

Already remembering

On the day I visit Sandra Kruisbrink's studio, the weather is beautiful. The sky above Amsterdam is a clear blue. Around me I see pots of bright pink petunias, blooming in abundance. Also abundant, the cyclists peddling over the bridges and the sunlight reflecting from the little windowpanes of the canal houses.

In Kruisbrink's studio all is calm, except for the many drawings and sketches around the walls, on the tables, on the floor. I look round. At home I have a lithograph by Kruisbrink from the series *OverLand*. This print from 2004 shows a landscape seen from above, like most of Kruisbrink's work at that time. In my mind I shift into a bird's-eye view and soar above Amsterdam. The higher I go, the less intense the colours beneath me become. Everything grows less substantial, less tangible. The River Amstel runs like a ribbon through the image, the red roofs of the houses fade, the trees are ordered in an irregular rhythm. But oh dear, I can't really soar. The moment I become aware of it, I come crashing down. I look from the ground again, now with a somewhat limited view. I can no longer see the whole, but I can make out the details. The wide pull-out shelving, the printer, the pencil shavings, the sketch paper.

In her more recent work, Kruisbrink has also lowered her viewpoint. In the new work you find countless details. A huge variety of lines and marks, for example, some hard, others soft, with little pressure on the paper. The lines gradually shift from light to dark, or vice versa. This work is intended to be meditative, a time-consuming occupation. But what am I actually looking at? Many of the most recent drawings and lithographs show a tree. Sometimes the tree isn't actually there, but is left as blank space. I see the tree only because I see the shaded background, and when I focus on this the work becomes almost conceptual. The vast number of lines is important, something is under investigation here. But what? In the first instance Kruisbrink appears to be wondering, how can I leave out the tree, yet in doing so depict it as substantially as possible? Yes, how can an absent tree dominate the image? This seems to me to be a question worth investigating.

Before I examine this question, I would first like to return to Kruisbrink's earlier work: the insubstantial landscapes viewed from above. These images are quite empty. People who see this work are inclined to describe it as poetic. But what is poetic? In this case it seems to refer to 'saying as much as possible with as little image as possible'. This would make it literally a condensed version of the image. Yet I don't have the impression that condensing plays a central role. This is not what I experience when I look at the lithographs and drawings. At the roofs that seem to be floating, the soft shadows, the almost faded colours, or a fence that simply disappears from the image. To me this work expresses something of a memory. As if the artist is saying, I saw this place, and this is how I

remember it. Or more accurately perhaps, I saw this place and then I made a head start on my memories. I draw on paper or on stone what I will remember. I don't condense, I filter.

But how does this work? How could we select in advance what we are to remember later? To examine this in more depth, I turn to the German professor of cultural studies Aleida Assmann, who on 1 October 2014 received the Dr A.H. Heineken Prize for her pioneering role in research on cultural memory. Assmann gave a lecture on this occasion at the Castrum Peregrini building in Amsterdam, in which she distinguished between seven different forms of forgetting. This is interesting, because forgetting is inextricably linked to remembering.

Firstly Assmann describes an automatic forgetting. Forgetting and learning something new is a natural process, comparable with the cells in an organism which every so often renew themselves. However, memory develops a resistance to this. Remembering does not happen by itself, it demands a certain effort. At the same time, the context is important. If the context changes, then something that has been forgotten can rise to the surface again.

Secondly, there is preservative forgetting. Also from a cultural and historical perspective, the wheat is separated from the chaff. This happens within the cultural canon and the historical archive. The canon is active and is constantly being updated, but the archive is not; here the objects and events have only a latent presence. They have been taken out of context and no longer have any direct meaning. Yet they are not gone. In the future, in different circumstances, they may be reinterpreted.

Then Assmann describes selective forgetting. A computer's storage capacity is vast, but that of a human brain is limited, she writes. We have to choose. That which is unacceptable is generally forgotten. This is true both on a personal basis and for society as a whole. Nevertheless, here a change is becoming apparent. The negative aspects of the past are increasingly being included in history. And thus they are remembered again.

