

VERNACULAR
ANIMAL SHEDS

SERVAAS VAN BELLE

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A MASTERLY MASH-UP

Stephan Vanfleteren

Fog rolls over the motorway. In the right lane, I am bowing to the reality of a morning traffic jam. The darkness is gradually lifting, but the fog clings to the tarmac. I relish the slow pace, because I have plenty of time to get where I'm going. From the corner of my eye, I see a shadowy figure in the middle of a field. Could it be an anonymous surveyor, a small game hunter, or one of my dear colleagues? I exit the next off-ramp.

It's him! It's the first time that I've seen photographer Servaas Van Belle at work. I see three things: a field, a man, a building. There is nothing else. The foot of the unhemmed curtain of fog meets green grass, and where the distance blends into white sky, I see a black silhouette with a tripod and a concrete house without any windows. Is it a barn, a bunker, a barrack? I can't tell from this distance, but it is clearly the photographer's subject. The tripod looks too large. Van Belle looks through the viewfinder, steps back, steps in again, lowers the tripod, turns something and moves to the right to observe the subject from a different point of view. I guess he has pressed the shutter release, as he now moves along the building to look again and presumably take another shot. The scene is repeated several times, moving anti-clockwise bit by bit, so that after half an hour the photographer ends up back at the place where he began.

At the edge of the field, I stand and wait. He walks towards me, balancing the tripod on his shoulder. I can see the zigzagging loop of the photographer's path. The morning dew was brushed off the grass as he waded through it in his rubber boots. It looks like he's thrown a lasso of condensed water around the building. 'Happy?' I ask. He nods and says: 'Perfect fog.' The series of shots is safe and dry in his camera case, the Berlebach ashwood tripod disappears into the back of the van and the key is stuck in the ignition without delay. Fog doesn't last forever. No time to lose. The car accelerates and disappears into thin air.

Servaas Van Belle doesn't photograph people. He photographs objects made by people, typically buildings. Planned by architects making full use of their professional skills and spatial awareness. Designed to please the public visually and make their inhabitants happy. But something different is going on with the *STAL* project. These structures are man-made, yes, but without any intention to please. A bricolage of old building materials, created by farmers to provide

shelter for their livestock as economically as possible. This type of construction has no pretensions. If it doesn't get blown over by the wind and more or less keeps the rain out, it'll do. The only ambition here is to keep some fur dry. Every now and then Van Belle encounters some embarrassment or an apology because 'that ugly thing' has not been knocked down yet. Thank God, farmers have a lot of work to do and demolition is usually the last thing on their list. Sometimes the building has been converted; it may have started out as a German wartime bunker, or a disused flatbed trailer put out to pasture (literally) in a field after covering 100,000 kilometres. 'Repurposing decommissioned facilities,' officials would say. Of course, some of the shelters are still actually in use. Some are ambiguous, a few clues betraying a fleeting presence of animals. But most of the structures have reached the end of their useful life and no longer have to provide cover. They are now left to themselves in the cold. No need for shelter any more. Nothing but a sublime uselessness. Just waiting, waiting, waiting for a definitive gust of wind.

In some cases, no one knows how long the shed has been there. Is it twenty years old? Fifty? A hundred? This type of architecture has no date of construction. No inscribed stone was cemented into the foundations in the presence of dignitaries. This is architecture without architects, built in a day, then patched up and rebuilt for generations. The result is often hauntingly beautiful, if you know what to look for. Sometimes these structures have ideal proportions, interesting shades of colour, elegant curves. They have been polished by wind, erosion or human hands. It is a collaborative effort by Man and Nature, built from metal, wood, brick or concrete, with Time perhaps the most important creator. Cracks, dents, fissures, patina, corrosion, discolouration and lichen add unintended beauty to that feeble miracle of vertical and horizontal configurations. In other words, it's a masterly mash-up.

A photograph of a weather-beaten shed is an allegory for our lives: we all muddle on, we try our best, we keep our wits about us, we field some blows along the way, we carry the scars, and we all die on the horizontal in the end. Humans harbour a deep longing for shelter, warmth and security. That's what makes these wondrous little structures so human. They are marvels of mayhem, missing parts, misjudgements and shabbiness

That is the chaos that the photographer takes in hand. Don't think that he just shoots a picture on impulse.

