

People and Spaces

People and Spaces
Photographs by Mona Breede

Edition Dittmar Berlin

INTRODUCTION

The fourth volume to appear in this series is dedicated to Mona Breede and, thus, for the first time, to a photographer. However, the questions that are addressed here, such as those concerning art and nature, space and order or, in a narrower sense, that pertaining to the principle of variation, are familiar. Nevertheless, these are treated in an very independent manner by the artist.

Mona Breede unifies the rendition of public space – both architectural and natural – with the depiction of people. At the point where these two motifs meet, people lead like secret directors. They define the space and lend it intensity while simultaneously building independent, almost abstract, configurations. In this ever fluctuating relationship there emerges a moment of alienation. Time seems to stand still; everything exudes a vastness, a quiet rhythm, a choreographed beauty.

The points of departure are specific places, real situations that betray no staging. It is only the choice of the spaces and the moments that define the images without their ever being the actual subject matter. Despite the images' precision and their realistic character, they are never marked by a documentary sobriety or the incidental. The movement is captured in the image, space and situation are condensed and simultaneously transcended and may be experienced as a new reality.

This catalogue aims to present the scope of the artist's work in an engaging form. For the fruitful collaboration of this project I wish to thank Mona Breede. I am also indebted to Rolf Sachsse, a specialist in the field of photography and media theory, for his contribution to this publication.

Peter Dittmar

PEOPLE AND SPACES

Photographic paradigms in the work of Mona Breede

When I saw Mona Breede's photographic work, *Axe Majeur* (ill. 3), for the first time, I felt I knew the place. The image and its variations reminded me of a train station in Tashkent, Uzbekistan that I had walked past daily for a month as well as of the columns on the upper level of the never-finished subway station near Buyuk Ipak Yuli. I have never visited the architectural installation by Dani Karavan in the Parisian suburb of Cergy-Pontoise, the subject of Mona Breede's *Axe Majeur*. Such a visit is not necessary, least of all for understanding the artist's work. Her standpoint is more than just the space from which the perspective and, thereby, the character of the scene is constructed; even when the scene has its point of departure in a specific place, the image is independent of this place. The place in the photograph is a different one from that on which the camera stands.

With the images of Parc de la Villette, La Défense and Parc André Citroën I experienced just the opposite; I had visited these places and reconstructed the situation of the photographer after viewing the works. Thus, in my memory I continued on my own way; I attempted to unite my experience of the space with that of the photographer's, trying to put myself in her place. It is the gift of Mona Breede to touch on both poles of photographic perception equally and yet to do so differently with each observation: the transference of memory onto an image and the shifting of the recognizable in a recalled image. Without a doubt, photography dislocates and leads to breaks and shifting although we believe the opposite to be the case.



ill. 1 *City Walker*, 2003

These works are about people and spaces and once again memory shifts to another image when viewing the London photograph, *City Walker* (ill. 1). The Albertina in Vienna houses a Parisian roof panorama from 1873 by J. Verotier, which is populated by thirteen figures. When one looks closely, it becomes obvious that only four men are either sitting or standing in the photograph and that these four allowed themselves to be photographed three or even four times as the panorama camera continued to be advanced unnoticed. Such images are common in the history of photography and are usually presented by museums as curiosities. Nonetheless, the anchoring of such works in our memory summons a second look at Mona Breede's pictures, for whether the sidewalk in *City Walker* or the escalator in *Upstairs* is as long as it appears remains open.

The German language makes a fine distinction between the words treatment (Be-Arbeitung) and processing (Ver-Arbeitung), regardless of whether the word pertains to images or texts. When things are treated (be-arbeitet) the origi-

nal in the lexical sense is preserved, whereas this is not the case when things are processed (ver-arbeitet). This difference is rooted in the pride of fine mechanical craftsmen and is an expression of a deeply embedded material aesthetic that extends into art criticism. However, Mona Breede demonstrates that this difference no longer exists or – what affects the human conception of craft and product even more – that this difference is no longer relevant. The ethical component of this realization is the origin of the word virtual; French bon vivants in the 17th century amused themselves by acting out the knightly virtues of the Erasmian princely education (virtus) only to break with them in an ironic manner – a repertoire that continues in the practice of art even today. Mona Breede is an especially serious artist with regards to this for she maintains the demand for transparency in the work process as well as maintaining control in the processing of her images.

