

Moments by Martina Tritthart

Perceptual fragments from the memory of a commuter between Vienna and Graz.

Arrival at Vienna South Station at 7:55 a.m. with bus 13A. A race against time begins. Dive through the threshold between outdoors and the hall. A bleak and gloomy atmosphere. Just before the ticket hall, the aroma of coffee and fresh bread waft past the nose. Then the overwhelming vastness of the interior: A solemn moment. The flutter of a pigeon wing, human voices, announcements from the loudspeaker overlaid with its echo in the hall, cooing of pigeons, a diffuse hum – suddenly a strange noise, a ghostly, faded ticking, a signal that time and again abruptly abates. Inner unrest. A glance at the departure board. Rush up the endless walkways with a heavy bag to the tracks of the southern railway. Dreading to miss the train. The weight of the bag multiplies with the proximity to the train. A frantic glimpse at Kurt Hofstetter's video installation "One Moment of Time". Blinking. Time. Ticking. Pigeon spikes on the artwork, on the roofs of the kiosks, on the bridge balustrade, pigeon nets on the façades. Dust. Disgust. Diving again through a threshold; it is brighter and colder. The train is waiting. 7:58 boarding and departure.

The photographer Roman Bönsch follows an objective-documentary approach and breaks with conventional ways of seeing, broadening the field of vision without letting the spatial experience of the observer seem unnatural. This is especially apparent in the photos of the ticket hall and railyards of Vienna South Station. With knowledge about the before and the after, each image documents a temporal process and, simultaneously, is a snapshot in time, a moment in the history of the South Station and its demolition.

The chronology of events, the disappearance of buildings revealing views to the unknown, the previously hidden, draws attention to the evolution of space. With these radical changes of space come profound transformations in the social environment of the station and its surrounding city districts.

The images stir the imagination of the observer; they affect on an emotional level. They evoke experiences, sentiments, and memories. They convey atmospheres that inhabited the spaces. According to Gernot Böhme, "atmosphere" is the "prototype of an intermediate phenomenon".¹ A space, for example, can be friendly, festive, or perhaps sombre and have a corresponding effect on people's moods. The atmospheric character is here the essential feature of the spatial experience. The architectural photographs by Roman Bönsch contain different aspects of the atmospheric. On one hand, they convey the aesthetic of the 1950s expressed in the materials, colours, and details of the building and the spatial structure. The images tell of the importance of the railhead as a functional space for travellers and waiting passengers, as the beginning and the end of a journey from and to the city. Scenes on the platforms communicate feelings of joy, longing, and anxiety. Remnants of the past spirit of optimism of the '50s become tangible in the photography.

On the other hand, images of the demolition work move us in an oddly melancholic and sensational way. Pictures of abandoned buildings, marked by the absence of (human) life, disturb us with their seemingly ominous feel. In contrast, the machine aesthetic of the demolition equipment fascinates the observer. The photographs of publicly inaccessible facilities around the reception building tell stories of the work, the people, and the room functions.

The concept of space stands in relation to society, its developments, its sense and perception of space. Architectural photography represents aspects of space as extensions of the body (spatium) and place (topos), which are inherent to the depicted spaces. The term spatium goes back to the natural philosophy of René Descartes, which defines space enclosed by objects as measurable volumes. For Gernot Böhme, this metric space (spatium) is a space of intuition that defines itself through distances, while the concept of place (topos) is characterised by the "space of bodily presence" and refers to humans and their scope for actions and movements.²

The artist does not conceive space as an empty volume. While the spatial volumes in the photography of Roman Bönsch provide an understanding of the space and orientation, inviting one on a conceptual procession, the close-up images draw one near to the materiality and bring the surfaces “within reach”. The photographs draw a connection with the experiential by placing the observer in relation to the space and consequently to the image. The artist thematises the relationship between humans and space in two ways. On one hand, he represents the people in their space of action – this is also true for the empty spaces where the action is implicit. On the other hand, the images play with the imaginations of their observers as a virtual space. The image itself is two-dimensional, but it produces a three-dimensional illusory space for the observer through the central perspective representation of space. At the same time, the often extremely offset sight lines chosen by Roman Bönsch dynamicise the perspective. The observer on this side of the image is literally pulled into its vanishing point.

¹ Gernot Böhme, Atmosphäre als Begriff der Ästhetik in Daidalos Nr. 68/1998, S. 112

² Gernot Böhme, Architektur und Atmosphäre, München 2006, S.