Van Belle is the master of straight and perpendicular lines. He is the man with the yardstick. Even if distant horizons are not often on view here, and the shed may even seem slightly aslant, you can believe me when I say his camera was level. This photographer grew up by the sea, with the horizon as his lodestar. Isn't it ironic that he of all people has lost his heart to capturing these skewed structures?

There are thousands of them scattered across the Belgian landscape, I would estimate. Like a good stableman, Van Belle tried to visit them all. He approached it very methodically. Sunny days were used for prospecting; driving around, sometimes scouting 5,000 kilometres in a month. Searching, stopping, jumping over barbed-wire fences, taking a quick picture with his iPhone, running away from the bulls – or were they just cows? Noting the coordinates of the sheds and arranging them in lists, then dividing them into regions and planning the most efficient route to take. And then: being ready to go on manoeuvres when the light conditions become ideal.

'Ideal' for Van Belle means: foggy. He didn't make it easy for himself by wanting to shoot in only that particular kind of weather. Wind, rain and storms can be predicted, but fog is the most difficult to foresee for the meteorologist. Fog is so fragile that a breeze, a slight change in temperature, the rising sun and a hundred other factors can cause it to disintegrate – or loom large again. Chasing fog takes nerves of steel, perseverance and good luck. It can also drive you crazy.

Plus, fog comes in many guises. There is your basic ground fog as well as valley fog, radiation fog, ditch fog, low-hanging fog, dew, freezing fog, rain fog, evaporation fog, ice fog, smog... Sometimes fog forms on the ground, sometimes in the sky and at other times it blows around like a sandstorm in the desert. I'm a bit of a connoisseur myself, but I have to say that Servaas Van Belle's expertise on the mysteries of fog surpasses mine. He works with increasingly specific subsets: oily fog, heavy fog, powder fog and – because of its delightful contradiction, my favourite – dry fog. The phenomenon is difficult to capture, but once you get your hook in it, this is the most beautiful thing there is. An object in the mist is the centre of its own existence, surrounded by a void with no perceptible end. The concrete line of the background becomes a tenuous suggestion. There is only essence without interference. You can grasp, hug, embrace, as it were, the object you are photographing.

Does he maybe talk to the walls while photographing them? No one's around, so no one would hear him. I wonder if he goes into the sheds? Does he jump for joy at the discovery of a new jewel, alone in a field? And what is it about sheds that makes them visually interesting for him? What are the criteria? Is it love for mathematically pleasing shapes? The marvel of cubes, prisms, beams, pyramids, cylinders? There is a bonanza of interfacing surfaces – bases, sides and tops – for the advanced student to play with. Sometimes the structures are so basic that they resemble magnified hotels on a Monopoly board, not in bright green and red but in a faded brown and soft grey. Other huts have been blown so crooked by a storm that they resemble a textbook diagram explaining the shape of a parallelogram. Now and then, a shed is nothing more than a skeleton stripped to the bone, or Mikado sticks scattered on the ground.

The circular, rusty, mammoth humps from the First World War have been withstanding German shells and Belgian rain for more than a century now. Some shed have roofs that look more like the back of a brown toad or walls that resemble pangolin armour. Eternit's corrugated sheet of toxic asbestos is a classic – simply add 'y' and it will last all eternity. Sometimes the only thing propping up the roof or keeping the wall upright is ivy, instead of mortar and cement. Here and there a shed miraculously persists as one last standing wall. All that's needed is a blindfold and it's ready for the execution shot to ring out through the air. At times the process is unhurried, and the skin of the reinforced concrete peels off slowly, allowing the iron to emerge. Some huts are propped up crudely, protruding nails visible; others appear to be making for the emergency exit on crutches; occasionally you see some dry straw lying in a doorway or window.

And have you noticed it too? Not an animal to be seen anywhere. Sometimes the ruin resembles a Hollywood star's car wreck on a Californian roadside, or a crashed train with a row of crumpled freight cars. Some old sheds resemble an archaeological dig with a dolmen or tumulus from the Neolithic era. One shed looks like a house drowning in the ground after the deluge has passed, the rain gutter just below the waterline. I see ingenious drainage systems, neatly collecting any rainfall in a drainpipe that flows into an enamel bathtub that serves as a drinking trough. It's always intriguing to see a structure demonstrate a whole gamut of building techniques, from reclaimed masonry stones to scrapwood hammered together with nails. Canopies, lean-tos, extensions: you name

it, they've got it. Buttresses in matte or semi-gloss finish, with fifty-one shades of grey from white to black, and the same number of shades of rusty brown. Anselm Kiefer, Mark Rothko and Thierry De Cordier are never far away. Not much typography, but oh, the irony when a beautiful trailer in Fausto Coppi blue reads 'Transport and Removals' with a telephone number without an area code. Or the place-name 'Ghent' – the only word that is still detectable on a black 'coffin'. Could *The Ghent Altarpiece* find shelter there?