Nonetheless, whether her art is only photography may be questioned. Even she quietly has her doubts about this but does not claim to be either a sculptor or painter, meaning someone who performs the transference of the genre in the image personally. For this she knows the history of photography too well. For this is a romantic practice in the fine arts, developed in the times when the Nazarenes in Rome begged, in the images of their lovers, for friendship between Italy and Germany, when the highest goal of photography was to capture images of central perspective, picturesque views of beautiful landscapes, people or things. If war and terror, suffering and death, are going to make their way to the front of the camera and thus into pictures, then these images should at least show things as they are and serve to amaze, teach, and arm the viewers morally, and, finally,

to make amends for these deeds. For nearly two hundred years photographers have resisted such a notion; they have helped themselves to all possible forms of aggression in front of and behind the camera in order to move beyond the depiction of the world as a nice place – to no avail. The world is beautiful even if Albert Renger-Patzsch struggled a life long to nullify the famous title of one of his own books.



ill. 2 Upstairs, 2002

For Mona Breede this problem as such does not exist. When an image in her imagination and the finished work are in concurrence, then the work is automatically beautiful, obvious and without deeper questions, which are not existent in the process of seeing, recognizing and the making of images anyway. Photography is the documentation of objects' surfaces and human action in space; it creates indexes of the existing and frees the way for the documented to be observed and treated symbolically. The production of photographic images for exhibitions requires constructing two indexes: the first is of the photography itself and the second of the image on the wall, in the White Cube, in the catalogue and on the internet. The second set is as reflexive as art itself. However, photography cannot do without a reference to the first, without the portrayed detail of the real. With this reference photography consummates the

symbolic act evoked in 17th century still-lives and landscape paintings in their use of composition, iconographic elements and, above all, in their use of light. Now, however, the process takes place backwards: first, a detail of the seen exists and an image is then extracted out of this. The attitude of the photographer is important here because it is she that defines art in the photograph.

Mona Breede does not set out to take pictures. She goes to places and spaces, observes them once, twice or more, returns and at some point sets up her camera. By this point she has an idea of the image she wants to take and, from that, what will be relayed in the picture or series. The German word for a photographic shot (*Aufnahme*) describes this process perfectly. (In English the word 'Aufnahme' can be roughly translated here as reception or absorption.) The artist removes an image from reality, taking it from its real source, as her own perception of what is real, and transforms it into the reality of the photographed image. Taking a photograph produces the precipitation, seeing initiates the form, doing fixes the image. Shooting a photograph is aesthetically as conventional as is all craftwork; however, as a process it implies a cut into time and space defined by the photographic act per se. At the same time, the shot is the product of shooting, referring to the process and the work in one word. The conceptualist maxim, that the path is the goal, does not apply to photography because it is materially bound to carriers just as a panel painting or a sculpture is.

The ability to see, in the figurative sense, is part of taking photographs. Mona Breede is also an outstanding portrait photographer. In her portraits, space is retracted and only

planes remain behind the volume of head and shoulder – vague references to the space in the form of emblems, strips and color borders. The portraits are always profiles, they follow the staging of their protagonists and subjects, often young people, and yet they maintain a dignified distance in the true sense of the word. The photographer thinks highly of her subjects. The images are taken from, and show, the figures at mid-distance, which is, in both these senses, a question of perspective. On the one hand, distortions are avoided, which serves the credibility of the subject and, on the other hand, the camera does not invade the subject's space and oppress him.



ill. 3 Axe Majeur, 2001

The photographer maintains a similar distance to the people who populate her images of spaces and streets in which they appear relatively small. Mona Breede has often maintained that she is interested in the choreography in spaces. Although this is so, it is not the entire truth. The places and spaces she photographs are defined by the people who populate them as public, or at least accessible, spaces rather than as a stage. When a group of children and teenagers spring down the concrete stairs of *Axe Majeur* (*ill. 3*), the character of the stairs

is formed by the way they are used and by the motion and behavior of the children. However, the autopoiesis is not dependent on a director's hand but is rather the result of several coincidences and their usual implications. When viewed in this way, one is always able to find parts in these images in which the people are engaged in patterns of motion that are reminiscent of surrealist procedures and the painterly practice of the informal. Nonetheless, this is not the simple transference from the one genus into another, but rather the double indexing of photographic images: diverse elements form genera before the form is defined, in the informal. It is precisely this disturbing factor that interests the artist, especially when she photographs public spaces. On the one hand, it is the urban scenery, on the other, a section of the landscape that engages her attention. Each has its specific place in her work.

