

Looking through the space

The politics of appearance

Roemer van Toorn

Introduction

There are philosophers and critics who make extremely negative pronouncements about our image culture. Images are deceiving. They can be interpreted in multiple ways and therefore are not capable of telling the truth. Therefore we would do better, according to Paul Virilio, to concentrate on the word.¹ According to Guy Debord, our culture of spectacle even ensures that the spectator becomes passive in the extreme: an optimal consumer.² In short, despite the enormous influence, the pleasure and the significance we derive from our image culture, many theorists prefer to renounce the image instead of taking its complex nature seriously. Rather than putting out yet more critical analyses on the negative aspects of spectacle or develop yet more strategies that destabilize our image culture by taking refuge in the sensual, for instance, Paul Toornend and Jelle Post of *Untitled_Space* and I – at the invitation of Jeroen Boomgaard and Henk de Vroom of the Art and Public Space lectureship – looked into what realities might be revealed when you look through the space. This premise was not so much predicated on a position of ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em’ as on the conviction that spectacle, and with it the image, can also generate other kinds of experiences. Or to put it another way, the essentially pornographic dimension of the visual,³ the mindless appeal of the image, which seduces us into staring at the world as if it were a nude body, can also be used to see things differently. We do not want to disqualify the virtual reality that has become so important, we want to embrace it – because its ambivalent ambiguity, its appeal, and yes, even its false and dirty beauty can take the audience on a journey along alternative paths.

The consequences of such a perspective are nothing to sneeze at. The designed object, in this case, can no longer be seen as a self-asserting, autonomous and formal structure, separate from a specific time and place. It is not about the object but about the connections that the object makes with a given everyday context and about its relationship with the spectator. The moment you look through the space, the object can no longer appear autonomously through the many reflections operating in the confines of the *Untitled_Space*. Thinking in ready-made dialectic oppositions, representation versus tactility, technique versus content, and for instance good versus evil, can be discarded, as well as design methods that declare the outcome of a specific process sacred according to a tried method of expertise. Nothing is certain, and that’s the whole point. What considerations, attitudes toward the profession, possibilities and limits can our virtual intervention at the *Zuidas* lead to – those are the questions I want to address in the following text.

Beyond autonomous reflection

Today, all sorts of doom scenarios fill us with fear.⁴ Instead of resisting this – and appealing to our social history of democratic experiments – many, through lack of vision, fall back into forms of fundamentalism. There are architecture critics⁵ who forget that championing a better living environment is more than making propaganda for ecological materials or user participation.⁶ Now that consumerism is robbing the world of its sensual depth, philosophers, artists, critics and architects are resorting to the experience of real life. They no longer base themselves on critical considerations but merely on what they feel. To them it’s more about what’s in your bones than what’s in your head. And this while technical science is only interested in the

measuring and weighing of an object. In short, it comes down to a fundamentalist division between what things are as measurable facts and how we experience them from a subjective perspective. And this while aesthetics, as the science of concrete living, in fact links the rational with everyday experience, in our view. This is also the reason Bruno Latour prefers to speak of 'matter-of-concerns' instead of 'matter-of-facts'.⁷ You could say that a good work of art, like a good building, should be based on a sensual logic. It is reason, as it were, brought home, a reason linked to experience. In other words, projects are not about imagination or utopias, but about actual possibilities for living and models for action that are developed in negotiation with the complexity of our reality.

In *Untitled_Space*'s first experiment,⁸ a virtual space, that is to say an abstract, empty space – built out of glass walls and standards of mostly reflective material, à la Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion – is constructed on a computer and then placed in a landscape setting. In the book *Untitled_Space* we see photographs of how this digital house absorbs and mirrors a Holland landscape. These are digital abstractions that look just like our analogue world, but that under the influence of the laws of light and the subjective recordings of a photographed reality, invite the viewer to look through the space.

How can we best interpret this sensual logic when we deliberately go beyond the autonomous view of the architectural form? And when an investment is made, in fact, in how external references, such as those of social reality, can bring the building to life and make it accessible to the user? What the *Untitled_Space* experiment seems to emphasize is that architecture, as a cultural object, as a subjective presence, within a preconceived sustainability such as the one we find in the tectonics of the building. According to architecture critic Michael Hays, Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion can in fact only be understood – like the *Untitled_Space* – as a simultaneity of self-aware form and existing in the world.⁹ Van der Rohe, says Hays, created an internal order open to the possibilities and uncertainty of life in the metropolis, to the unexpected and the inexplicable. The pavilion comes to life through the many reflections in its glass walls. It is the reflections that give the pavilion its critical quality. The image of reality is distorted: the virtual and real worlds are difficult to distinguish from each other; they show how chaotic modern life is. It is this reflective effect, according to Hays, and according to Manfredo Tafuri as well, that creates a silent theatre of the world, even as the pavilion maintains its critical distance from the world.

