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The publication by Astrid Busch «world in minds» is an artistic approach to the ports of Hamburg, Antwerp in Belgium, Le Havre in France and Istanbul in Turkey. The history and present of the four ports, as well as the frequency of the ships arriving and departing, are the basis of the project's content and complement each other in their interaction. What does a port mean for a city and how has the development of the ports proceeded. Ships used to sail directly into cities, the harbour was part of the city. Nowadays, access to the port is strictly controlled and only open to authorized personnel. Past, present and future of the four ports and the tanker traffic are brought together creating stories about the ports, other worlds, ideas and exchange. The images she brings back from her travels are incorporated into a process of ongoing metamorphosis, resulting in new kinds of transition and expansion. In combination with the documentary images of the harbours, they act like «strange counter images» that stimulate associative thinking.

Astrid Busch and the Ecology of Images

Wolfgang Ullrich

Journeys are often the result of curiosity. And because artists and scientists are considered to be particularly curious, their travels have always been given special attention, in the hope that they will bring back something that will influence other people's knowledge or change their view of the world. In science, journeys are often called expeditions, and in art some journeys have even gone down in history: Who does not know Albrecht Dürer's trip to Italy or the journey to Tunis undertaken by Paul Klee, August Macke, and Louis Moilliet? In recent decades, more and more «artist-in-residence» programmes have been set up, allowing artists to travel to different, often quite remote places.

Astrid Busch is another artist for whom travel is crucial to her work. For her, however, curiosity goes even further, and she is not satisfied with simply finding unexpected and extreme motifs along the way. She wants to know what else can be found in the photographs she takes and collects on her travels. A large part of her artistic work therefore consists of developing further images from the photographs she brings back with her. She is always thinking of different ways of translating and extending them, using different media and materials; and once an image has been introduced into the cosmos of her work, it enters into a process of continual metamorphosis. For example, she projects images onto a surface with a striking structure of its own in order to in turn photograph the resulting phenomena. Or she places further layers of material over a photograph, which then also becomes a template for new images. Sometimes she prints them on a curtain or on aluminium, giving them a third dimension. In the exhibition space, they become structures that undulate or bend, and filmic realisations projected there at the same time add another – fourth - dimension.

In general, Busch is not interested in obvious variations and distortions; rather, she often subjects the motifs of her new pictorial works to such strong transformations that they are no longer recognisable. The origin of the images - their provenance - can therefore no longer be deduced; rather, they appear self-sufficient in every phase, not infrequently completely abstract. One might assume that Astrid Busch is always searching for the most improbable pictorial forms, indeed for hitherto unknown types and manifestations of images. Even her initial images are often unusual, as in her project world in minds, for example, which incorporates thermal images from tracking apps used to locate tankers at sea. For viewers, this initially poses a challenge. Knowing that Busch collects the material for her works on journeys to model cities, ports, or other distinctive places, they are likely to expect interesting insights into worlds otherwise closed to them, perhaps even a collection of documentary shots. And the fact that Busch actually shows some of these images at exhibitions only heightens these expectations, making the other pictures seem all the more alien in contrast, all the more like enigmatic counter-images in their peculiarities.

For some, this may be a manifestation of the pride of autonomy of an artist who refuses to accept all the external demands made on her. But this would not be an adequate description of Astrid Busch's artistic intention.

By offering her audience images that do not reveal what they show or how they were created – that is to say, that give rise to speculation – she aims to arouse their curiosity. And when she gathers images of different character in the same room, hangs or projects some of them on top of each other, she encourages active association and further thinking, even tempting viewers to make their own sense of the pictorial processes presented. Those who do not travel to unknown or inaccessible places should not be fobbed off with a few pictures from there but should be given the promise that something new could open up anywhere at any time. The title world in minds makes this abundantly clear: There is so much to discover if you look inwards rather than outwards and rely on your own imagination.

Astrid Busch's approach may even be prescient for times when travel will be more difficult and even more controversial, especially for environmental reasons. Techniques will then be needed to stimulate the imagination and to experience as much as possible without further expenditure of energy. But then it will also be important to make good use of the material brought back from a journey, not to discard it indifferently, but to work with it, to use it repeatedly and in different ways. All kinds of transformations, superimpositions, and continuations will then become standard, and artists in particular will be expected to develop their own ecology of images. And what better role model than the work of Astrid Busch?

Le Havre Risen from Ruins

Thoughts on War and Destruction,
Reconstruction and Hope

Astrid Busch

The port city of Le Havre in the north of France is particularly marked by the destruction of the Second World War.

During my many visits, I became interested not only in the post-war architecture of Auguste Perret, but also in the port and the container ships that arrive there at high frequency, providing this city not only with goods, but also with hopes, dreams, and aspirations. That is why I decided to go there myself by sea and enter the port on a container ship.

ARCHITECTURAL AND ATMOSPHERIC FEATURES OF A CITY

The architectural and atmospheric features of the city have been the subject of my investigations in the past, as well as the basis for new works. My artistic work is about places and the experience of them. My images are created through the aesthetic experiences generated by the interaction of all the senses. I overwrite historical images and found objects that I collect on site with my own photographic works. I condense the material into spatial image arrangements, from which photographs are created that are translated into space on different image carriers and tell stories about the architecture or atmosphere of a place in an associative way.

In early September 1944, most of the city of Le Havre was destroyed by massive bombing by the British Air Force in its attempt to liberate the city from the German occupiers. All that remained was ash and dust. From the railway station, which is about 2.5 kilometres from the port, you could see the English Channel. Le Havre was bombarded for twelve days before the British finally liberated the city. Few historic buildings survived. 12,500 homes were destroyed and around 80,000 people were left homeless.