The urban spaces and squares are public spaces, even works of art in the public realm. Dani Karavan designed the Axe Majeur, Bernard Tschumi Parc de la Villette, and a team of architects the Parc Citroën and La Défense; even the walls of a nursery school in Karlsruhe betray an underlining design. At first it may seem as if the artist is trying to make a plea for the preservation of public space in general with her selection of these. The choreography of the human movement recorded by her – often in series of two to four smaller photographs from which she increasingly chooses one ‘final’ work – refers to her initial assumption that this specific movement was affected by the design of the space. In this case, these works would be art about art, as old a practice as it is honorable. However, these images are more than that and than the simple constitution of the particular space according to the guidelines of a given art form

in public space. As little as the overpaintings of Arnulf Rainer are a critique on overpainted works, so little are the photographs of Mona Breede a critical statement on public art.

Richard Sennett describes the end of public space in several publications and laments the tyranny of intimacy that is the result of media and its private use. Mona Breede does not counter these dramatic statements with powerful images but rather she describes this process calmly from another point of view. People orientate themselves on small elements whose references are different in the photograph than they are in the actual space. Her manner of drawing attention to this difference is as simple as it is obvious. The particular elements of orientation occupy just a small part of the images with the arrangements always diverging from the overall orientation of the images. The shallow stairs in front of La Défense, as a horizontally aligned counter pole to the surrounding high-rises, are pictured in upright format, which limits the space in which the people move, forming a small part of the image, whereas the Axe Majeur strives to heights with its concrete stairs and is placed in a landscape format with diagonal movement.

The relationship between the composition of space and the movement of people is especially refined in the images of *Parc de la Villette* (ill. 4). Two pedestrian paths, one on top of the other, lead across the landscape format at a slight diagonal, but establish an element of height because of the supporting pillars, which produce a horizontal movement.

This small series draws attention to a further development in the artist's oeuvre. For a time the protagonist's movements are limited to lin-



ill. 4 Parc de la Villette II, 1998

ear vectors: footpaths that run parallel to the bottom of the photographs or escalators that run diagonally across the image so that the spaces take on another structure. In the image with the escalator, people move on the flat plane; they do not even move themselves but, rather, are moved linearly as they are standing. All is being directed here; there is no trace of individual organization and yet one cannot speak of the scene's being choreographed. In the images of paths and sidewalks the background has the quality of a set, and a foreground, in comparison to the images of spaces, is non-existent. Enormous blocks of concrete, gridded glass facades and stone surfaces appear, an anonymous architecture where the name of the designer is of little or no interest to passersby. In keeping with the nature of the space, the movements are fast, hurried, inattentive – human walking descriptive of organized falling. The people are no longer self-determined but are guided by and conform to other forces. However, Mona Breede is not passing any kind of qualifying judgment here. She knows all too well that the critical potential of art is very limited. Her theme is something else – the photography itself.

It is not a coincidence that one might think that these motifs were manipulated. Linearity screams of automatization, something László Moholy-Nagy already knew and Lucia Moholy precisely described when describing the history of his so-called Telephone paintings. Linearity is also a classical theme in literature, only streets and stairs are infinite, not, though, squares and spaces. Regardless of how or whether one manipulates an image, the repertoire of artistic creations is once again presented.

This is the old problem of the relationship between figure and pictorial space, but the question remains whether the small figures in these photographs are actually people. Here, too, there is a thematization in the three photographs, *Business People* (ill. 5). The people move in slow motion, with their actions and postures being ones of waiting. However, the space is in motion, with the containers hopping around in the middle and background through the perspective structure of the space.



ill. 5 Business People III, 2001

The images of *Business People* also demonstrate an aspect of how the artist deals with people, less obvious in other photographs, that of the unintentional humor of human behavior in public spaces. These business people appear

out of place in front of the containers. Their behavior is telematic in nature; they use mobile phones and carry briefcases. Their paths seem unpredictable, their movement less intentional than that of those in the larger spaces. Their relationship to their surroundings is lost once and for all, with the remaining space between anonymous, temporary structures no longer forming a specific space, a space that would offer paths of movement, thereby creating a public in the first place. An existing, urban or public space is only suggested by high-rises in the background; we are somewhere, anywhere, in London, Paris or even Singapore or Tokyo. It is not important to these people.



ill. 6 *Luxor*, 2003

The spatial structure of the landscape photographs is totally different and yet it leads to a similar definition of the elements in the image as in the urban context. On the one hand, the landscape images show how humans appropriate nature and, at the same time, they exhibit human yearning for nature – Enzenberger's words, that tourism destroys what it seeks, rings true here in every aspect. For the most part, open landscapes are portrayed, landscapes with clearly defined horizons and deep vanishing points. Some of these photographs are scenes of the ocean, either of the beach or of breakwaters, while others, primarily of

Egypt, are lined with mountains that do not form spaces but rather jagged linear borders. With some of the images one could suspect or see manipulation, as is the case with the breakwater island, *Sea Piece*.

