

Ruth Horak

Before Disappearance

Industrial ruins lie in waiting: for intruders, for an intermediate use, for their demolition. Sooted from fire, vacated, closed off, cut off from the rest of the city, covered with mud and garbage, they have become accustomed to the fact that the times of activity have passed.

Others arrive, broken glass cracks beneath the soles of their shoes, one moves toward an empty wall to tag it, another takes photographs. Nature comes as well, snow penetrates the ceiling, undemanding vegetation settles in the cracks. The spray can begins to plant a forest in the city, the camera takes a picture of the uppermost visible layer of the space (with forest). All underlying layers that could attest to earlier events remain, however hidden, perhaps one or the other lies in the photo-album of a former employee or in the archive of the architect. The right tool has not yet been invented, one that could remove individual layers of time or rewind a photograph like a video cassette, so that along the way it could be stopped at random.

Markus Oberndorfer, who studied with Friedl Kubelka at the Schule für künstlerische Photographie and with Matthias Herrmann at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna, is intrigued by these layers that take hold of a building over the course of time: the remains and new traces of human presence, reuse through rededication (Lilian Bailey School) or appropriation by the homeless, by graffiti sprayers (Traces) or police officers (Bakary J), the disappearance using the example of the Atlantic Wall at Cap Ferret in South France, where the bunkers are sinking into the sand and the waves, or at least disappearing under graffiti. The special thing about these representatives of an important historical event, which are not located in neuralgic points like Normandy, allowing them to become a commemorative site, is the holiday mood that they exude in their new role as a sundeck, diving platform, or surface to paint on. Markus Oberndorfer encounters them with the same self-evidence as those who come to holiday here. The series, which was begun in 2005 and since then expanded into many facets, accordingly speaks little of the historical significance of the motifs or the utopia of this megalomaniacal fortification system. He trivializes rather than dramatize. The bunkers are not exaggerated into monuments that demand respect, where their troublesome political dimension is still noted today, especially not with children playing out gunfights with plastic toy guns. They are rather ruins that lie as if by coincidence on the shore, that on the one hand develop sculptural qualities before the very light, landscape panorama, all kept in the same shade, while simultaneously being inspired by the dynamism and mood of the holiday beach. Oberndorfer: „For me, it's not just about physical disappearance through corrosion, water, and sand, but what is caused by the people that live with them, re-functioning them and using them in the most varied ways.“

It is always the uppermost layer, the current use, the momentary situation, which yacht harbor, vacation homes, unused tennis courts and boat garages, that attract Markus Oberndorfer, because the sites are no longer what they once were, but are still there, for others and other purposes.

The past is inscribed in these architectures, but they are affected each day by new events that again leave traces of their own and cover the old with new layers.

The „trace“ is closely linked to the photography, be it the symbolic trace of the past, the actual chemical trace, or the trace in the sense of „detail“, that is overlooked by the otherwise unprepared eye.¹ But once the trace is fixed, inexorably passing and disappearance begin, a process that photography would like to arrest. But for this, there is an additional tool, at least in Thomas Pynchon's last novel, where „one by one, across the land, responsive to his desire, photographs trembled, stirred, began to move, at first slowly, then accelerating, pedestrians walked away out of the frame ... family gatherings at festive tables were scattered into drunkenness and debris ... as if all the information needed to depict an infinite future had been there in the initial „snap“.²

¹ C.f.: Bernd Stiegler: *Spur, Bilder der Photographie*, Frankfurt/Main 2006, p.217ff.

² C.f.: Thomas Pynchon: *Against the Day*, New York 2007, 1038.

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