Fourthly there is repressive forgetting: the killing or ignoring of a person's memory. When your name is no longer mentioned and the archives stay closed, then your voice is not heard and your ideas are not read. You are forgotten. This leads on to the fifth form of forgetting: defensive and complicit forgetting. After the fall of a dictatorship, historical traces are generally erased. Abuses that have been hushed up for years also fall under defensive forgetting.

Sixthly there is constructive forgetting. When unpleasant events or impediments from the past have been forgotten, there is the chance of a new beginning. Here Assmann quotes Nietzsche: "The weakness of memory is the source of human strength."

Finally Assmann describes therapeutic forgetting, as happens with confession or catharsis. Here it is precisely by remembering that we forget – in the sense that once we have come to terms with something, we can forget it. In recent decades, therapeutic forgetting has overtaken constructive forgetting. A traumatic past cannot simply disappear. This is true both for the individual and for society as a whole.

Remembering and forgetting are therefore inseparable, says Assmann. In themselves they are neither good nor bad. Both are necessary for us to go through life. They are in constant interaction with each other.

Back to the work of Kruisbrink, which in terms not only of space (the bird's-eye view), but also of time, I associate with vast distance. It seems to me that the artist makes a head start on her memory. As if she is resisting automatic forgetting. Kruisbrink's interest lies not in the 'beauty' of a tree or the reproduction of a landscape, but in the already remembered tree. And if in her early work, Kruisbrink left out the details almost out of necessity due to the spatial distance, at present the details are precisely what preoccupy her. When she draws a tree, she details the branches, the twigs, the trunk and the bark. When she *doesn't* draw the tree, the detail lies in the background, in the endless shading, whereby the absent tree appears as a blank space. This seems to me to be a very concentrated form of memory work.

There is also an aspect in her recent work that seems to be about a reconquest of forgetting. What I'm referring to are the blank shapes (sometimes like photographic negatives) which shift almost cinematically behind or in front of the detailed images. The blank tree is assigned an active role. It covers the meticulously drawn tree or disappears in a carefully shaded distance. Sometimes it looms out of this distance and seems to be pushing aside the tree that is present; yes, actually claiming its space. It is as if Kruisbrink already wants to negate the selection that memory makes. As if she also wants to present the unselected. It is like leafing through future memories.

Forgetting, Assmann argued in her lecture, is not final; memories can be retrieved. When the context changes, what has been forgotten can come to the fore again. Assmann illustrates this with a quote from Francis Bacon: 'When you carry the light into one corner, you darken the rest.' The light, however, is movable.

This is something that Kruisbrink also seems to realise. In her studio she told me about the trees in the garden of her childhood home, a place she has not visited for a long time; the house now has new occupants. But if she concentrates, she can still see the trees of this garden in front of her. She even remembers the position of each individual tree – and not only the trees in the garden; she can also still clearly visualise the trees in the adjacent woods. She can picture every trunk, every silhouette, every crown. Kruisbrink now thinks of returning to that garden at some point. To call on the current occupants with a camera in her hand and thus gain access to the lost but not forgotten garden. She would like to photograph the trees as they always were and perhaps still are.

At this point, it seems to me, the head start on her memory would correspond with what has been conserved. And that undoubtedly opens up the possibility for new investigation.

The word 'investigation' sounds rather solemn, as does the term 'conceptual'. Because even though Kruisbrink's work indisputably comprises investigation, and there is certainly a conceptual element to it, these are not the aspects that stick in the mind. It is what she explores that lingers. What is preserved when you zoom in, and what is lost when you zoom out. The white patches of memory as opposed to the details. You first have to forget something to be able to remember it, said Assmann. And when the context changes, what has been forgotten can come to the fore again. The work of Sandra Kruisbrink seems to be about meticulously and almost lovingly struggling in advance against forgetting. This produces images that also touch the viewer.

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