

***THE TRANSPARENCY OF NIGHT:  
Erieta Attali's „Nightscapes & Glass Buildings“***

Of all the wonders of the traveling peepshow, that humble 18th century ancestor of photography and cinema, the most impressive must have been the magical transformation of day into night. To the amazement of those peering into the recesses of the traveling showman's box, a conventional daytime view of Potsdamer Platz or Versailles would suddenly turn into a nighttime scene ablaze with light pouring from open windows and doorways. The magic was simple but effective: the same scene might be viewed first by reflected light falling upon the surface of a painted image, and then, after sliding panels had been had been opened and closed, by the light of a candle shining through translucent inserts corresponding to openings cut in the card.

Photographers were not slow to take advantage of the drama inherent in the nocturnal city streets, but their depictions (Weegee's, say, or Brassai's) usually emphasized harsh film noir tonalities which turned night into a well of darkness rife with sinister possibilities. Erieta Attali's spectacular time exposure photographs, on the other hand, unexpectedly combine the elements of darkness and transparency. In her night-time views of Manhattan, one effect of long exposure is to intensify ambient light, resulting in a subdued, uniform glow which eradicates the city's normally harsh tonal contrasts: bathed in this unearthly illumination, expanses of sky and concrete, water and asphalt, snow and sand acquire closely uniform tonalities, punctuated by the harsh glare of individual streetlights or the lines of onrushing car headlights. As empty of people as certain of Atget's cityscapes, these photographs are absolutely still, proffering New York as an object of contemplation rather than a vector of energies.

Attali's depictions of Manhattan betray the viewer's normal expectations in another way: a subject conventionally represented in vertiginous verticals is here treated as horizontal, and canyons give way to panoramas. Instead of commenting on its height, her images emphasise the sheer spread of New York; in the process, she circles around the city's perimeter as though stalking it. Her vantage points, whether from the edge of the sea at Coney Island or from the coastline of New Jersey, remind us of what we usually forget, absorbed by the drama of the skyscrapers - that Manhattan is in effect an island, completely encircled by water. The panoramic format is essential to this perception, for as Ian Jeffrey points out, „there is always the question in a conventional photograph of what is happening in the rest of the world beyond the frame, and why this particular extract has been taken rather than another“; by contrast, the panorama is all-inclusive and self-sufficient.

Josef Sudek, who made an extensive record of his native Prague through the medium of a panoramic camera, was also fascinated by the effects of light on transparent and semi-transparent surfaces, above all on glass; he produced endless still lives of water in a tumbler, and repeatedly photographed a diminutive garden through the misty or iced-up windows of his studio. Sudek's small-scale photographic epiphanies confirm

what the builders of medieval cathedrals and the architects of 19th century iron and glass buildings both knew, namely that transparency does not confine light, but is defined by it.

For modernist architects, glass and other transparent or translucent building materials suggested openness and clarity, whilst simultaneously offering the possibility of modulating light in all kinds of interesting ways; a glazed opening or window is different from an unglazed gap in a building's fabric, not least because glass and air refract light differently. In a recent interview, Jean Nouvel speaks of glass „as a material where you can project images, operate with different degrees of reflection, opacity, transparency“.

Impressive though they may be when seen in situ, glass buildings are surprisingly hard to photograph convincingly, above all where formal architectural photography is concerned - a mode whose ambition it is to remain what Elvire Perego has called „a pure instrument of representation“, itself required to be „absolutely transparent“. In practical terms, the difficulty lies in capturing the subtle modulations of transparent surfaces without resorting to the kind of technical trickery which risks obscuring the architect's intentions.

Approaching three very different glass buildings - Richard Meiers' courthouse in Phoenix, Arizona; Miller & Hawkinson's Corning Museum of Glass; and Bernard Tschumi's Lerner Hall at Columbia University - Attali addresses the problem with elegance and economy: she photographs by night, or at dusk, allowing artificial light to sculpt the structures. The illumination usually comes from within the building itself; in allowing light to escape, the surface planes of the glass envelope are themselves concurrently outlined and defined.

Manhattan considered as a numinous nocturnal vision, and transparency rendered tangible: with these two seemingly disparate sequences, Erieta Attali demonstrates with impressive fluency how darkness, far from obscuring, can illuminate and interpret both the city and its individual components.