painting, and weighed down by sky and clouds, not liquids. On another level, of course, we understand that the landscapes are immersed in tanks but like Sebald's characters we tend to submerge this information in our unconscious. Neudecker has made reference to this aspect of her work in earlier tanks such as *Much was Decided Before You were Born* (1997) where a brain-stem-like tree floats upside down before the viewer. In more recent pieces, though, the flooding of the world has become blatant and complicated in new ways. With *Who Has Turned Us Around Like This?* (2002) a tree again floats in thick fog, reminiscent of *Much Was Decided*…. This time, however, the tree can be viewed through the window of a room that fills the other half of the tank. That room is a recreation of Caspar David Friedrich's studio from the painting *View from the Artist's Atelier, Right Window* and Neudecker has flooded it with clear water. The allusion to

Friedrich's painting reminds us just how images lie submerged in our memories, influencing what we see before us. The more general reference to romanticism in the piece broadens this point to suggest that various concepts of landscape are equally present in our unconscious, helping to frame all we view.

The viewing point itself plays a key role in *Who Has Turned Us Around Like This?* With the title suggesting a dizzying about turn, viewers find themselves circling the piece and attempting to locate the best vantage point while the glass bends and refracts the world inside the tank. Ultimately, we struggle with the impossibility of settling in this work, acknowledging that every good position denies us another vista. Such impossibilities permeate many of Neudecker's recent tank works, none more so perhaps than *Think of One Thing* (2002) in which the viewer is dwarfed by several of the tanks on soaring plinths. At times, no view of these tanks is possible except from across the gallery and, at that distance, it is impossible to grasp the detail of the models. Reversing this process in *Over and Over, Again and Again* (2004), Neudecker presents us with three tanks that are easily accessible, ranked in line to construct a foggy prospect though steep mountain gradients. Here we have full access to the detail of the models but, as we move around the work, the materials and means of construction constantly disturb our attempts to suspend disbelief and revel in the illusion. Again, we find ourselves on the move, searching for the right spot in which to achieve this affect and temporarily forget our surroundings.

Paralleling the constructions of these recent tanks, Neudecker has produced several film and video works which extend this interest in movement and viewpoint. In *Another Day* (2000), for instance, there are close parallels in the ways in which viewers realign themselves physically in

the gallery to gain a purchase on the piece. Having filmed a simultaneous sunset and sunrise in the West Azores and South East Australia, Neudecker has presented the two pieces back to back on the same screen or on two screens at opposite ends of a gallery. In these installations when you are watching one image you lose the other, aware all the time of the loss and the physical impossibility of seeing both at once. There is an awareness too of the logistical difficulties in filming this phenomenon, despite its everyday nature. Neudecker's film teams needed precise sun calculations and sophisticated communications equipment to coordinate their efforts and document the event. All of this contrasts strangely with our knowledge of how easy it is to imagine the whole thing. In our minds we can hold all of this information, create complex images of the sunlight falling on a rotating earth and shift easily from one perspective to another.

The deliberately awkward choreography of the viewer in the gallery installation has another interesting function. Film and video are characterised by a ruthless linearity – a procession of images moves forwards in time and, with the growth of a film tradition, audiences have come to expect a narrative arc in a film's action. Certainly, the rise and fall of the sun provides a classic narrative arc but the installation of *Another Day* works against the temporal drive of the images. Neudecker's means of display is almost sculptural rather than cinematic, demanding a dynamic relationship between the viewer and the work.

There is a similar set of criteria in *The Land of the Dead* (2001) in which video footage, shot from an ascending hot air balloon, is projected on a screen just above the floor and on another horizontal screen suspended high above. Filming in Egypt above the tombs of the dead, the landscape is difficult to interpret, often more like an abstract painting scrolling across the

screen than a discernible territory. The work's relationship with painting is important as we attempt to catch the image on both screens from the right viewing angle. Even as we look down on the landscape, we are aware that the screen has been removed from its now traditional position on the wall as a vertical hanging. Oddly, too, the installation of the work recalls modern paintings radical rethinking of the picture plane in the late 1950s. Describing Robert Rauschenberg's use of the vertical and horizontal, art critic Leo Steinberg says

> The paintings he made towards the end of that decade included intrusive non-art attachments: a pillow suspended horizontally from the lower frame; a grounded ladder inserted between the painted panels which made up the picture; a chair standing against a wall but ingrown with the painting behind. Though they hung on the wall, the pictures kept referring back to the horizontals on which we walk and site, work and sleep…Perhaps Rauschenberg's profoundest symbolic gesture came in 1955 when he seized his own bed, smeared paint on its pillow and quilt coverlet, and uprighted it against the wall. There, in the vertical posture of "art", it continues to work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource, our horizontality, the flat bedding in which we do our begetting, conceiving, and dreaming. The horizontality of the bed relates to "making" as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane related to seeing.

While Rauschenberg's project is ultimately very different than Neudecker's there is common ground in this sense of the vertical and horizontal. Floating almost silently above the landscape, looking down on the land of the dead, the horizontal projection accentuates the funereal dimensions of this territory.

Just as *The Land of the Dead* plays with the conventions of the picture plane, it also evades many of the expectations associated with film, video

and projection. In its unorthodox installation it recalls instead the early days of the moving image when experimentation was rife. In the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris, for instance, the French engineer Grimoin-Sanson displayed a 'cineoramic' projection of a 360 degree aerial view of the city. He had mounted 10 cameras in a hot air balloon which then flew across Paris. In the World Exhibition, he then mounted 10 projectors within a circular 330 ft screen and viewers could enjoy the full panorama from a mock-up of the balloon.

The energetic inventiveness and sense of experiment that is typical of such early forays into film have a parallel in Mariele Neudecker's video works. Her interest in optical devices and the technology of viewing has often been acknowledged, particularly with references to works such as *Waterfall* (2000), *Deluge* (1998) and *Heliotropion* (1997). What is fascinating, with the passage of time, is the way in which these works themselves become antique. As each depends on the development of various computer programmes they betray their origins as the technology moves on and their effects become rooted in a particular moment of technological history. This seems entirely appropriate to such pieces and adds a new edge to their optical investigations. The contemplation of time is important to many of Neudecker's works whether it be *The Sunken Village*, *Another Day* or *The Land of the Dead*. There has long been a tradition of visiting ruins, even at times building 'ruins' in which to enjoy and mourn the passing of time. Neudecker's works certainly partake of this tradition while her playful experiments persistently assert the liveliness of the mind.

Francis McKee, 2004