

ISABELLE PATEER
Unsettled (2007 – 2012)

Liz Wells
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Under the Shadow of Change.

There is something peculiarly uneasy about communities that formerly seemed settled becoming 'unsettled'. Yet disruption happens. In the case of Doel on the Belgian coast, the threat of change results directly from political decisions relating to the expansion of the nearby port of Antwerp.

Historically the Channel connecting the North Sea to the Atlantic has linked nations such as The Netherlands, Belgium and the UK to overseas colonies for imports of food and of raw materials for industrial transformation. Sea transport was crucial and ports meant jobs. But places and circumstances change. In recent decades international conglomerate systems of investment, ownership and control along with the availability of cheap labour in Asia and elsewhere have encouraged industrial centres to move from West to East. Online shopping and the global availability of cheap goods mean that commercial shipping makes extensive use of the 'forgotten space' of the sea.ⁱ Indeed, ports are expanding. Meanwhile, the achievements of engineering, especially containerisation and the increased capacity of ships, have reduced demand for dock workers – although, of course, people still crew ships, run the loading cranes and oversee docklands including road and rail connections. But actual jobs are fewer than before.

The expansion of ports such as Antwerp and Rotterdam has implications for surrounding regions otherwise marked by signs of post-industrial decline. Isabelle Pateer explores the impact of change in one small Belgian village, Doel, near Antwerp. We note the cranes, pylons and power plant that dominate the skyline over the flat polder that edges the sea. Large metal cleats seated in the mud that suggest boats previously moored here.

Unsettled documents the situation of villagers, juxtaposing individual portraits and pictures of the local environment. Young men and women hang out in empty rooms or exterior spaces whose bleakness testifies to the limited prospects confronting them. The farmlands and village of Doel, with its old stone windmill, date from mediaeval times, but this pre-industrial legacy is not what concerns her. The house that belonged to the family of the painter, Rubens, is still there, but we don't see it. Rather we note the everyday banal of empty rooms, ordinary houses, a schoolroom, graffiti and wall art. The historic village is under threat of demolition to make way for the expansion of the Antwerp docklands. Infamously, in 2008 riot police were sent in to help convince the 200 villagers remaining in their homes of the benefits of responding to the Flemish Executive's request that they vacate all properties.ⁱⁱ The tensions are complex: a nuclear power station borders the village and safety legislation limits the proximity of industrial activity which means that the proposed new dock may never be permitted. Meanwhile villagers live on polder (reclaimed) land under the shadow of an expanding port, a power plant, the impact of massive vessels on the ecology of the water and the lands bordering the sea, and a very uncertain future.

For Pateer, the village symbolises the consequences of such developments internationally. The flat light and brown/grey tones that characterise the majority of the images point to the

bleakness of the region and the unresolved situation of those who remain, still living here, but *unsettled*. The stream in which Kirsten stands, ankle deep, appears murky despite the pictorial glow of the setting sun. This portrait of people and place reminds us of social manifestations of post-industrial change across much of the north of Europe.

Economic progress? At what price!

Liz Wells is Professor in Photographic Culture, Faculty of Arts, Plymouth University, UK, and convenes the research group for Land/Water and the Visual Arts. www.landwater-research.co.uk

ⁱ Allan Sekula and Noel Burch (2010) *The Forgotten Space*. <http://www.theforgottenspace.net/static/home.html>

ⁱⁱ See <http://doel2020.org/page.php?ID=135>