The landscape photographs reveal the artist's position while photographing more than the urban spaces do; above all, the relationship between camera height, spatial coordination and direction of people's movement is more clearly defined. The people on the beach move much as do people on the sidewalks. In Egypt, square-like areas are bordered by walls and barriers, which, as architecture, are similar to Mona Breede's urbanscapes, but are differently defined by their natural environment and are used differently. In Egypt the photographs are taken from a high vantage point, the breakwater image from a very low one, making the size of the people that move into or out of these images larger.

The photograph of *Luxor* mediates between nature and city by introducing a middle ground consisting of a village. This image can be seen not just as a didactic play on the visual vocabulary of 'people and spaces', but also as a kind of report on the innumerable photographs taken of this place in the history of travel photography from Maxime du Camp and Francis Frith to the Beato brothers and Pascal Sebah and finally to the thousands of snapshots taken by the masses of tourists that pass through it each year.

In urban areas, spaces are defined by either a corner or a wall; there are almost no horizons. A fine example of this is the facade in the work *Urban Affairs* (ill. 7), behind which lies money but no perspective. The size of the people in

the photographs is determined by the height of the vantage point and here a very high one was preferred. If one does not wish to ascribe this spatial order to the model-like designs, which have set the tone for photographic images in art over the past several years, then one's only recourse is in the maxim of Aldo van Eyk of 1959: "Architects should build an inside outside, too. For far too long they have built outsides on the inside." Mona Breede constructs interiors, in the landscape, too, but even more so in the urban settings of public spaces, that space which is no longer supposed to exist but that holds on more tenaciously – just look at the movement in the images – than suspected.



ill. 7 *Urban Affairs II*, 2003

Usually a mild light shines over the surfaces of the images. These spaces are meant to be bright, and it is only in this way that an interior like that of Norman Foster's in *Space Walk* (ill. 8) can reappear. In places where the weather is not always good, a certain exterior space is manifest, as is the case of the bank and office facades. Obviously the weather can not be a guarantor for the interior of a building – just the opposite; it, along with the perspective of all the rooms, refers to the construction of a world view through photography in the manner of a peep-show. The artist simultaneously uses

and thematizes photography, constructs images of the world whose distance to everyday experiences is great enough to be noticed and yet small enough to be searched for and read.



ill. 8 *Space Walk I*, 2003

The series *Seascape* (ill. 9), taken at the beach on the North Sea island of Sylt, is the obvious conclusion for this catalogue. The scene is totally unspectacular, the organization rather simple: in the middle is the horizon of the water, in front of this three rows of people. It is only the area at the bottom of the photograph that causes surprise, for one does not expect to see snow on a beach and despite the many icy landscapes in 17th century Dutch painting we may know, one seldom sees both snow and surf together. At first the snow surprises, but soon it acts as a structure in the perception of each individual photograph. The soft curving patch of the white snow is reflected in the white cap on the approaching wave and once again in the low-lying cloud over the horizon. Despite the apparently bad weather, the people seem to be enjoying themselves, if one judges by their posture. The photographs are only slightly rectangular, thus not as strictly ordered as other works, a fact further reflected in



Abb. 9 Meeresbilder IV, 1996

the movements of the people. Even if one may suppose otherwise, a manipulation in this series did not take place.

With this Mona Breede demonstrates to us once again what her art is about: she shows images that are obviously based on photographic works. Thus, the viewer has the expectation that what he sees is real. And so it is. Once the photographic production has experienced extensions on all levels through different techniques, a certain amount of trust in the final product is lost. 'So it is' becomes 'it could have been so.' However, when this assumption becomes personal, and the image is only credible thanks to the name of the artist who has carried out these acts for a good reason and with the goal of achieving a specific depiction, a careful look, committed observation, and a composed dialogue will suffice.

