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Reflected Transparency: Contemporary Architects Working on Glass

OUT OF SIGHT:

The Architectural Photography of Erieta Attali

What is the meaning of glass architecture? We tend to take it for granted as simply another branch of architecture somewhat out of the ordinary, but we should consider its implications. One of the great virtues of Erieta Attali's pictures of this relatively new mode is that they offer a reading.

In conventional buildings facades suggest an enclosed world apart beyond the doorway. On this side of the screen lies the public domain, and on the far side private spaces and secrets. Glass architecture, on the other hand, deals in transparency. We know, of course, that the inhabitants of the buildings presented to us here are probably as secretive as any in human history. What the photographs do tell us, however, is that the inhabitants of these elegant milieux have something sublime in mind: an idea about continuity touching of infinity. Perspective, emphatically registered, leads into the far distance, out of eyeshot. You might argue that such vistas represent a globalising turn of mind, and that they introduce us to the ideas of commercial and institutional outreach. In one or two instances in this collection perspective plunges into the distance, at the speed of light or of sound at least. Other photographers have been drawn to such figures, especially during the modernist era when the sky above the rooftops was usually contrasted with the grimy streets below.

In modernist photography, from the early part of the twentieth century, we were shown the streets in detail, in terms of cobblestones, hand-objects, fountains, urinals, torn posters, rubbed doorways, graffiti and abraded signs.

In their ideology, expressed but rarely spoken, the modernist stressed that we were subject to things, to items in the material world, and that these things determined our existence irrespective of our beliefs. Modernist photographers, like Eugene Atget and Walker Evans, doted on materials, and their pictures ask us to make the finest judgements regarding sawn wood and mortared brick and stone. There is, however, nothing of that kind here, nothing you can actually put your finger on, for these are pictures relevant to our condition now.

Notice, for instance, that they are marked by grids and lattice-work, which is such a feature of contemporary building. There may be practical reasons for such grids, but in actuality they remind us that we see through screens and these in their turn are contaminated by reflections. This is how contingency is understood in a current context: overlapping imagery impinging from all sides, and most of it evanescent, light as air or as the clouds in the sky. In the modernist era we would have paid no attention to it for, in our imaginations, we were artificers who dealt with tools and raw materials. Utopia then was a place of corporeal bliss; now it is felt more teleologically, as delayed, distant and difficult, almost out of sight through the multiple screens and light atmospheres of our cultures. This is the world picture on which Erieta Attali reflects and which she expresses in these glimmering vistas.