

THE TRANSPARENCY OF LANGUAGE

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Always After (The Glass House) is the title of a 16 mm 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 really interested in the notion of the aftermath, in terms of both politics and the global environment, which makes the title readily comprehensible. 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, ultimately revealing an inability to produce anything outside the modern tradition: whether we like it or not, we are always after the Glass House. The almost sensuous pleasure with which the camera accompanies the squeegee as it sweeps together the fragments of glass would therefore be reminiscent of small insurrections and silent insubordinations, such as the almost obscene appearance 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 many 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, *tout court*, by their own insignificance, our realization 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 nighttime, 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 that the artist allows herself (and us) is the time demanded by detailed descriptions, the time we need to really understand, finally to see the pattern of the marble on the floor and the walls; the plant, subtly bureaucratic in its oversized round 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 (in the mirror on the left, on the floor and on the wall); the building's street number (2964), written in black inside a white oval in a Baroque font that 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 back and forth in front of another lobby, without any break in continuity. The interior of the lobby, with two armchairs instead of one, a larger plant in a black pot and a doorman dressed in a dark blue suit, is larger than the previous one, and yet just as deprived of any personality. Each time the camera slides by, the doorman is in a different position: first he is sitting down, reading; then he is looking out of the building; a third

time, he is standing up. In another shot the camera glides through the lobby and the doorman is nowhere to be seen: he may have gone or perhaps he has not arrived yet; there is no way of knowing, as the time of this video is not linear but confusing and enigmatic, like that of *La Jalousie*, the novel by Robbe-Grillet in which we also time and time again witness scenes that are the same yet not the same. What was on the right reappears many pages later on the left (but in a scene that is prior in time to the one we read before); the mark of a crushed centipede anticipates rather than follows the view of the animal as it crawls across the wall.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the book by Robbe-Grillet is the way its cold, almost metallic language, with its methodical and surgically precise descriptions, conveys a love story, a tale of jealousy and perhaps of attempted murder. In other words, we witness a commotion similar to that which characterizes the works of 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 in which the artist reproduced side by side the covers of the same books (often in different editions), which she and her live-in boyfriend shared, was a magnificent example of this idiosyncrasy. According to the artist, '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 passage through the literary forest points from the outset to the paths, the hopes, the obstacles and perhaps, to a good reader, even the outcome of the relationship. If the titles of both the books and the artworks are at times ironic and at others romantic, the presentation—à la Robbe-Grillet—is extremely dry, without excesses or deviations, of a minimalism of the sort which tends to point, in general, to the impossibility of any poetic daydreaming. This contrast has been explored in depth by other artists, such as Absalon and Bas Jan Ader, the authors of passionate yet vulnerable works, such as the celebrated *I'm 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 rigorously conceptual aesthetic to deal with eminently romantic themes.

It is curious that a meta-narrative work as charged with references as Lisa Tan's has not mentioned (yet) Bas Jan Ader, above all if we recall that only four years after making the video mentioned above the artist was lost at sea as he attempted to cross the Atlantic solo as part of his trilogy *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975). To imagine and to undertake journeys, walks and *dérives* has been a recurring practice at least since the Situationist theories of the *urban dérive*, but there are few instances in which this strategy seems to emerge from an inner need rather than a decision to break with the conventions and the logic of the market by producing a work that is ultimately intangible. Lisa Tan's *Baudelaire Itineraries* (2007) are suspended between these two extremes: it is obviously a carefully thought-out work, the fruit of lengthy 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, before the centrifugal force of time scattered them all over the world. The work consists of a series of proposals for travel itineraries inspired by Charles Baudelaire's observations on paintings after his visit to that year's *Salon*, which offers any hypothetical *flâneur* with the time and the resources needed to follow all of the

itineraries drawn up by the artist the chance to see the works discussed by Baudelaire in their current locations and to read texts relating to the paintings and/or the poet's critical comments. It is, of course, a huge and arduous task (the works are now scattered over several continents), but perhaps the important thing is not taking the trips suggested by Lisa Tan but connecting the pieces in one's mind, knowing that someone knows where each painting, each fragment of text, each moment of the journey is.

If we return now, after speaking about journeys and literature, to the title *Language Barrier*, it too seems to call for a deeper interpretation. In the first instance the reading would be obvious: as the artist herself says, 'the glass boundary separates the lobby doorman and the pedestrian like a language barrier'; like a glass membrane which separates the doorman's gaze from that of the artist who walks down the street (and from ours), the linguistic barrier is a fragile and almost invisible barrier, yet it separates two worlds, complicating the conversations of travellers and healthily confounding the certainties of those who stay behind. However, it may not be entirely wrong to think that language is, in itself and independently of the differences between languages, a barrier. Just like glass, language is a transparent barrier that, as it separates and protects, becomes more invisible the more we look at it. There is—as works such as *Language Barrier* prove so extraordinarily—a hidden poetry in the materiality of things; a poetry which is seen through language: a poetry perhaps unconventional, certainly unexpected, that at times surprises us in the rigorous and impeccable use of a material and can suddenly emerge from the hard coldness of stone or metal, from the transparency of a sheet of glass. It is the inexplicable sweetness that is present, for those who know 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, as Sol Lewitt wrote in his *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, what makes the strictly conceptual artist (that is, almost always, the minimalist artist) the most mystical. It is that intangible *something* which always seems to be just around the corner, that disorder which disturbs and fascinates us, which we keep on seeking in our readings and our interminable journeys, be they real or imaginary.