After this devastation, the city was rebuilt between 1945 and 1954 to plans drawn up by Auguste Perret and a team of sixty architects. For the construction, Perret had the rubble of the destroyed city ground and separated according to colour and structure. By adding other materials such as glass and gravel, he was able to create different surfaces and colour tones that radiate brightness and warmth. Le Havre became possible, plannable, and realised through the new concrete architecture of the time.

HEAVY DESTRUCTION, RADICAL MEASURES

The philosopher Stephan Erdmann aptly writes: «When the history [...] of cities is told, it will be a history of radical measures. The fact that (technical) possibilities determine reality is exemplified by the impact of gunpowder on culture and architecture, the latter of which can be taken literally. [...] In the end, there is also a small irony in the fact that concrete would

be much less attractive without explosives. After all, you kind of want to get rid of it again when it has done its duty.»[1]

Le Havre's proximity to the English Channel and its turbulent history are evident throughout the city and continue to define its atmosphere. Three main boulevards link the city's main characteristic poles: the city centre, the Channel, and the port. The debris of the war, dumped in the Channel at the time, as well as the bricks and tiles of the destroyed houses, rounded by the currents and washed up on the beach to this day, remind us of the devastation. The past of this city is still present through the tides.

The war in Normandy is inextricably linked with the Allied invasion of 6 June 1944 and the route taken by the Allied Forces across the Channel. Today, it is these memories that are evoked on the beautiful and seemingly innocent landing beaches.

THE SHIP - A HETEROTOPOS

I started my journey on a container ship from Hamburg via Antwerp to Le Havre. I am now also travelling from the Channel to complete my picture of Le Havre and to examine the unity of the city with its port and container traffic. The history and present of the port, as well as the ship as an independent, self-sufficient, and self-contained space, form the basis of my current project.

The philosopher Michel Foucault coined the term 'heterotopia' for such situations. «If we think [...] that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea [...], you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization, from the sixteenth century until the present, the great instrument of economic development [...], but has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence.»[2]

The seas have always connected the world's religions by carrying ships, goods, and people to the remotest places. They thus have multiple functions, as a space of transport and communication, but also as a place of longing and memory.

But what does a port mean to a city, how has it evolved, and what significance will it have in the future?

The container revolution of the late 1960s, with its specialised terminals, changed not only maritime transport but also ports, which had previously been located close to the city. As a result, the seafarers can hardly leave the ships due to the shortened berthing times, thus reconfirming the concept of heterotopia coined by Foucault.

There are few places where superstition, sailors' yarns, and romance clash so violently with the realities of the working world as on a ship. Surrounded by the sea, you quickly lose your sense of time, proportions, speed, and distance. The transition from reality to fiction in the world at sea is fluid. Not only metaphorically, the ship, which forms a self-contained space at sea, is connected to all ports and times through the narratives and the cargo.

A RUSSIAN CAPTAIN, UKRAINIAN AND FILIPINO CREW

The captain of «my» ship is from Russia, the crew are Ukrainians and Filipinos. Political conflicts of the kind we are currently witnessing around the world play no role on board. The Filipinos are cheap, well-trained sailors and of Christian faith. Great care is taken to ensure that this closed world does not become unbalanced. Faith therefore plays an important role. Only the changing pilots, who are responsible for entering the ports, join the closed community for a short period of time. Pilots dock the ships and temporarily take charge.

Life on the water is characterised by contrasts: On the one hand, hierarchy and power relations are palpable; on the other, seafaring is associated with boundless freedom. Ships have always had diverse roles and meanings: prisons and escape ships, bearers of hope for refugees and travellers dreaming of great freedom. Ships have been used to colonise entire continents and enslave people, and the Russian Revolution was sparked by mutinous sailors on a ship. Today, slave ships have given way to refugee ships, and despite air travel, international trade is still largely carried by ship. Dangers arise not only from war, violence, and displacement; global shipping also puts a strain on oceans and ecosystems.

Loaded containers no longer reveal what is being transported – abstracted goods in boxes of the same size and shape. Containers also serve as accommodation for construction workers or as student dormitories. Are they also heterotopias?

FLOOD AND BEACH

Arriving in Le Havre, I find myself back on the beach, which has played an important role in the city's history, and from which I can still see the large container ships coming and going. Current associative images of beaches are evoked: images of the rising tide of flotsam and jetsam, the waste of civilisation, and the threat of rising sea levels due to global warming. The consequences are well known: floods, storm surges, and the sinking of many island nations. The Bible's promise that there will never be another Deluge seems to have fallen out of time. Even the rainbow as a symbol of salvation seems to be a thing of the past. The sea plays a crucial role in regulating the world's climate.

Asked how the story of the Deluge could spiritually arm people today and in the face of increasing natural disasters, the Protestant theologian Thomas Naumann replied: «With the narrative of the Deluge, the Christian faith holds on to the hope that God remains faithful to His creation and does not abandon it precisely because He created it.»[3]

Foucault also ended his «Order of Things» on a beach by contemplating the sand. What did he see there? The face of «man», the traces of appeared before the rising tide «[...] then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.»[4]

[1] Stephan Erdmann, Astrid Busch, Le Havre. Brasilia. Mezzamor. Wolfsburg, Berlin 2021, S. 130-131.

[2] Michel Foucault, Die Heterotopien. Der utopische Körper, Frankfurt/M. 5. Aufl.2021, S.21.

[3] Deutschlandradio Kultur: Thomas Naumann im Gespräch mit Andreas Main, 23.07.2021.

[4] Michel Foucault, Die Ordnung der Dinge, Frankfurt/M. 1974, S. 461.