The *STAL* project is a never-ending source of beauty, rich with remarkable details. Where else could you find a shed where an analogue 8mm film camera is mounted as a fake surveillance camera to scare off vandals and Van Belles?

Every so often there is no longer any shed to speak of: only a footprint remains of this humble building. A car tyre, two bricks and a drinking trough are the only relics of comfort past. The photographer was too late. Or was there never a shed here; are we seeing a mirage in a desert of grass? And what do those initials 'LB' on the water trough mean? Limburg? Liberia? Our vote goes to the beautiful *lector benevole*: 'for the benevolent reader'.

Sheds – understandably – are still underappreciated heritage sites in this land of mighty cathedrals, churches and chapels. These small bucolic temples in our damp landscape still have a long way to go to achieve recognition, and due to their fragility and relatively short shelf life they will never make it into history tomes or architecture books. Van Belle's work is briefly lifting these structures up above the abyss of the temporary. You won't encounter this kind of hodgepodge building in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and Scandinavia. There, it is commonly agreed that things are to be properly restored or, when they have outgrown their use, are best demolished. Here, something is only done away with if it really gets in our way. That feeling is entrenched in our national identity. I have never encountered this phenomenon in countries such as the United States or Russia. The size of their ranches or collective farms undoubtedly has something to do with it. In Belgium, we're still a bunch of smallholding farmers.

You can still find sheds like these in northern France. They also have some similarities with the *regards* of the French Savoie; the *hórreos* (granaries), of Galicia and Asturias in Spain; the *abearriaks* in the Basque Country; the *espigueiros* in northern Portugal; the *raccards* (storage huts) in the Swiss Valois; the

religious *bancos* (adobe mosques) of the inner Niger Delta; and the *jakkas*, the small mosques along the roads in Senegal. They have their visual counterparts across the oceans too: just think of the corn cribs of the Native Americans or, sadly, of the millions of shanty dwellings in the world, overcrowded as they are with entire families living in abject poverty.

With his typology, serial monotony and minimalistic approach, Servaas Van Belle is referencing the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Their 'objective' photography of German industrial architecture in the last four decades of the 20th century offered a new artistic take on the medium at the time. The remarkable thing is that this photography duo were awarded the Golden Lion for *sculpture* at the Venice Biennale in 1992. I do suspect Van Belle of actually being some kind of sculptor. Working not with hammer and chisel, or clay or marble, but with his lens and left eye, he captures a reality that is ignored by everyone else. Under his cool scrutiny, this undervalued architecture is elevated to an unpretentious art form. Van Belle forces us to look more carefully and shows us beauty in places where you'd least expect it.

When I look at his collection of photographs, I see an open-air museum without any guards or queues at the entrance. With this silent guide, I venture towards a curious crossroads in a deserted field where photography, architecture, sculpture and heritage gallantly surrender to one another. *STAL* is a unique celebration of these nameless, often accidental, sculptures standing on their pedestals of wet grass in fields full of incense.













