

The Transparency of Language

Always after (The Glass House) is the title of a 16mm film by Iñigo Manglano Ovalle (2006) which shows us, by means of exquisitely beautiful images, fragments of glass being swept across a black marble floor. The author claims to be truly interested in the concept of *repercussions*, in both terms of politics and the global context, which makes the title very easy to understand. However, knowing Manglano Ovalle's interest in the architecture of Mies van der Rohe, it is hard to resist the temptation to conduct a new interpretation of the title—one which is undoubtedly less linear, although perhaps more provocative—revealing, ultimately, an inability to produce anything outside the modern tradition: whether we like it or not, we are *always inside the Glass House*. The almost sensuous pleasure with which the camera accompanies the rake as it sweeps together the fragments of glass would therefore be reminiscent of small insurrections and silent insubordinations, such as the almost obscene view of the window cleaner in the aseptic environment of the pavilion designed by Mies van der Rohe for the Barcelona World Fair of 1929, in the photo by Jeff Wall entitled *Morning Clearing, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* (1999). These two works, as well as two others from the last few decades, speak, ultimately, of the latent yet common desire to pervert modernist perfection, deconstructing its irritating exquisiteness. Something similar, yet somehow different, happens in the work *Language Barrier* (2009), by Lisa Tan, in which she shows us, by means of two videos, the lobbies of two pseudo-modernist buildings in Buenos Aires: the sacredness of these environments is marred, simply, by their own insignificance, our realisation that we are seeing perfect examples of the anonymous style of peripheral epigones.

In the first video the camera does not move; it simply focuses on the buildings as if it were watching time pass. It is night time, and the only thing worth noting is the image of the few cars that drive by, reflected on the glass wall. Nothing else. It could be too little, but everything is clear and lucid, and the time which the artist allows herself (and us) is the time required by detailed descriptions, the time we need to understand the truth, to finally see the drawing of the marble on the floor and the walls; the plant, which is subtly “bureaucratic” in its round and oversized pot; the large glass curtain, made up of three identical vertical rectangular panels—one of which is revolving, serving as a door; the armchair upholstered in such shiny leather that it seems (and may actually be) fake; the lights that are reflected three times (on the mirror on the left, on the floor and on the wall); the building's street number (2964), written in black against a white oval with a Baroque font which is unexpected in the midst of such a rigorous international style. It is necessary to *say* what we are seeing in order to understand that the work is produced at the point where the image becomes a discourse, approaching the literature with which a large part of the work by Lisa Tan is profoundly imbued. In the second video, the camera slides left and right, facing another lobby, without any sort of continuity. The interior of the lobby is larger than the previous one, with two armchairs instead of one, a larger plant in a black flowerpot and a concierge dressed in a dark blue suit, who, however, does not add any sense of personality to the building. Each time the camera slides by, the concierge is

in a different position: first he is sitting down, reading; then he is looking outside the building; and, the third time, he is standing up. In another shot the camera glides through the lobby and the concierge is nowhere to be seen: he may have gone or perhaps he has not arrived yet; there is no way to know, as the video's time is not linear. It is a confusing and enigmatic video similar to *La Jalousie*, and to the novel by Robbe-Grillet, in which we also witness the same, yet not the same, scenes on countless occasions. What was on the right appears again, after many pages, on the left (although it is in fact a scene which took place before the one we read before); the track of a crushed centipede anticipates, but does not follow, the view of the animal as it crawls across the wall.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the book by Robbe-Grillet is its cold, almost metallic language, made up of methodical and surgically precise descriptions, which, however, conceals a love story, a tale of jealousy and, perhaps, an attempted murder. In other words, we witness a commotion similar to that which characterises the works by Lisa Tan, which are romantic yet essentially minimalist from a formal point of view. The installation at the Andreas Grimm gallery in New York, in 2006, where the artist reproduced, together, the covers of the same books (often published by different publishing houses), which she and her live-in boyfriend shared, was a magnificent example of that idiosyncrasy. According to the artist herself, "this is a relationship piece, and the titles of the works play off of the coupling. For example, Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" becomes "Two Hearts of Darkness" and Alain Robbe-Grillet's "In the Labyrinth" becomes "Two in the Labyrinth". The journal through literary forest reveals, from the *beginning of the tale*, the paths, expectations, obstacles and, perhaps, to a good reader, even the outcome of the relationship. If the titles (of both the books and the works) are sometimes ironic, and others romantic, the presentation—in the style of Robbe-Grillet—is excessively rough, without excesses or deviations; its minimalism is of the sort which tends to hint, in general, at the impossibility of any poetic fantasy. This contrast has been examined in depth by other artists, such as Absalon and Bas Jan Ader, the authors of passionate yet vulnerable works, such as the well-known *I Am Too Sad to Tell You* (1971), a video in which the Dutch artist sobs inconsolably in front of a fixed camera. If the title seems, once again, to be self-explanatory, it is possible that the artist is also referring to the apparent paradox of the use of a minimalist, almost conceptual, sense of aesthetics, in order to approach more eminently romantic subjects.

