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Davos, a town to rent



JULES SPINATSCH:
"Davos Is a Verb"
Lars Müller Publishers
2021, 304 pages,
273 illustrations;
CHF 50.00

As some of his teachers at the International Center of Photography in New York suggested to him, photographer Jules Spinatsch from Grisons has set his eye on a personal location. That place is Davos, the high-altitude town where he grew up. The work "Davos Is a Verb" shows the alpine town from the angle of its transformation for the World Economic Forum (WEF). It echoes the monumental work that he has already accomplished on the same theme using an automated photographic observation system. This time, the Swiss artist photographs the town with his camera in hand, looking at its transformation at the service of business, finance and politics. The images included in this work of 300 pages give the impression of looking through a kaleidoscope. The colours of the photographs are saturated. They show global brands displaying their corporate language according to a sophisticated design. Luminous slogans promise growth, security, sustainable development and health all at once. "Unsmoke Your Mind" suggests cigarette manufacturer Phillip Morris. "Growth Forever" is the mantra displayed by the State of Karnataka. Facebook, Google, Black Rock, Huawei and their peers have taken up residence in cobbled together spaces or by transforming local businesses. The Chämi-Bar is disguised as Turkiye House. The Parsenn hotel has metamorphosed into a showroom for the AMTD Group. The roads from the station are full of black limousines and military vehicles. Men discuss oil and the environment over cocktails. "Davos Is a Verb" is an allusion to the fact that this town in Grisons is today conjugated in the language of the WEF. Money waters the resort. Some businesses remain empty for the whole year, as all they need to do is rent their premises for the WEF forum to stay in business. Jules Spinatsch documents in photos, almost one hundred businesses rented to Davos during this event. Bodyguards, empty or barricaded spaces, young women in conversation with businessmen: these are just some of the moments captured by the Swiss photographer. The vision is rigorous and complex. The eye stumbles through a labyrinth of details, transparencies and reflections. However, the catalogue paints a rather sober picture at the same time. And the presence of protestors disguised as clowns or as police officers adds to the discomfort. During the 2020 WEF, the 50th edition, Trump laughed at Greta Thunberg. This was before the global surge of Covid-19.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Formulaic reality



STEFANIE HEINZMANN:
"Labyrinth"
BMG, 2021

And again, that mischievous smile. That quaint Valais lilt. Stefanie Heinzmann wears her heart on her sleeve. She is a frequent fixture on Swiss television at the moment, starring on reality shows ("Das Schweizer Tauschkonzert", the Swiss version of The Best Singers), advertising health drinks, and plugging her new album.

But the singer from Visp – the former winner of a talent contest on Stefan Raab's late-night show "TV total" – does not have it easy. Heinzmann has exploited television very effectively since she first appeared on our screens in 2007. She is a celebrity, and the whole country knows her. This is both a blessing and a curse. Whereas Heinzmann can always count on attracting the mainstream, more discerning audiences are chronically allergic to her. With the best will in the world, people are loath to consider reality stars as credible artists. Don't they have their own identity? No way. Not in the reality format – and not even during their subsequent careers.

It is easy to forget that Stefanie Heinzmann is in fact a successful performer in Germany and Switzerland and regularly releases albums containing songs that she has penned herself. The 32-year-old belies her celebrity status through the conventional no-frills manner in which she plies her trade.

Her new album "Labyrinth" therefore deserves a fair hearing. And, guess what, Heinzmann's sixth LP sounds pretty decent at first. The title track is a fresh, contemporary, groovy, funky electro-dance number. The second track "Best Life" has an infectious, catchy refrain. The next song "Would You Still Love Me" also begins promisingly. But then the album loses its way. Unfortunately, the music slips into a ready-made pattern that oscillates predictably between linear radio pop and a more club-centric sound.

Hamburg producer Steffen Graef has given Stefanie Heinzmann's songs the modern treatment, adding powerful keyboards, crisp beats and notable intensity. Heinzmann's soulful voice also shines through in places. This is when the Swiss artist sounds her most natural and genuine.

But what about having an identity? Although Stefanie Heinzmann comes across as likeable, the unflattering but unsurprising conclusion to make is that "Labyrinth" is formulaic music for a formulaic star. The naysayers still have a point.

MARKO LEHTINEN