Aalter	Chairière	Essene	Ieper	Lomprez	Nieuwenhove	Scotton	Vaux-sur-Sûre
Alle-sur-Semois	Chassepierre	Evergem	Isle-le-Pré	Louette-Saint-Pierre	Nieuwpoort	Senonchamps	Vesqueville
Amblève	Chêne	Faulx-les-Tombes	Izegem	Lovendegem	Ninove	Sint-Kruis	Veurne
Ardooie	Chenogne	Fauvillers	Jabbeke	Mabompré	Offagne	Sint-Laureins	Vinkt
Assenede	Chièvres	Fays-les-Veneurs	Jodenville	Maissin	Oizy	Sint-Niklaas	Vivenkapelle
Assenois	Chisogne	Flamierge	Klemskerke	Maldegem	Oosterzele	Sint-Pieters-Leeuw	Vlamertinge
Ath	Ciney	Fosset	Knesselare	Manhay	Oostrozebeke	Snaaskerke	Vlekkem
Baclain	Compogne	Gedinne	Knokke	Massul	Oudenburg	Sommerain	Walcourt
Baliebrugge	Couvin	Geel	Koekelare	Meerbeke	Paliseul	Sprimont	Walem
Bastogne	Crisnée	Geraardsbergen	Koksijde	Melle	Petit-Fays	Steenhuize-Wijnhuize	Wambeek
Beauraing	Damme	Gijzenzele	Koolkerke	Menen	Philippeville	Steenkerke	Weismes
Beernem	Daverdisse	Gistel	Kortemark	Menuchenet	Pittem	Steenokkerzeel	Wellin
Beho	De Haan	Gives	Kortrijk	Middelburg	Plainevaux	Stekene	Westkapelle
Belleaux	De Panne	Gouvy	Kronegem	Middelkerke	Pondrôme	Strooiboom	Westouter
Bertogne	Denderwindeke	Graide	Lavaselle	Moerbeke	Poperinge	Strooihaan	Wevelgem
Bertrix	Dentergem	Haaltert	Lede	Mogimont	Ramskapelle	Temse	Wilskerke
Beveren	Diepenbeek	Halconreux	Léglise	Moircy	Rechimont	Tenneville	Wingene
Bièvre	Dikkebus	Haut-Fays	Lendelede	Monaville	Remagne	Ternat	Witry
Blankenberge	Dilbeek	Heist-aan-Zee	Lennik	Monceau-en-Ardenne	Remoifosse	Tielt	Wulpen
Booitshoeke	Dudzele	Herk-de-Stad	Lescheret	Moorsele	Renuamont	Tillet	Zomergem
Bredene	Ebly	Héron	Libramont	Moorslede	Rienne	Torhout	Zonnebeke
Brugge	Eeklo	Herzele	Libramont-Chevigny	Moulin de Naomé	Ruddervoorde	Traimont	Zuienkerke
Büllingen	Eggewaartskapelle	Houdremont	Lichtervelde	Neufchâteau	Sainte-Cécile	Transinne	Zulte
Bulskamp	Erpe-Mere	Houffalize	Lievegem	Neuville	Sainte-Ode	Tronle	
Bütgenbach	Ertvelde	Houtem	Lissewege	Neuvillers	Sart-Custinne	Trouhéraoul	
Carlsbourg	Erwetegem	Hubermont	Lo-Reninge	Nevele	Savy	Varsenare	



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STAL – Vernacular Animal Sheds

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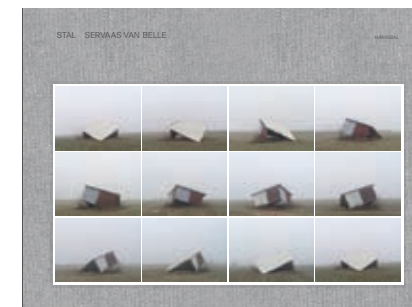
Stalletjes zijn in die mate een gemeengoed en een evidentie in onze omgeving en cultuur dat ze nog zelden worden opgemerkt. Nochtans staan er in het Belgische landschap architecturale pareltjes. Een karaktervol gezelschap met een duidelijk *carte blanche* voor hen die deze schuilplaatsen hebben neergepoot. Talrijke vormen en formaten, opgetrokken uit diverse materialen en in een uiteenlopend kleurenpalet, sieren het landschap. Met de tand des tijds duidelijk zichtbaar ademen ze verhalen uit. Door hun oplapwerk zouden sommige ervan niet misstaan in een museum.

Servaas Van Belle ging jarenlang in alle uithoeken van België op zoek naar de meest tot de verbeelding sprekende structuren en beet zich vast in het oud ijzer. Het resultaat wordt nu gepresenteerd in zijn eerste boek.

STAL – Vernacular Animal Sheds verschijnt naar aanleiding van de tentoonstelling van Servaas Van Belle in het kader van Foto Knokke-Heist en loopt van 26 maart tot juni 2022 in Cultuurcentrum Scharpoord.

Met een tekstbijdrage van Stephan Vanfleteren.

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Levenswerk van fotograaf Servaas Van Belle: het vastleggen van typische kleine stalletjes en schuurtjes in het landschap, voor ze verdwijnen

Important photographic contribution to the recent international focus on vernacular architecture.



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