

Almost architecture

Adriano Pedrosa

Art's fascination with architecture spans many centuries and could be regarded as yet another manifestation of that age-old artistic practice: representation itself. The relationship between art and architecture has taken different turns, and through just a quick glance one could begin to trace back some of these histories at least as far as the 16th century. The framed painting or picture hanging on the wall taken as a window in *trompe l'oeil* and the invention of perspective through the precise application of geometry in the pictorial representation of architectural interiors and exteriors are two well-known elements of these histories. Later in the 20th century, one can identify a renewed interest in architecture, now associated also with design and the industrial arts, in several of the various manifestations of Constructivism. Since the 1920s and up until, quite notably, the 1960s, particularly in Europe and in the Americas, there have been a large and rich number of experiments dealing with geometric art, which often go beyond the purely abstract to refer to architectural maquettes, scale models, constructions, floor plans and architectural space itself.

The pictorial, graphic or sculptural products of these investigations frequently take on geometric, mathematical or abstract expressions, and a few exceptions seem to

encompass more mundane or bodily themes.¹ If one could certainly identify heavenly, spiritual or other-worldly symbolic references in Renaissance perspective or in early geometric abstraction, it is not until the late 20th century that we encounter stronger psychological or psychoanalytic narratives in artistic production dealing with architecture. Thus, at the end of the last century, one can identify a shift in the perception and understanding of space, from a mathematic, geometric, scientific or perceptual concept to one that now encompasses a whole new set of themes: memory, fiction, dream, personal and psychological keys.

In parallel to this shift, one can identify another correlated one, loosely identified as critiques of modernism. In the last few years some contemporary art has turned to architecture, be it through photography, sculpture or installation, in order to engage in or refer to critiques of modernism. The precepts considered here are the modern principles of clarity, objectivity, rationality, transparency, functionality and lightness, which have recently been confronted by subjectivity, darkness, opacity, ambiguity, the unknown, the mysterious, the uncanny, the impossible and the absurd (of which the labyrinth is its strongest emblem).

This is the context and background against which Sabine Hornig's oeuvre may be framed. Her photographs, sculptures and installations take up several of the

¹ One significant exception here is Brazilian mid-century *Neoconcretismo*, where the rigid norms of constructivism and geometric abstraction were infused with bodily and vital elements in the work of artists such as Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Pape.

elements of the histories of the relationship between art and architecture.

Hornig's ongoing series of "Windows" (since 2001) inverts the traditional idea of the framed picture or painting as a fake window looking out onto the world, offering us instead an outside view of different interiors, mostly vacant commercial spaces in her native Berlin. In this series, reflection and transparency perform a quasi pictorial play, and the viewer may find himself or herself attempting to locate some of the elements in the photograph. Three distinct examples can be mentioned here. The superimpositions and reflection of different indoor and outdoor elements assume a striking quality and are best exemplified in a work such as *Window IV (Balloons)*, 2001, where a tree, strings of colored balloons, architectural elements and the window frame itself play with and against each other. *Fenster zur Allee*, 2002, engages in the same game, but this time the relationship between architecture and nature is underlined: on the glass window of the empty commercial space one sees a line of trees arranged in an orderly fashion, in a row which strongly indicates a perspective where the vanishing point is a faint reflection which can hardly be noticed and is here reflected somewhere on the white wall of the actual space in the middle of the photograph. A more radical example is found in *Radikal Reduziert*, 2004, where a window has been covered with white pieces of paper and one can barely read what seems like the marks of the signs that have been ripped off from the glass: "Radikal Reduziert". The two-toned whiteness evokes the monochrome, and the almost rectangular shadow that is cast upon the shop window

reminds us of a generic early geometric abstract composition.

The uneasy relationship between abstraction and figuration, the real world and the ideal world, is poignantly revisited in a group of 3 works all with the same title *Bus stop*. The first of these is a photograph taken in Greece in 2000 depicting a white bus stop, at the edge of a road, with an unusually simple, minimalist, box-like design. The subsequent *Bus stop*, made in 2002, is a scale model of the real bus stop found in Greece two years earlier. In cast aluminum, measuring 19x28x16cm, the small-scale model resting on a plinth could be taken as a generic abstract geometric sculpture of the most formalist kind, yet its title and previous reference give away its figurative, mundane roots. That same year saw the creation of the third work in this group: a slightly smaller than life-size model made from the small aluminum scale model, now rendered in wood, stucco and paint, and measuring 171x267x142cm. Taken as a group, the three works offer a clever and stripped-down interplay between representation, geometry, abstraction and scale.

A more loaded, psychological game is suggested by the project for *Window of Night* (2005), a new work to be constructed for the exhibition at the Centro Cultural de Belém. An incision will be made into the gallery wall, opening a rectangular pitch-black, inaccessible recess in the white cube. The functionality and logic of architecture are interrogated here. What is this? What is it for? Where does it lead to? We are back at the game played between picture, window and architecture, and the only clue is given by the title: here is a nightscape.

Yet the beauty of the work is related to its anti-modern precepts – subjectivity and darkness, the unknown and the mysterious, the impossible and the absurd.

Another new work made for the exhibition has similar anti-modernist spirits, but of a different kind. *Before and After* (2005) is a representation of a 12-meter-long wall, made of faux bricks. From a distance, the elements that are stacked and compose the wall look like bricks, but they are in fact made of brick-colored papier maché. The illusion of weight and of solidity is confronted by the veritable lightness and fragility of the long wall. In addition, and emphasizing the architectural misconception, gaps will be noticeable between the bricks. The title refers to a dimension often disregarded by architecture and construction: that of time. Yet *Before and After* may also be interpreted as a reference to the process which the real brick wall goes through to become the faux brick wall which we now confront, from real wall to art wall: the process of representation itself. The wall will be constructed next to one of the Centro Cultural's glass-paneled windows, and at a slightly different angle in relation to it, bringing the anti-modernist game to the questioning of its orthogonal features. Now the absurd, impossible and fictitious architecture is also, and most importantly, hand-made. cunningly announces its: it is a representation of a 12-meter-long wall, made of *faux* bricks. From a distance, the elements that are stacked and compose the wall do indeed look like bricks, but they are in fact made of brick-colored papier maché. The illusion of weight and solidity is confronted by the veritable lightness and fragility of the long wall. In addition, emphasizing the

architectural misconception, gaps will be noticeable between the bricks. The wall will be constructed next to one of the Centro Cultural's glass-paneled windows, and at a slightly different angle in relation to it, bringing the anti-modernist game to the questioning of its orthogonal features. Now the absurd, impossible and fictitious architecture is also, and most importantly, hand-made.

In the end, one may realize that Sabine Hornig's objects and pictures, so full of games and memories, fictions and deceptions, subtexts of a personal and psychoanalytic nature, may refer quite strongly to architecture, to the histories of its relationship with art, but they do so through subtle and powerful twists and turns: it is as if her work were almost architecture; it is as if it were *faux* architecture. It will have remained a mystery.

Bibliography

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