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WERNER BARTSCH

DESERT BIRDS

Published by Kehrer Verlag in October 2010

A cockpit faces into an endless desert landscape; a gangway stands in the middle of an abandoned expanse, points at the sky and appears to wait for planes that no longer fly, for passengers that no longer arrive. In this kilometers-wide desert in the southwestern USA, hundreds of unused and discarded aircraft stand in waiting and contemplate their fate. While one normally encounters them amidst the hustle of the airports of this world, as the center of a network of activities, here the planes are found in absolute solitude. Not a single person far and wide, no infrastructure, no movement. It is not artificial materials like cement, tar, steel, or glass that make up the scenery, but instead sand, a few scattered grasses, and rocks.

This isolated and deserted location appears absurd and bizarre for the once so modern and freedom-connoting airplanes. So many people taken to distant places. So many dreams and longings, fears and joys embodied. So many people who trusted them with their lives and hopes. Countless stories and memories slumber in these ships of the air and are now fading away into the remote distance. The only reminders of the activities of the past that remain are the imprints and furrows in the hot desert sand.

Whether these aircraft will rise into the air one more time like a phoenix from the ashes is uncertain. Several of them have already stood here for decades and are aging quietly. What begins as a stopover in times of crisis and as temporary disuse not infrequently becomes the last stop. Obsolete or defective, the planes remain useful only as a stockpile of replacement parts. These parts are removed and resold; the unusable remnants are disposed of and melted down.

Deprived of their mobility and functionality, the discarded planes are reduced to their basic form. In the gleaming light of the burning desert sun, on white sand and against a backdrop of bright-blue sky, the aerodynamic shapes and elegant curves shine with an unreal brilliance. In the sleek wings and abstract silhouettes, which stand out in the bright glow of the moon and under the clear, starry sky, the futuristic expressiveness of these aircraft becomes apparent one more time.

In his photography, Werner Bartsch concentrates on the 'new' that comes about when familiar relationships between subjects and surroundings are dissolved. His works show the contradiction between the subject aircraft and the desert context as well as the tension that this contradiction produces. The vertical line of focus in some pictures draws the eye to details and structures, to individual planes in endless rows, to gleaming surfaces, and to a plane's ragged fuselage, from which two lonely seats look out into the open. In its expansiveness and simplicity, the arid desert functions as a minimalist backdrop against which the grace and beauty of the 'Desert Birds' are made fully evident. Like imposing metal sculptures, they submit to their rough surroundings, becoming unintentional works of art placed in no-man's land.

The very specific interplay of colors and forms, the mood of the lighting, and the endlessness of the barren surfaces combine to form a unique aesthetic through which the fascination that these places and subjects generate becomes perceptible. These photographs are not inventories of discarded airplane models, not documentaries of storage yards and airplane graveyards; they are a tribute to countless hours in the air and long journeys, to the pioneer spirit and human imagination.

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WERNER BARTSCH

AIRTROPOLIS

Published by Kehrer in September 2013

A gangway in the middle of nowhere in the glaring floodlight. Encircled by the night darkness that embeds it in a wasteland of grey asphalt. Far and wide, not a person in sight, no planes taxiing over the landing field, no cargo being loaded. Only the sparkling lights in the distance suggest that this place is not asleep, that this conglomeration of function and efficiency never really comes to a standstill. Behind the scenes, the machinery keeps on running day and night to ensure that the process of travel – once a luxury, now something commonplace – can function without a hitch. Every work step is exactly choreographed, every movement has to hit the mark, has to fit into this precisely interconnecting system of cogs and flywheels composed of co-ordination and concentration. Every day, countless people are channelled through check-in counters and passport controls, through metal detectors and waiting areas; vast quantities of baggage are loaded from conveyor belts onto luggage wagons and then back again; aircraft are serviced and made ready for take off.

With “Airtropolis” – the second part of his aeronautic series after “Desert Birds” – Werner Bartsch plunges us into the cosmos of the airport; he allows us to linger at leisure in places where hustle and bustle are usually the order of the day. He takes us along with him into the heart of the machinery, leads us through the waiting areas and loading zones, past conveyor equipment and an airstrip dappled with black skid marks, and as far as the blue, infinite spaces of the skies. In addition to the carefully honed infrastructure and logistics of this area of transit, the viewer is able to experience the unique atmosphere and nature of a place that many regard as nothing more than a place on the way to somewhere else, as something temporary and transient.

Mirroring and reflections convey the hectic concomitance of what is going on. Travellers pass each other by like fleeting shadows before again becoming lost in the heaving masses and disappearing like beads of condensation into thin air. Interior and exterior spaces become fused into one; destination boards, people and architecture combine to form abstract images; colourful pools of light represent the heartbeat of an intermediate space that has a different rhythm for each person

who passes through it. It is the rhythm of the globalised world that materialises in an airport. This is the focal point of goods and personal transport, a place where international connections assume physical form and develop, where technical change becomes visible. The world with its countless cultures and languages closes ranks, congregates and shows that co-operation is attainable. During the time of mingling and cross-linking at the airport as the point of intersection, it seems as though cultural boundaries are abrogated, and our age of mobility and migration acquires visual form.

“Airtropolis” casts light on the complex nature of a place that renders certain things possible. This is where distances are overcome, where minor and major decisions are realised, where goods that were once unknown or unobtainable are brought in. A cosmos is revealed in small details that represent the big overall picture and then point, beyond the airport as a place with its specific mechanisms and regulations, towards more far-reaching chances, hopes and ways forward (and out).

In his subjective approach to this global space and his exploration of its diverse facets, Werner Bartsch succeeds in making the fascination of this universe tangible. Straight images are combined with abstract impressions; clear and explicit details in the heart of the vast organisation along with diffuse and fleeting impressions of travellers. The candour of the images opens up a new and highly distinctive visual space encompassing the spectrum of meanings and memories that this place holds for each individual. Just like the conveyor belt that leads to the unknown or the empty destination boards, “Airtropolis” does not impose a set direction or interpretation, but rather offers points of contact for one’s individual sensibilities and experiences. While one is leafing through the pages of this book, the central hub of the globalised world comes to a standstill and opens the doors to its fascinating and multi-layered world.