It is somewhat strange that a meta-narrative work and one which is as full as references as that by Lisa Tan does not mention Bas Jan Ader, particularly if we remember that, only four years after making the video, the artist was lost at sea, as he attempted to cross the Atlantic alone, as part of his trilogy *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975). To imagine and to go on trips, walks and itineraries is a recurring practice since, at least, the Situationist theories on the *urban drift*, but there are few cases in which this strategy seems to emerge from an inner need, rather than the decision to break away from conventions and the market logic by producing a work which is ultimately intangible. Lisa Tan's *Baudelaire Itineraries* (2007) stand between these extremes: it is obviously a well-thought-out work, the fruit of a long period of research and reflection, but it is also linked to the Utopian and romantic dream of

bringing together the fragments of what had been joined for a brief period of time, in 1846, and the centrifugal power of the era, which could be felt all over the world. The work consists of a series of proposals for travel itineraries inspired by the observation of paintings by Charles Baudelaire, in that year's *Salon*, which offers any hypothetical *rambler* who has the time and the necessary resources to follow all of the itineraries produced by the artist, the chance to see the works discussed by Baudelaire in their current location, as well as to read literature connected to the paintings and/or the poet's reviews. It is, of course, a huge and arduous task (the works are now spread over several continents), but perhaps the most important thing, rather than taking the trips suggested by Lisa Tan, is to connect the pieces in one's mind, to know that someone knows where each painting, each fragment of text, each moment of the journey, can be found.

If we return now, after speaking about journeys and literature, to the title *Language Barrier*, it seems to be open to a deeper interpretation. At first, this reading would be obvious: as the artist herself says, "the glass frontier separates the concierge in the lobby and the pedestrian outside, like an idiomatic barrier"; like a glass membrane which separates the concierge's gaze from that of the artist who walks down the street (as well as our own), the linguistic barrier is a fragile and almost invisible barrier, yet it separates two worlds, complicating the conversations of travellers and giving rise to a healthy sense of doubt regarding the certainties of those who are left behind. However, it may not be entirely wrong to assume that language is, in itself (and independently of the fact that different languages are spoken in different countries) a barrier. Like glass, language is transparent, and it both separates and protects, becoming more invisible the more we look at it. There is –and works such as *Language Barrier* prove this in an extraordinary way– a hidden poetry in the materialisation of things; a poetry which is seen through language: it is perhaps so unconventional, so unexpected, that we are sometimes surprised by the rigorous and impeccable use of a material which may emerge suddenly from the hard coldness of stone or metal, from the transparency of a glass. It is the inexplicable sweetness which exists, if one knows how to see it, in brutalist architecture; the nostalgia for the time of Concretism, when it was still possible to believe in Utopias; it is what transforms the work, as Sol Lewitt wrote in his *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, of strictly conceptual artists (i.e. almost always, minimalist artists) into the most mystical of art. It is that intangible something which always seems to be around the corner, that chaos which disturbs and fascinates us, that which we seek with our interpretations and interminable journeys, whether real or imaginary.

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