

WHERE TIME IS WATCHING
Bernard Dewulf

I got to know her work thanks to a tip from an art lover. I was looking for images to go with the presentation of my book *Kleine dagen* (Small days). It is about time, memory and transitoriness in the mind of a fifty year old. Her work seemed to revolve around the same subjects, even though she appeared to be twenty years younger.

The first work of Ilke De Vries (1981) that I saw was *Detskaja Plowadka*, a video featuring two swings. And two walls, a bench and some trees. Nothing more seemed to be needed to evoke a deep melancholy.

In a deserted, grimy playground nowhere in particular, the two empty swings slowly start moving back and forth. They go faster and higher and then come back to a standstill.

That is all there is to see. Yet to me, this video of barely two and a half minutes represents essentially everything I wanted to say: that over the years, all beloved presence irrevocably reveals its absence as well. And that transitoriness gapes in the middle of this movement.

To me, the swinging also holds a certain eroticism – though not the kind, that we, who were raised by Hollywood, are used to seeing.

Independently of each other and yet as parts of a whole, the two swings reach a climax. In the meantime they produce a creaking, grinding, almost antagonizing noise – as if from something that is lonely and desperate.

The human race.

There are no people in *Detskaja Plowadka*, even though, of all things, an empty swing requests our – childlike – presence. Yet, Ilke De Vries often stages people. She does so with love, empathy and compassion, but without sentiment.

In *Completion*, for example, she films sleeping elderly men and women who are nearing their end. Their worn faces, the inscrutable breath of their sleep, their sighs or their inward silence, their final resignation or their last restlessness: it speaks differently to us than if they were to speak.

Completion shows the ending of life in an unguarded moment, in a state of speechlessness and a time of innocence. Unintentionally, the filmed people make their very personal comments on time – on their own completed time, but also on time in general.

It is hard to miss that Ilke De Vries is occupied with time. Anyone who is so explicitly occupied with time does so because time itself is also occupied with us, albeit in its own indifferent way.

And what does this indifferent time precisely do to us? Another question that Ilke De Vries is concerned about.

In *Uit Zicht / Out Look* (2011) she has people testify who were forced to leave their home, after having lived there for a long time, because it was to be demolished. Their desperation is enormous, their testimonies are poignant. The loss of their habitat also severely interferes with the memory of its residents.

These testimonials show that even the unapproachable time needs a place to thrive. And each place has a memory and each memory becomes attached to a place.

Time, space and memory: this work revolves around these three concepts. In a way, *360°* even does this literally. Using a clever optical illusion, the camera goes all the way round in a building, straight through the walls, entering one room after another: from living rooms to bathrooms, from bedrooms to storerooms.

This results in both a dreamlike and realistic exploration of the spaces in which we exist. Because the camera constantly 'looks' and records with the same slow pace and from the same height, it is as if we are looking through the eyes of time itself.

And so, in this both simple and ingenious manner, through the slow sliding of an undisturbed eye, the memory of the places we pass becomes almost palpable.

Time does not really tick here, it glides. And it appears everywhere, both discrete and manifest. And where it appears, it is accompanied by an unreal noise, like a distant rumour: a soundtrack that fuses our busyness and our vagueness.

In a major part of this work I feel a fundamental question shimmering: that of our destiny. What brings us here? What keeps us here? What moves us? And: how do we, each in his own time, with his inalienable memory, belong together? And how and where *can* we come together in this labyrinth of life in which we have to pave our way?

From close observations and with the help of subtle comments, often discreetly revealed by the deceptively simple images themselves, grows a quiet, yet passionate human story, in which pain and joy, remembering and forgetting, existence and decline are more or less reconciled.

Here this reconciliation is a not romantic trick. It stems from plain compassion. Ilke De Vries seeks no apologies, she is lucid enough for that. Nor does she want to evade a certain radiance that emanates from each life.

It seems to me that the serene beauty of her work thrives in this tension between her lucid detachment and her intense empathy.