Reflections of reality in a building may be a source of confusion, but it remains to be seen whether they can be considered critical. Robin Evans rightly points out that Mies is mainly interested in reflecting his own construction, more than the surroundings in which it is located.¹⁰ Rather than looking through things with a directed gaze, Mies creates coherence in his pavilion. According to Evans – and in this I agree with him – Tafuri and Hays confuse the idea of aesthetic distance with that of critical distance. Mies keeps the world at arm's length. He makes everything so beautifully abstract, imbues it with so much beauty, everything is so perfected, that the everyday – that of use – has no chance of taking possession of it by discovering or recognizing something in it. It is the reflection of amnesia – what Evans calls the beauty of the forgotten – that Mies van der Rohe propagates in the Barcelona Pavilion. Rather than the pavilion turning the spectator into an active investigator, the spectator is forced to identify with the pavilion by means of the many reflections he or she sees. In so doing Mies objectifies his reality, and the spectator can only identify with the beauty of the pavilion itself. It is a way of looking that, despite the dynamic interaction of reflections, operates in a dominant fashion, instead of mediating between inside and outside. Alternative levels of interpretations are excluded. Finding out just what is fixed must be open to interpretation, in order to bring the many contradictions that abound in reality into focus, might well be

highly relevant to break through the impasse of the autonomous reflection in Mies's work.

Amateurism

Initially – when I first saw the publication *Untitled_Space* – I thought I detected the same obsession as Mies's propagated beauty. On closer examination, however, I saw that the abstract building that Paul Toornend and Jelle Post had designed on the computer hardly matters as an autonomous object. It is nothing else than a three dimensional camera that absorbs light in search of what specific reflections a space creates when reality enters it. The point is not the beauty of the object – as evidenced by the everyday objects, like a ball, a meadow, a bush or other kinds of reflections that enter the *Untitled_Space*. Instead of architecture framing life – making beautiful paintings of life in an architectural *Mies-en-scène* – everyday reality enters in heaps and unframed. In contrast to Mies van der Rohe, the *Untitled_Space* is not about the architecture itself; what is at stake is not the autonomous object but what it can set into motion at a specific spot in space. How architecture is continually able to change the perception of reality – in an unexpected and startling way. Mies van der Rohe's architecture clings to what is certain, while uncertain life is separate from it. He makes a roof so that life can have free range on it. Dealing with doubt, let alone with complex contradictions that might provide direction to a space, is not Van der Rohe's strong point. *Untitled_Space*, on the contrary, is not about the permanence of the architecture, but looks into what it sets into motion. In the *Untitled_Space* tectonics, collage and photography meet in a surprising way. Toornend and Post are looking for what the moving eye sees beyond Mies van der Rohe's framed gaze. What draws their attention is not what is static, but what changes under the influence of the permanent in the architecture. In so doing they are entering unknown territory and deviating from institutional paths. And they open the door to a necessary amateurism. Experts are certified professionals who, by collaborating with the right authorities, realize institutionally correct and in particular profitable projects according to the norm. The amateur, on the contrary, is nourished by care, affection instead of profit, self-interest and limited specialization. The amateur resists the blindness of the expert; he does not merely follow the procedural route dictated by technical competence, but instead is prepared to take risks precisely because he wants to relate to the public sphere. In essence the amateur is asking, how does one speak the truth, and what truth? For whom, and why?

On to the Zuidas

In terms of outlook and method I can follow Toornend and Post. But how were we to confront the new work and residential city of Zuidas with the concept of *Untitled_Space*? When we went to look at the Zuidas we were struck by how shabbily and unimaginatively neoliberalism manifests itself in the Netherlands. The mediocre architecture we were presented with, based on an urban-design plan stripped to the bone, is fairly hopeless. We saw a public space that is nothing more than a cheap display for Amsterdam's corporate business, with neutralized art as decorative kitsch, a public space lacking any form of urban conflict befitting a real city. We felt something had to be done. We saw lifts whiz by like *Untitled_Spaces*, into which different realities can be projected, like those encountered at La Défense. We thought buildings on a 50-cm plinth, with a light ticker with stocks and news information, like those we know from the CNN news scroll, would be a good idea. That way, at least, it would be clear what these urban centres are based upon: the permanence of virtual economic speculation. Or should we do something with the ideology of the lobby on the Zuidas?

We weren't satisfied with these proposals. We ran into a problem: our critical commentary seemed too literal. The spectator no longer needs to experience,

discover or interpret anything personally. When you set theories or opinions loose on a project, the risk arises that the project will become an illustration of an idea or a critique, whereas the project itself should be able to stimulate through the experience of looking. Toornend and Post went back to their tried method of the Untitled_Space. They took photographs of the Zuidas and set them loose on their space without features, constructed on the computer. After many hours of computing time, unexpected images appeared. Yet how exactly were we supposed to interpret this mountain of subjective images of the Zuidas? How were we supposed to decide which spaces of the Zuidas were interesting and which were not, which were a secret and which were not, which would elicit commentary and which would not? Here the tried method of the Untitled_Space failed us. The amateur gaze had to be precisely directed, that is to say we had to rely on our viewpoints to make a definitive selection. A selection that addresses the multiple cultural meanings of the Zuidas, beyond the subjective gaze that the method of the Untitled_Space generated on the computer. This method entailed Toornend and Post looking, by means of the computer, from various camera angles through the Untitled_Space at locations on the Zuidas: through a door, through a room, you see a hangar-like space, or the Zuidas is reflected by a wall. Operating procedurally, all the angles are neatly aligned, but what perceptions and emotional effects the combinations of images can stimulate in the viewer through colour, subject, sensation, visual rhyme, contradiction, emptiness and imagination – as a theatre of the city – that is what Toornend, Post and I care about. However elaborate and clever a method might be, a trick does not art make. By means of our professional amateurism, we found out, together, by choosing ever-changing combinations of angles and locations, that a series of four triptychs with varying angles best captures the actual character of the Zuidas. The combination creates multiple connections among the images. In other words, a certain mediation takes place between the different contents contained within the image and activated by the act of looking.

