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Reflected Transparency: Contemporary Architects Working on Glass

***The Environmental Fusions  
of Erieta Attali***

*“My Inspiration moreover seeks through assiduous research a complete fusion of environment and object by the means of the interpretation of planes.”*

*-Umberto Boccioni 1913*

Far from being only a representation of reality the architectural photograph is as involved with the construction of the real as the building itself. We may say that the photograph is a second order creation with respect to our everyday experience of the built environment. Clearly a photograph or cinematic frame is no more able to represent a building than a drawing even though a moving image may convey the illusion of moving through space. In fact one may only approach the simulation of architecture through the contrived interface of different media, that is through drawings and photographs of different genres arranged in a didactic sequence; juxtaposition of panoramic and/or aerial shots combined with close-up images of details, along with explicatory schematic and detailed drawings. Such arrangements inevitably reveal a particular mode of beholding that by definition cannot be impartial. No photograph of a building is ever neutral as every editor knows; not every architectural photographer is equally capable of capturing the essence of a particular work, since sensibility and experience certainly count as much as equipment and technique.

Erieta Attali is a rising architectural photographer whose experience hitherto has been generally addressed to archaeology and landscape rather than to architecture; with the former arising directly out of professional commissions and the latter stemming from a personal preoccupation with the topographic, which remains her concern even though her recent photographs do not address landscape as such. In one way or another her images of built-form are traces having a topographic character, images of buildings that go beyond the buildings to evoke another dimension suspended between the built and its transformation through a ricochet of reflections lying outside the normative of vision. Thus one simultaneously sees both into and out of a building as in her all but negative rendering of Rick Joy's Adobe Canyon House in Tucson (2005). An illusion of a more constructivist character obtains in Attali's closely framed shot of the glass atrium lying at the heart of Pekka Helin's Finnish Parliament building (2005) where the implorable all but imperceptible mirrored walls of a transparent elevator cabin create a spectacular cacophony of real and illusory planes in space. In one instance the reality of a mirrored wall is forcefully separated as a spatial plane from the unreal, suspended horizontality of the louvered walls of the atrium.

Apart from being seen by the eye of the photographer, these spectacular kaleidoscopic realms do not exist. They only pass before us as phantasmagoric assemblies transposed onto on light sensitive film. Thus it would be hard to imagine anything more unreally topographic than Kengo Kuma's restaurant/bar in Yamaguichi, where the reflected

projection of a cantilevered timber roof in the full height plate glass wall of an adjacent bar creates a virtual bridge spanning between one glazed pavilion and another before the horizon line of a frozen sea.

There are limits to which the real is overlaid by reflection in Attali's vision so that the layered schismatic result is not always derived from the reflection of a virtual space but on occasion from a record of the space itself. This is more or less the strategy adopted in her panoramic views of FOA's Yokohama Ferry Terminal (2003) and Rafael Vinoly's Tokyo Forum (2003). In the first case the morphological movement of the form conveys the impression of a dynamic, moving volume as the timber deck swells and distorts before a curtain wall canting out with its handrail towards the spot lighting of the perimeter and light studded aqueous horizon of Yokohama at night; in the second, the sweeping blur of a high speed train echoes not only the serpentine curve of the lighting above the platform as it conforms to the arc of the track, but also the correspondingly curved and horizontally striated glass façade of the building as it looms into view from the misty depth of the night; in the one the illusion of movement, in the other, the trace of velocity.

At times Attali will focus her lens without the veil of illusion as in her rendering of Toyo Ito's Mediateque at Sendai (2002) or the opalescent glass catenary engineered by James Carpenter over the central cylindrical courtroom of Richard Meier's The Sandra Day O'Connor Courthouse in Phoenix, Arizona (2001).

Much the same way may be said of her chimeric rendering of the interior of Riken Yamamoto's Saitama Prefectural University (2003) where a shadowy figure, descending a suspended metal stair with perforated treads, is caught with the traces of a striated space-field, partly real, partly reflected.

Except for the image of Dan Graham's Pavilion in Philadelphia, Attali's crystalline images are largely removed from any received notion of representing architectural form. Verisimilitude is simply not the intention. Even in the Heart Pavilion what her eye seeks is the multiply refracted lights and shadows cast upon the paving and back up into the surface of the glass, reminiscent of the unfulfilled Futuristic metamorphosis imagined by Umberto Boccioni some eighty odd years ago.