

The Birds Are Loose ...

Wolfgang Wirth's travelling images and after-images

By Gisela Steinlechner

Wolfgang Wirth calls his project of travelling pictures '*Little Birds of Passage*', whose temporary stay in landscapes he documents in photographs. Like stowaways, these *day-release prisoners* shift nimbly to and fro between media and perceptions: between painted pictorial space and real natural space, between colour and black-and-white, between brush stroke, sign and photographic track. Our gaze hops about with them, alighting momentarily on a painted hinge as if on a trusted and yet precarious foothold for our senses. There awaits us usually one of these small birds – alert aviators, mounting the painting as if this, and not the air, were its very own element. They are in any case transients – birds of passage; their talons touch pigment, a network of canvas and hold fast, just in case, to a painted branch or streak of colour. Such mooring is necessary, for the canvas is largely shadowed, nearly murky: grey-black schlieren and vapours engender or veil an eerie abyss, against which the somewhat more lightly nuanced avian forms are contrasted. The delicate touches of colour and sometimes the radiant white of a bib look as if they have been distilled from the dark backdrop, become visible for only a moment. Both the seeing and the seen here are in progress.

The small birds also have kin, strange and yet familial-like things that take a place in their society or take up their place: for example, the spiral that seems to be about to metamorphose from a painted into a corporeal thing (viscera rising out the painting), or the yellow, red and blue toy flag raised on a bright blotch of colour (a cloud?); it can't fly, but air is also its element. A well-known place-name sign stands in a nocturnal landscape; straightaway we want to feel at home and already see a hint of daybreak on the horizon in the somewhat lighter passage at the picture's centre. However, there too is a frayed black brush-stroke that swabs fiercely across a corner of the sign, scaring us out of the illusion. Not that the illusion is thereby obliterated; on the contrary, it thrusts itself into the picture, wants to be seen, or even more, well and truly *read*: the sign as a citation of a sign, the landscape as a composition of brush-strokes and colours, the canvas as the specious place where painting performs its somersaults and turns. In Wolfgang Wirth's pictures we repeatedly find the technical / material and the figurative / representative agenda of painting enmeshed in such scenic mini-dramas: Who was there first, who is giving the other a wipe or sitting himself cheekily on the other, and where is room (food) for the viewer?

These squadrons of images are also a travelling theatre in the sense that they shift physical places, even continents, and always appear in new formations. Like migratory birds, they inhabit a few places in the open air for a short space of time, alight in an exhibition space and fly off again. Some images are thereby lost, while others are picked up as motifs on the spot and carried on to the next station. Their travels have taken them hitherto to Warsaw, Los Angeles and Vienna; the artist found changing local open-air stages: at the edge of the city, in parks, on riverfronts, in semi-wild, scrubby landscapes.

I imagine it in this way: he searches, much like a bird, for a landing-place for his images – something which they can temporarily lean on, link up to, even assimilate themselves to; what he finds are real spaces, atmospheres, filled with light, air, noises, insects, plants, signs and artefacts. There the images are set out; they hang on trees like apples; other are reminiscent of wayside shrines on a country path, of an old poster on the wall of a barn or of flotsam and jetsam. As paintings, they obviously don't belong here, and yet they make themselves a little at home, alight casually on the grass, unconcerned with wind and weather or perilous lighting conditions. They are excursionists who have temporarily forgotten their normal manners, have loosened their ties and shoes or thrown them on the grass, snacking without cutlery or dishes.

And the landscape, nature? It likewise emphasizes its pictorial qualities, demanding extraction, composition, interpretation. Here photography chimes in; it locates the exposed art images in a photographically assorted and probed terrain.

