



## LANDSCAPES *of* DESIRE

Hallstatt, Austria is a place of bizarre beauty or so the tourist brochures say: “ ... don’t forget to pack your camera. Take a short walk from the market square to take your very own snapshot of one of the most photographed points in the world. Capture the delightful houses built into the mountain, the glass-like lake, and the amazing mountains in the background ... discover landscapes that have attracted mountain climbers, explorers, romantic poets, and painters.” Hallstatt is the ultimate tourist destination for people who desire the authentic experience of a folkloric fantasy world that is worthy of chocolate boxes and postcards, where nature and old world culture collide in an explosion of Romanticism that should be impossible to reproduce.

While Cathy Laudenbach’s *Landscapes of Desire* is not about Hallstatt, Austria, it essentially began with this ancient village, a focus on tourism in all its complexities, and an emphasis on its relationship with photography and architecture. Laudenbach’s project centres on Hallstatt See, a housing development built by Chinese Company Minmetals in Luoyang, Boluo County, Southern China.

For all intents and purposes it is an exact replica, complete with churches, fountains, streets and dwellings. The construction of Hallstatt See is the result of a current trend to imitate or replicate other parts of the world. Confident that this urban facsimile could be distinguished from the original by its inherent inability to mimic an ambience of authenticity it was given the seal of approval by Hallstatt Mayor Alexander Scheutz when he attended the opening ceremony in 2012 and saw opportunities for cultural exchange as well as an increase in tourist dollars for the original.



While the concept of tourism plays a significant default role in Laudenbach’s research, she is not, herself, a tourist. To some extent, however, she must play the role of tourist gathering a collection of photographs and videos that focus on visitors to Hallstatt See. In this idiosyncratic environment she is an actor whose project is distinguished by research rather than recreational exploration. As a result, the images and videos, superficially, have much in common with those of tourists and on the job she is a decoy for other tourists.

Thus she is able to move freely amongst them, in a sense, heightening their experience of looking by being watched themselves. Neither tourist nor voyeur there are elements of both in her work. She is undoubtedly fascinated by the behavior of the tourists who now visit the housing estate to costume themselves in fantasies of their choice against the exotic backdrop of a faux Austrian village. Herein lie shades of the early photographic studios, with costumes and painted scenery, which even today offer vicarious journeys into the past.

Laudenbach’s anthropological eye reinforces how photography and video have always served as a passport for entry into a world that is not strictly one’s own. Both stills and moving events enable the operator to create their own space of fantasy from a foreign zone, to be momentarily immersed in a place of “otherness” via media that will evidence the subject’s presence for years hence. For the tourist it is a site of creation and Laudenbach’s mission is to record visitors in the act of generating spaces of personal fantasy in the new Hallsatt. In this “selfie ghetto”, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter have enhanced the tourists’ abilities to expand the zone of opportunity, to rise above everyday existence and become part of a *mise-en-scène* that is limited only by imagination.



At this point Laudenbach demonstrates the influence of psychogeography, an exploratory approach to urban environments that underscores ideas of “drifting” and playfulness. Psychogeographical theory has links to the Situationist International and the idea was defined in 1955 by Guy Debord as the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. While Hallstatt See is redolent with paradox it also offers in the Situationist sense, strategic inventions for exploring urban environments where pedestrians are liberated from their well-worn paths and jolted into unfamiliar modes of engagement with the structure and architecture of the development. So while Hallstatt See might be geographically close to a large number of its visitors, it also offers an alien psychological and cultural experience that will resonate beyond its boundaries. In other words, visitors can travel large distances without actually going anywhere.

Laudenbach’s research reveals what is something of an obtuse twist on the idea of orientalism in which we view people of the “Orient” in the act of making the West a space of unashamed exotica.

Precedents such as Bang Pa In, the summer residence of Thai Royalty revived by King Mongkut (Rama IV) in the 19th century to resemble the palaces of European Royalty with a hint of Paris metro, demonstrate how only the very rich and powerful are able to afford the luxuries of exotic replication. Often, like Las Vegas, a mish-mash of styles and ideas, Hallstatt Chinese-style is a coherent statement of economic power where new wealth brings the capability to rebuild the great architectural symbols of other nations and cultures. Ironically, in the communist People’s Republic Hallstatt See is the most democratic of copies, accessible to the burgeoning Chinese bourgeoisie and an open playground for its visitors.

Interestingly, some visitors dress in the uniforms of the Red Guard (while others might prefer haute couture or bridal attire).

This project begins at a time when the people of China are set to become the tourists of the future. Laudenbach’s images of Chinese tourists exploring an “alien” playground, essentially conceived by and for themselves, bring to mind the ideas of Umberto Eco’s “Age of Simulation” where contemporary culture becomes filled with recreations and themed environments. Hallstatt See is perhaps what Ecco would see as an “absolute fake” in which imitations don’t just reproduce reality but somehow attempt to improve upon it in the context of the new. Laudenbach explores not only the architecture of imitation but also the social relations that occur as a result of its visitors’ engagement with the replicated buildings. As Ecco had noted in his study of hyperreality, behind every facade is a business, whereby capitalism lures its potential clients, lost in fantasy, into a shopping spree. And it is clear from her works that the impeccably dressed visitors in (perhaps fake) designer gear, carrying expensive cameras and phones, readily employ the architecture as a backdrop to their display of wealth.

In the Chinese context this project is one of complex multilayered irony. As is the case with Disneyland, Laudenbach reveals a new aspect of China in which Hallstatt stands for everything that is brighter, larger and more entertaining than everyday life. Similarly, as Ecco would have noted, Hallstatt does not appear to be imitating mundane reality but rather reproducing fantasy within its enchanted enclosure of imagination. As the lens moves from close to wide, however, modern China reappears with enormous skyscrapers and cranes in the distance, shrouded in a veil of pollution. The strict regimentation of a Communist past can also be seen not far beneath the surface of punk fashion and tulle dresses, or kitsch representations of the Red Guard whose drab conformity in this context becomes the sign of a new Cultural Revolution. Hallstatt is a stage upon which both visitors and Laudenbach are able to engage with a succinct characterisation of the world’s most powerful economic and military newcomer, acting to a script that all participants are in the process of rewriting. In this respect Hallstatt See China is also a place of bizarre beauty.

David Broker, 2015, Director: Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra ACT



Cathy Laudenbach’s *Landscapes of Desire* is showing at the Northern Centre for Contemporary Art (NCCArt), Darwin, 21 February to 21 March 2015: [nccart.com.au](http://nccart.com.au)

All images are installation views of the exhibition at NCCArt; photos: Fiona Morrison