Rolf Sachsse

(Translation by Marie Frohling)

Illustrations





Parc de la Villette II – I, 1998



City Walker, 2003



Axe Majeur, 2001





Sidewalk I – III, 2001





Parc Citroën I – III, 1998





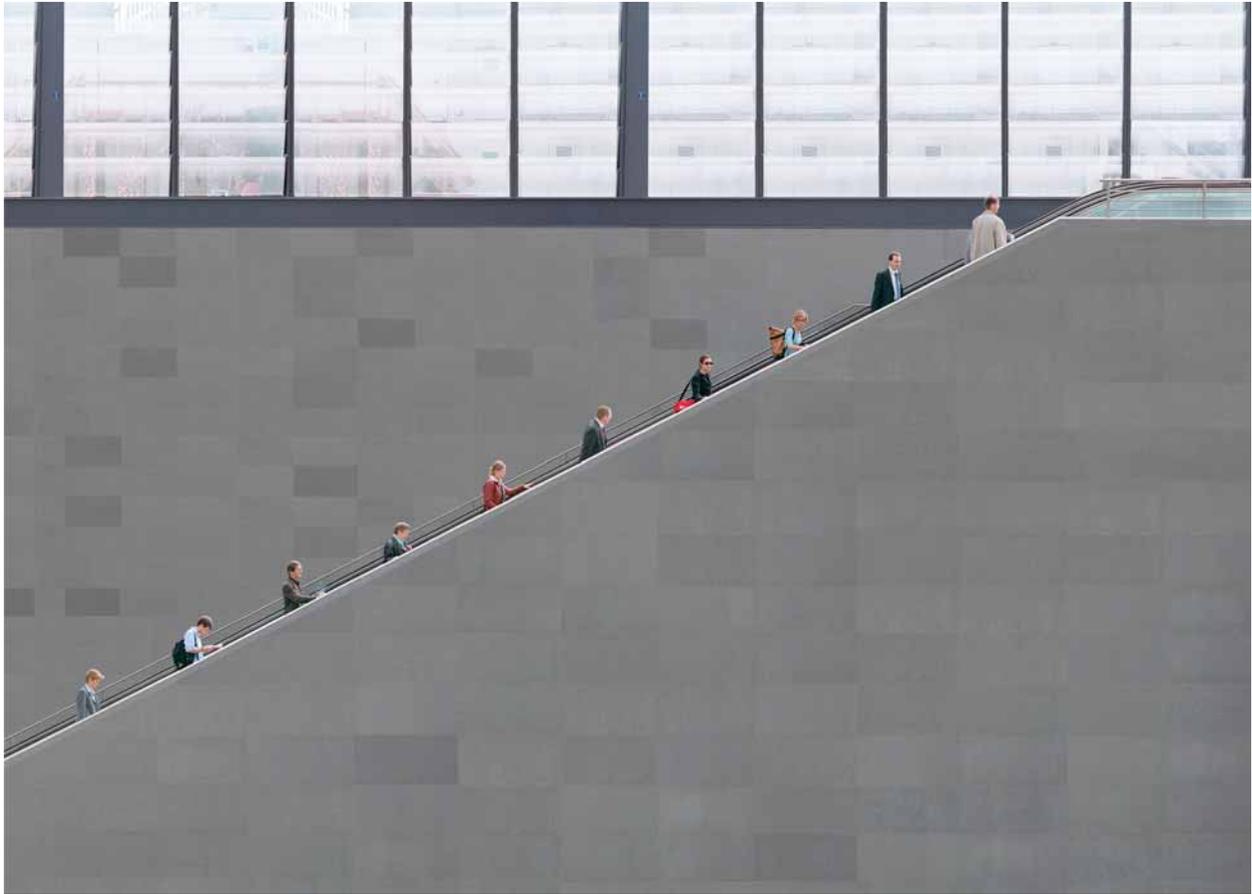


Urban Affairs I – III, 2003





La Défense I – II, 2000



Upstairs, 2002





Business People I – III, 2001





Space Walk I – III, 2003



Meerstück (Sea Piece), 2002







Barceloneta I – III, 2002





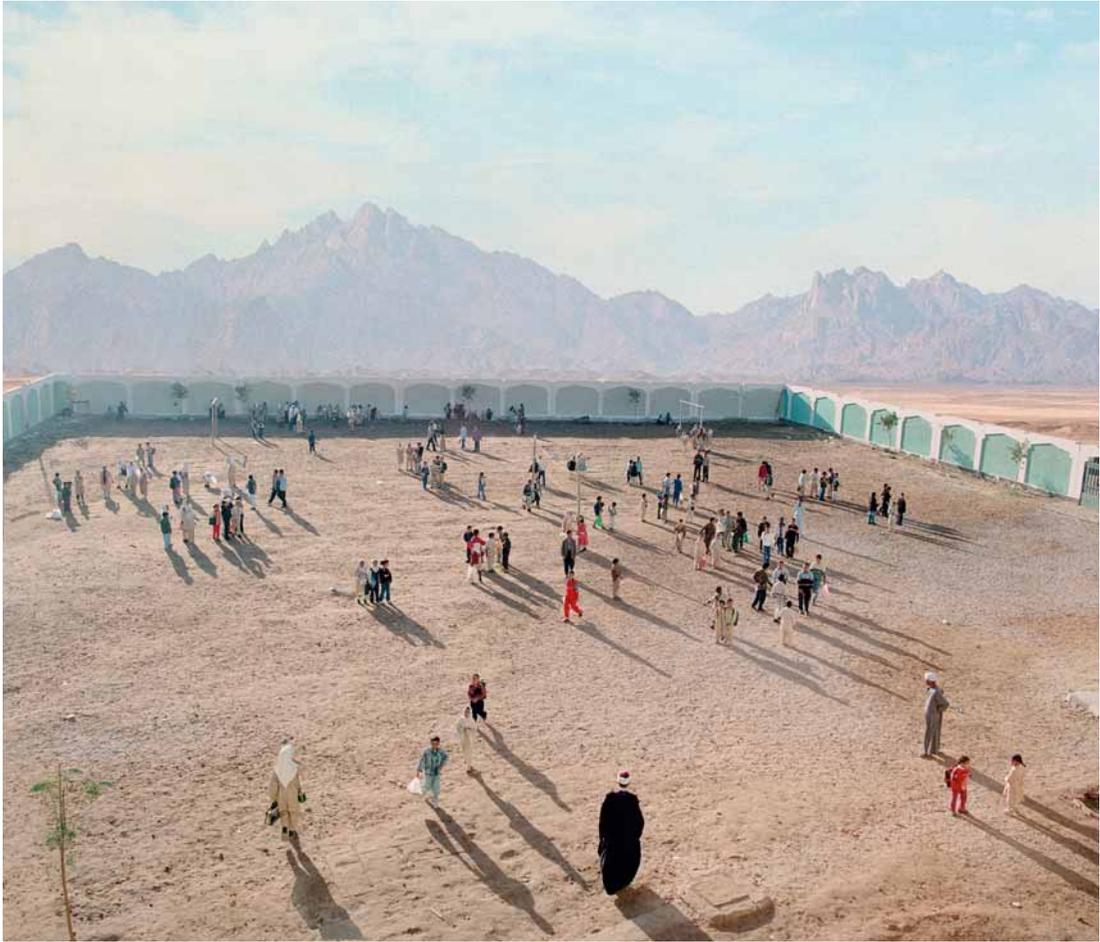
Plaça de Catalunya I – III, 2002





Spielplatz (Playground) I – IV, 1997





Hurghada I – II, 2002



Luxor, 2003



Landschaft in Ägypten (Landscape in Egypt), 2003





Meeresbilder (Seascapes) I – IV, 1996

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74 x 104 cm

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74 x 104 cm

C-Print

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Meeresbilder (Seascapes) I – IV, 1996

each 50 x 60 cm

C-Print

MONA BREEDE

Mona Breede was born in Kiel in 1968. From 1988 to 1989 she was an intern in the photography department of the Museum for Art and Industry in Hamburg (Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe) and later trained as a photographer at the Bavarian State School of Photography (Bayerischen Staatslehranstalt für Photographie). She holds a degree in photography from the Academy of Design (Staatlichen Hochschule für Gestaltung) in Karlsruhe where she studied under Rolf Sachsse and Thomas Struth. The artist lives and works in Karlsruhe.

Solo exhibition at the Goethe Institute in London in 1999. Participation in the group exhibition, "Reconstructing Space: Architecture in Recent German Photography," at the Architectural Association London (with catalogue; see pgs. 143-147) the same year. Special report in "Photography Now", a journal for photography and video art, Nr. 4/2001. Awarded the dit prize, "starshots 01," for photography in 2001.

IMPRINT

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