Jean-Christophe Arcos
The Ghost Utopia, 2019
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View(ed) from above
translated by Amanda Crabtree

Since the beginning of last year, Léonie Young has been flying over Maubeuge.

Viewed from above, it's all there: shopping centres, factories, houses on estates, houses in the city centre, a cemetery, secondary schools, a railway station, surrounding fields and a meandering river.

However the airship hangar has disappeared.

Léonie Young has been focusing on the traces of this missing part of history and architecture in the landscape.

The ties between the conquest of the air and national defence linked the destinies of Maubeuge and Jean-Marie-Joseph Coutelle, an aeronautical first officer appointed in 1794 by the Committee of Public Safety to deploy an airship to observe Austrian positions near the city. Hauled as far as Charleroi, *L'Entreprenant* was to continue to drive back the enemy. On Coutelle's advice, for a while Napoleon even contemplated invading England by balloon. Throughout the 19th century, Maubeuge concentrated on other technological breakthroughs involving coal and steel, and it was in Paris that the most notable progress in airship technology was made before Maubeuge found itself on the military map again in the lead up to the First World War.

Built in the 1910's, the air-station of Maubeuge did not enable the city to withstand the siege of the Generals von Zwehl and von Bülow: Maubeuge was to be the first French city to be occupied by the German army at the very beginning of September 1914. The dismantlement of the hangar by the German army in 1940 seemed to conclude a chapter of local history linked as

much to the technological advances of the industrial revolu-
tion as to aeronautic military engineering

The hangar in Maubeuge was different from other buil-
dings connected to airships which were generally construc-
ted with a metal skeleton and walls alternatively filled with
brick and glass. In Maubeuge, the architecture took a diffe-
rent direction with a gigantic concrete shell composed of
matching pre-fabricated elements fitted together to form a huge
concourse.

The use of concrete contrasted with 19th century conventional
large glass panel sheds and open spaces obstructed with pil-
lars holding up thick metal frames with crossed beams to sup-
port sawtooth roofs. At the turn of the 20th Century, there
were increasing endeavours to use new building technologies
for industrial architecture: Peter Behrens, in particular, was
to reuse the patents of Joseph Monier and François Coignet,
the inventors of reinforced pre-stressed concrete, whilst
eliminating all superficial decoration in these *cathedrals of
work*, as they were referred to by his contemporaries. Behrens
trained the best architects of the beginning of modernism, Le
Corbusier and Walter Gropius in particular, and was to play a
significant role in redefining industrial architecture, where
the forms and applications would gradually veer towards ad-
ministrative buildings, constructions of new large-scale in-
frastructures and collective housing. For the air-stations,
the modular domes used in Maubeuge, Berlin or in Raincy in the
1900's replaced the heavy rigid wooden frames of the preceding
century, their rounded shape enveloping the airships without
any waste of space.

Although they feature as part of industrial, military and transport history, the airship hangars were demolished when the flights were discontinued, meaning they were effaced both from the landscape and collective memory. Did they represent such a problematic heritage that it was necessary to eliminate every trace? On the base of what logic of memory were they returned to utopia, namely to the absence of a real location?

By starting with this absent trace, Léonie Young here confers on the image the function of clinical observation as much as the responsibility for the survival of phantoms.

The word *Image* is actually derived from the death mask which, in moulding the deceased person's face, enabled the Romans to conserve the contours; Aby Warburg noted that the condition of the appearance of an image, as a witness of the real, was to be placed in the chronology of its disappearance. Warburg's *Nachleben* is therefore unfailingly linked to photography, which resurrects the past form in the present.

It was not by chance that photography was used in spiritualist experiments which spread throughout the Belle époque and which found in the photographic medium scientific approval by objectivising pursuits rooted in the fear of a world guided by positive science.

Neither was it a coincidence that photography was used at crime scenes: the metric photographs of Alphonse Bertillon,

who perched his camera on a tripod over the victim, intending to record with the most exact precision the grip of death in order to elucidate the exact circumstances that brought it about.

This is the actual issue: the quest for objectivity, for which photography is the perfect auxiliary.

Does photography give an account of objects? Does it not reveal, in a complementary yet paradoxical manner, what cannot be seen by the naked eye? What temporality does it enlist?

Léonie Young's research is based on the premise of objectified photography, that is to say that which becomes itself an object, only reconstructing with the means available the experience of what has been approached by the body.

By placing the collected images alongside the shots she took in Maubeuge, at the Museum of Air and Space in Le Bourget and at Tropical Islands, an exotic theme park in a former airship hangar in Krausnick near Berlin, and by revealing the simulacra which, with technology or devices, bring the sky and the ground together, Léonie Young suggests we acknowledge photography as an interior, flat, two-dimensional space which generates its own fiction — a *mental image*.

The impossibility of any incarnation takes on its full meaning in a video that Léonie Young made in Krausnick: in a car on a roundabout that she can't escape, like an insect near a long sought-for light source, the artificial nature of which diverts it from its intuitive path, the eye of the camera circulates, turns around, launches into orbit.

What is revealed is cruel absence: photography cannot be confined to vision. It does not stay outside of entropy, it never crashes into the real, does not become one with it, does not convey the body even when it shows it. Even if photography is based on physics and optics, it belongs to the domain of the mind, and depends more on the work of the brain than the eye.

By capturing the airship hangar of Krausnick on *Google Earth*, Léonie Young assembles the facets damaged by the lens into visual chimaeras unrelated to the industrial harmony of the concrete dome. *The Church of Auvers sur Oise* by Van Gogh had signed the death warrant of perspective space inherited from Greek Antiquity via Ibn Al-Haytham and the Renaissance; Léonie Young forces the issue to blinding point for the eye that is used to taking the artificial nature of the photographic image as proof of reality as it is seen by the eye itself.

In lectures about optics and camouflage to the students of the New Bauhaus in Chicago, and then to the soldiers of the American army after the Pearl Harbour attack, György Kepes had in his time already pointed out the limits of aerial observation and demonstrated that what Paul Virilio called the *logistics of perception* could perish on scanty illusions: seen from above, the world is flat.

Perhaps then it is not so much in space that we should look for the counterpoint to this detachment that Hannah Arendt attributed to technology, driving man to leave his terrestrial home for utopian odysseys, but within time itself, a human dimension if ever there was one, of which Léonie Young strives to reveal the invisible presence[1].

Jean-Christophe Arcos
Art critic and curator

1.
Today, the site of the airship hangar in Maubeuge is occupied by the Lycée Pierre-Forest.