

## **Thomas Nowotny: Looking Around**

Thomas Nowotny lives in a large loft in Williamsburg, a section of New York's borough of Brooklyn, with other artists, computer programmers, and graphic designers, a trendy local living arrangement among creative thirty-something people. In his work, the Austrian born Nowotny, who has lived at this address since 1995, looks out his windows at his surroundings with double vision: as both an insider and an outsider.

In less than a decade, Williamsburg has been brought back to life by a young international artistic crowd, vastly different from the Polish community that has been there for almost 100 years. As in many situations of contemporary society, in Williamsburg the local and the ecumenical co-exist side-by-side, together and yet disparate. This unusual blend of cultures has given this neighbourhood a particular colour and character.

Nowotny 's works catch the shades and nuances of this unique place and its relation to the City across the river, linked to Williamsburg by a bridge and single subway line.

The urban, social and aesthetic space is manipulated by Nowotny with a compulsive, almost childlike energy. He photographs, scans, cuts, adds, and juxtaposes images. The results are hybrid and unexpected pictures demanding on the eyes and mind. The imagination becomes restless as it attempts to capture his non linear representation made up of bits of urban visual information. The images possess many moods. Some are extraordinarily vibrant containing speedily edited sequences of architectural images that have been sliced lengthwise and recombined as in "Reflection of a Lost Dream ", 1998. Others deviate his focus onto the European style stores on this neighborhood's main street, Bedford Boulevard, and from there to the underground space of the subway station, a site of encounter in the community as in "End of Transfer ", from 1999. In editions of one, each of these large digital photos tell a different story -an urban tale through this artist 's eyes.

Since his work has a strong connection to the idea of place, it recalls one of the best-kept secrets in contemporary philosophy, the erasure of the difference between place and space.

Altered by the process of expansion,"place "has become the "where " but it is not merely an adverb designating location.

Lately, the meaning of place has crossed the local boundaries and incorporated the idea of space. Very in command of his subject matter, in his work the incorporation of place into space also obliterates the modernist idea of pinpointing places according to geometric or cartographic grids. This leads to the

assumption that Nowotny 's use of the grid is more than an impertinent imitation of modernism's systems. Fragments of architecture and mass media break through into a wider social space such as in the flickering and sparkling "Curtain of Propaganda ", 1998. It transmits the speed of information and a sense of movement, making this, among other of his pieces, suggestive of video animation works by Nan June Paik.

Nowotny 's image-combinations give movement to the grid.

This flexibility develops into an evolutionary process by which the works and their expressive pictorial resources of events, people, places, and spaces, not only challenge the use of photographic imagery but also our ability to mentally capture the essence of an image and its genealogy. Through the use of colours, shapes and language, his digital compositions are imaginary maps of today 's fragmented cultural landscape.

**Berta Sichel, curator, int. art journalist, New York City, October 1999  
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