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Reflected Transparency: Contemporary Architects Working on Glass

Architectural Fictions

Having started as a landscape and archaeology photographer, Erieta Attali has been in the last seven years occupied with architectural photography. In a timely convergence with the architectural zeitgeist, Attali has found in glass architecture a suitable material to develop her photographic language. Since Philip Johnson's Glass House and its declaration of complete transparency, architects have utilized glass as a material with a varying degree of opacity; even as a structural one. The works of Toyo Ito, Kazuyo Sejima, Bernard Tschumi, Herzog & de Meuron and others have been emblematic of recent shifts that merge architecture with climatic effects, and reconsider architecture's representational function. Erieta Attali has been a keen witness of these recent developments and has traveled throughout the globe, overcoming language and other barriers, in order to photograph such works. The outstanding results of this persistent and geographically expansive account are demonstrated in the exhibition 'Reflected Transparency.'

Attali's photographic work presents a cartography of the contemporary use of glass in its variety of tropes, structural, laminated, reinforced with fiber-optics, demonstrating the varying effects of glass that alternate from expressing objectivity to confusing familiar coordinates. Although several of Attali's earlier photographs are well placed within the genre of architectural photography, her recent work show features that mark a departure from it: her photographs more and more emphasize pattern over a building's overall form, demonstrate an obsessive interest in symmetry, even when it is absent in the actual architecture, and more than frequently betray the photographer's fascination with the surrounding landscape rather than architecture per se.

The rhythmic, repetitive array of the glass panel that comprises the buildings' glass shell provides abundant opportunities for elaborating on the theme of pattern. Buildings like Riken Yamamoto's Future University in Hokkaido or Kazuyo Sejima's Museum-O in Nagano treat the glass façade more as a screen, analogous to the traditional Japanese shoji, rather than a transparent membrane. Indoor and outdoor worlds register upon these screens, as photographed by Attali, appearing as two-dimensional diagrams punctuated by the rhythmic presence of the grid. In other buildings, it is precisely the reflective quality of glass that, at carefully selected moments, holds the ability to generate illusionary symmetrical formations. Thus in photographs such as the ones of the Water/Filter by Kengo Kuma in Yamaguchi, Attali takes the liberty to double a part of the buildings' profile, providing it almost with the status of a genetic code, in order to generate new formations that remain indifferent to the building's actual shape.

In most cases however, what seems to attract the photographer's interest is the qualities that glass obtains when abandoned to the effects of its surrounding: the random, elliptical and instantaneous that is induced due to the double nature of the glass, as both a reflective and transparent material. In such photographs, glass surfaces obtain a strange dimension of depth exposing fragments of the interior microcosms of life as they merge with the macrocosmic expansion of local and universal elements that surround them. In pictures like those of the Glass House at the Botanical Garden in Graz by Volker Giencke, or the Adobe Canyon House in Arizona by Rick Joy, we observe how landscape and weather register upon buildings' skins and intermingle with their interiors. Similarly but in reverse, Attali has chosen to present Rafael Vinoly's Tokyo International Forum, not by shooting it directly, but rather by capturing its fleeting reflection on the window of a JR train. Such views, in which asphalt merges with the sky and trusses with tree branches, are scarcely extraneous to architecture. It may not be too fetched to say that in pictures like these, architecture and the 'spirit of place' – a seemingly obsolete idea in the contemporary architectural discourse--obtain a new bond. Indeed Tokyo International Forum's semi-elliptical form appears as almost born by the hastiness of urban life in downtown Tokyo, as the minimalism of Adobe Canyon House nurtures dreams of return to a bodily proximity with the earth.

By looking at this strange family of buildings, that seem to lie dispersed in the globe awaiting for Attali's lens to be given cohesion, viewers cannot but feel overwhelmed by their failing capacity to counter such photographic images with their known or unknown architectural origins. Whose views is Attali representing with her images? Architects themselves are often astonished by the appearance of their work, confessing that Attali's photographs reveal dimensions that have been unknown to them, while most viewers who have visited the actual buildings would hardly recognize these prints as reflective of their own experiences.

These abstract graphs of climate, grainy landscapes and architectural materiality come into being not through an orthodox process of approaching the architectural artifact. Unlike traditional architectural photographers who have been interested more in the exterior perceptions of glass buildings, Attali often chooses to situate herself at the interior. But this is not in order to follow traces of anthropologic interest, but rather in order to direct her gaze outwards, collecting views that are augmented by these gigantic 'optic machines.' At the same time, it is not familiarity that is sought by Attali's gaze. Her favorite hours for work are those following the twilight, the time when artificial illumination competes with the skylight, and when things that were once intimate appear different in substantial ways.

Like Alice's 'looking-glass house,' these lucid buildings have led Attali to a world that may seem removed from the 'real,' marking her return to the realm of the landscape, with a sci-fi twist in it, or even that of a futuristic archeology. That floating world of idyllic serenity that her photographic silver prints document are meant to unsettle rather than reassure the viewer's need for understanding. When you give up trying to solve the puzzle of recognition you start feeling like a wanderer in a strange planet devoid of human companionship, where buildings and landscapes appear as the sole living entities. Indeed, as we see more and more of these photographs, especially in the brilliant, homonymous

with the exhibition video that is composed of Attali's still pictures (put together by Ferdy Carabott), it is almost inevitable that our attempts to relate image with reality surrender, and we slowly drift towards a hallucinatory state of contemplation. Scenes of science fiction films unavoidably come into mind, such as Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, or Chris Marker's *La Jette*, where nature, humanity and artifice blend in an enigmatic ensemble. What we recognize in them is neither the memorable nor the unknown. Rather what was destined to fall into oblivion seems to have been salvaged by the deep-rooted memory of the photographer's recording lens.