Not seeing, but looking

The promise of the Untitled_Space experiment lies in the opportunity to look at reality with different eyes. This is not about seeing the facts – the stereotypical image of the Zuidas advertising likes to propagate – but about an act of looking that shows the familiar and the apparently trivial in a different way. Experiencing and evaluating – judging through looking – generated more rewarding reactions than reading and understanding a method or the theoretical exposition of a work. By experiencing the images and not understanding them – if everything goes right – opens up a moment in time filled with ambiguity. If you could see that the Untitled_Space images were in fact computer montages, our plan would fail. It is not the computer, but the amateurish method that should control the process: open up the gaze onto reality. Each image in the series should evoke a tension between subjective construction and documentary recording, so that the audience begins to investigate. Like the spectacle, these four triptychs command all attention (certainly when they are exhibited, the smoothness of the surface, the use of colour, the sterility and reflection of the Untitled_Space will strike the viewer), but it is no authoritarian spectacle, no spectacle that merely seduces, but rather a spectacle that poses questions. It is like an inward-facing Mesdag panorama. Instead of looking at a panorama from a single elevated point, from a distance, the various panoramas of the Zuidas are unlocked within the three-dimensional interior of the Untitled Space. The gaze does not stretch to the horizon, but the rough framing of the space – by doors, windows, walls, floors, ceilings and materials – light reflections of what is taking place outside are interconnected, awaiting the reflections of the spectator. In the four triptychs, various main themes of the Zuidas are highlighted. There is a kind of narcissist, almost autistic beauty through which the architecture is annexing the

surroundings and turning them into a religion of pure abstraction associated with a sublime form of luxury. In a surprising way – with surreal and sometimes even Baroque aspects – the wild and the designed greenery of the Zuidas invades the abstract order at certain moments. At other moments we seem to find ourselves in Jean-Luc Godard's sinister 1965 science-fiction film, *Alphaville*. And this while in another triptych the world of the infrastructure is strung together in fragments or the emptiness in all its indeterminacy begs to be put to use.

In an earlier experiment, the space without features (Untitled_Space)¹¹ changed into a luxury villa with transparent storeys and reflections of everyday use in the Holland landscape. Here the Untitled_Space could still be read as an actual villa, built and inhabited. With the experiment on the Zuidas, it has long ceased to be about floor plans, elevations, façades or entrances – it doesn't matter whether you find yourself in a villa, a high-rise or a lobby. The point is how an abstract modern order – a space without features such as that encountered on the Zuidas – with its endless corporate interior – generates a series of multiple reflections through which it says a great deal about its use and the city. As far as I'm concerned the point is not the beauty of the Untitled_Space on the Zuidas, but how the method of the Untitled_Space reveals the actual character of the Zuidas through its spatial reflections of its immediate surroundings. By looking through the Untitled_Space we see that architecture is too important to be left to the architectural object itself. Architecture is always more than that which the autonomous object places in the foreground: architecture is a relational aesthetics. A politics of appearance in space. A viewing machine that directs the gaze. Not from a single point but with a simultaneous gaze. One that produces, as well, instead of simply representing. What we need is a re-appreciation of looking, image and spectacle, of how we can use the act of looking by the active spectator to better understand the architecture we produce and use.

1. 'Der Paparazzo, das sind wir', interview with Paul Virilio in *Der Spiegel* (37, 1997), 08.09.1997.
2. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London/New York: Verso, 1998).
3. Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
4. The world is headed for a global environmental catastrophe, Islam will engulf our Christian culture, the devaluation of our society through the free market and super-individualism is destroying the public sphere, and so on and so forth.
5. See for example Harm Tilman, 'Architecten moeten plebezorgers worden voor een betere leefomgeving', interview with Anthony Vidler in *de Architect*, January 2007; Kenneth Frampton, 'Architecture in the Age of Consumption', in *Power. Producing the Contemporary City*, catalogue of the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers 2007).
6. Such as in the work of Jeanne van Heeswijk and many other artists who take pity on everyday reality and set to work outside the walls of the museum. The alibi for their art lies in a passion for reality.
7. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge/MA: MIT Press, 2005).
8. Paul Toornend and Jelle Post, *Untitled Space* (Amsterdam: Architectura+Natura, 2005).
9. Michael Hays, 'Critical Architecture: between culture and form', in *Perspecta* 21, 1984.
10. Robin Evans, 'Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries', in Idem, *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (Cambridge/MA: The MIT Press, 1997).
11. See note 8.