After-images

A b/w photograph: On the banks of the Vistula, in a suburb of Warsaw, a painted picture of a bird leans against a concrete beam and is reflected in a puddle of water. The bright band of the river shines in the background. That is the simple caption, but the visual circumstances of the photograph are more complicated. What is the relation, for example, of this bright strip 'river' (which the concrete beam on the bank seems to frame) to the brightly coloured rectangle on the canvas, against the background of which the artist has positioned (painted) a bird on a branch? Part of this brightly coloured rectangle, which is moreover 'fixed' to the canvas with painted thumbtacks, is reflected (in a somewhat darker tone) in the water puddle on the ground: a picture within picture within a picture ... Nevertheless, it is not primarily a hall of mirrors reflecting visual theory that Wolfgang Wirth set up and photographed on the banks of the Vistula; first and foremost, the photograph documents and investigates an ambiguous situation that arose out of a concrete action: painted pictures (*artworks*) introduced into a landscape (*nature*). This is remarkable, entertaining or meaningful only for a culturally encoded gaze, and just this gaze is represented by the photograph through its selecting certain angles and extracts, producing relationships, operating with illusions and allusions. These are unique and nevertheless multilaterally open relations of a 'It-was-so-on-this-afternoon-at-this-place', which the photograph has brought into view in the form of a little koan: a brain-teaser for the eye – with mix-ups, background noise and short circuits – and at the same time a poetic day pass for art into the bewildering terrain of reality.

Field photographs also document the subsequent gaze of the artist on his pictures: not separated, picture for picture, and set in the abstract space of a catalogue but, as it were, questioned situationally, presented in interaction, aired in genuine landscapes. These always somewhat deranged-seeming landscapes appear in the smuggled-in pictures as if reflected and alienated in tiny splinters of mirror; the dark background of the paintings reinforces further the association with a mirrored world in which light no longer suffices to fill infinite space. Only the birds seem able to traverse these expanses. Some of the landscapes are photographed in colour, which at once imparts

a touch of b/w photography to the grey-toned pictures placed within them; in this visual ping-pong game they operate as subsequent images of the *second degree*, ambiguous and at the same time hanging awkwardly between the levels of representation and reference.

Most photographs of the open-air installations, however, are in black and white, as if such a discoloured nature had adapted itself to the reduced palette of painting; yet whereas we 'retranslate' the grey tones of photographed sky, tree and shrub into their natural or probable colours without difficulty, the transfer between abstraction and reality in the painted pictures is not so easy. The question of colour necessarily becomes, in the case of painting, an affair of imagination and speculation; seen in this way, the various light-dark shadowings of the b/w photographs describe empty spaces, or we might also say spaces of possibility.

Wolfgang Wirth's pictures and installation are also about the latter. The paintings and the landscapes that they seek out graze such spaces of possibility precisely through their concrete relations and through the operative conditions of a here-and-now. Here a canvas casts its shadow on sandy soil or catches the silhouette of a gnarled branch on its surface where the branch mingles with other branches formed of colour, which are again joined by others that project their real physical presence into the picture. Here a painted cloud is reflected in the water, perhaps next to a real cloud. What is the difference? What of the representation is caught in the reflection, what kind of image casts the shadow? And where in our perception do the various levels (degrees) of reality and illusion merge or shift?

Of the Xenies, those still-life-like murals of ancient Pompeii characterised by particularly 'realistic techniques of figuration', Norman Bryson has written: 'When they refer most faithfully to the reality of the world, they at once shift from that world into transitions and thresholds which culminate in the opposite of figuration – irrealisation, artifice, the simulacrum' (Bryson: *Looking at the Overlooked*, 1990). In such transitional zones between reality and artificiality, Wolfgang Wirth has located his apparently simple visual motifs: the little birds, painted to a (brush) hair, are recognisable unto unrecognisability, and the canvas does not first become a *foreign body* when it is hung under the open sky between trees and bushes. It lends its measured surface and material texture to the illusion of objectness, and when the pictures (these imagined castles in the air) travel from one place to another they cleave to this two-dimensional reality as if to their own four walls. Yet they are not altogether impermeable; they open up like a house of cards; painting falls apart, and the birds are loose ...

Translated by Jonathan Uhlener