Mirjana Rukavina, Here and There– Places of Absence

In the 1950's, Hilla and Bernd Becher started to photograph abandoned industrial architecture. Their photographic series found their way to the art galleries, which left a significant mark on subsequent art photography. Such photographs can be understood in the context of a society that was enthused about technological development, after the harshest devastation of war was restored and industry boomed again. Obsolete industrial edifices were a sign of a disappearing, bygone time and yet the Bechers presented it with the aesthetic value of contemporary sculpture. They passed Duchamp's gesture with the pissoir on to photography. An everyday object that otherwise would not attract one's interest, gained artistic value in their photographs, as they do not depict a special scene or event, and the expressiveness is reduced to the mere language of the photographed structure. Only form and a little information about the (former) purpose are recorded without any sentiment. The seriality accentuates the photographers' cold distance holding the position of an objective transmitter of the pictures. The differences among the photographed structures are negligible as it is the entirety that reveals a pattern. During this time, pop art occurred in the art of Western Europe and the US which attempted to present society's modernity with as less an expressive touch as possible and through seriality as its most important feature. A similar approach marks the works of Ed Ruscha from the 1960's. He himself declared that for his first artist's book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, he excluded every photograph that seemed too interesting. As if he was gathering data for statistical processing. To a certain extent, connections can be observed in contemporary minimalism and the forthcoming conceptualism.

The artists' fascination of gathering, describing and recording objects of the same kind to be later presented as a series, continues in present times, albeit as an approach that rather resembles Ruscha than the Bechers. To gain greater interest in deserted edifices, it was necessary to await the end of another war, namely the Cold War. Particularly after the year 2000, photographers began to record abandoned spaces more frequently. Mainly examples from Eastern Europe showing desolate landscapes with symbols of the ruinous feats of a socialist regime − monuments of misguided ideas − started to circulate the media. Dilapidated factories have been appearing during the last thirty years in the West as well, since production is being constantly moved to Asia. However, the capital was able to recycle these worn out edifices or replace them with new, for the consumerist and industrial society, more useful ones. Thus freshly discovered skeletons of abandoned airports and factories in Belarus, megalomaniac monuments of the former Yugoslavia, and even an intact shuttle hangar from Russia that appears to belong to the Sleeping Beauty fairytale, manifest themselves in the present media. They are not only covered by Western reportage photographers, but also represented in artists' books and at exhibitions in galleries and contemporary art museums.

Mirjana Rukavina's exhibition focuses on the current state of a former textile factory site in Maribor's Melje district that was founded by Josip Hutter in 1926, nationalised in 1945, and denationalised and privatised in 1991. The story of the factory which, after it became privatised, gradually but persistently deteriorated is just one of many similar in Maribor, and the artist documented it as a result of the ravages of time in her neighbourhood. Although the scenes in the photographs are presented more or less from an aesthetic view and emotionless, a personal sensitivity in the details can be perceived as well. Traces of people (working gown, wristwatch, and a folder put aside) who long ago enlivened these rooms and used the inventory sensitively span over the emptiness. It is a rather personal commentary, though far removed from the intimate photographic testimonies known from the 1980's and 1990's, but still not as neutral as the works from the 1950's and 1960's mentioned above. The former Maribor Textile Factory is a ravage of past times, but as a ruin it has become some kind of a war victim and not a technologically outdated edifice that needs to be recorded, otherwise it would have sunk into oblivion. Although aestheticised, it shows traces of trauma. It is neither beautiful nor spectacular. In some photographs, where there are no utility objects but simply architecture and furniture, the timeless design is appealing and by association tied to another architecture in the exhibition − the new Donau City Tower in Vienna. It too, is an industrial edifice, although not a factory that would produce implements. It is a space dedicated to short-term rentals, and even though it is not empty, it appears impersonal and refined. People leave no traces behind, and the Tower's modular architecture facilitates a quick change of settings and deconstruction. It is a typical space designed for the production and amazement of a modern consumer society that has already forgotten about factories and material production. Most people arrive there only for a couple of hours per year or even only once in a lifetime and can therefore leave the space unburdened. The architecture of the currently tallest building in Austria is an achievement in itself that enthrals or even inspires the attentive observer. However, its functionality is best comparable with an operational system desktop set on our workplace computer. After installing the new version, the old one is easily forgotten. Hutter's factory represents a real body of pain and pleasure; it is a conscious image, a presence, even though fading, while the DC Tower is an apparition not to be grasped and only scarcely perceived through the scenery of spectacle.

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