

The scents of the hazy crystal - Tomás Camillis

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Sabine Hornig explores the plastic and political implications of transparency in The Matter of the Glazed Fence. Not for nothing, matter in the title of the show means question as well: in a scenario of social unrest gripped by conservative, anti-migrant and hygienic policies, what can the artistic scrutiny of the glazed fence stir in us?

And how could I know myself without looking at your glass mask?

Camilo Tomasio

Greek democracy was still unborn when Pythagoras felt that he had found, in the ellipses of the stars and the chimes of blacksmiths' hammers, the hidden mathematics that rule all things. When translated into art, the golden ratio guided the sculptures and temples whose stonework revealed the harmony of a cosmos in which all the parts are autonomous but unite in commendable cohesion. Could it be so extraordinary, in this way, to relate the classical beauty of flawless proportions to the dawn of Athenian democracy, where individuals, like the marble limbs of a perfect statue, kept their own identity but were part of a cohesive social body? The pristine transparency of a society in harmony with itself and with the workings of the cosmos was kept, nevertheless, through the rejection of all parts seen as irregular – women, slaves and foreigners were bestialised and cast out of the collective body. But modern democracy, inspired by Hellenic transparency, is seen from a different perspective. Much like the Greek polis, the modern city drives democracy, from the boroughs to today's megacities, but it lacks the right proportion of sculpted marble, for it is in love with a different material.

Alchemists in the Middle Ages viewed glass as a symbol of transmutation, a technological wonder. They could see in it the *prima materia*, the vital mass found in all things. After all, what other justification could there be for combining sand, limestone, mineral salts, potash and metallic oxides, all of which were opaque, and obtaining a transparent film from them? Glass represented the glory of the intellect, which refines and neutralises what is discordant. The abstract character of glass appealed to modern architects who abhorred the past, loathing ornaments and their old iconography – the glass sheet is the setting for hopeful forgetfulness, where only the light of a new beginning can dance. New cities of intoxicating vastness are made of it, crystal domains where all is reflected in a light-hearted detachment later known as *International Style*. The delight in such luminosity is indicative of the iconoclastic thrust of modern architecture, which aspires to implement the Enlightenment utopia – all differences are melted away in it, leading to a democracy which is only seemingly more open: anyone can step

into it, as long as they give up the uniqueness of their origins, changing the opaque stains of their identity into translucent glass. The modern psyche is the same: it only retains the tint of rationality from the old traditions that will become the raw material of the universal subject, entirely transparent with itself. The modern *flaneur* strolls through a crystal polis that, just like their mind, is stripped of narrow alleys and dark corners.

Sabine Hornig explores the plastic and political implications of transparency in *The Matter of the Glazed Fence*. Not for nothing, *matter* in the title of the show means *question* as well: in a scenario of social unrest gripped by conservative, anti-migrant and hygienic policies, what can the artistic scrutiny of the glazed fence stir in us?

Anti-immigrant rhetoric often resorts to tropes typical of the horror genre: the rise of the monster is catastrophic as it threatens the social order, perceived as perfect – it must be exterminated to preserve the utopia. This ancient storyline reaches its peak in Greek mythology, whose young, enviably beautiful heroes boast of slaying monsters: when the frivolous and translucent Perseus used the reflection of his shield to behead the dreadful Gorgon, he took revenge not only for her sheer physical ugliness, but above all for her sight, which obscured everything she could behold, blurring the transparency of things. This aversion to the outsider is actually a fear of oneself: transparency is clouded from within, as if its repressed opacity longed to come out. The monster is not a villain, but just the unfolding of everything within us that has been repressed, or our unexploited possibilities, reminding us that the person is not transparent to themselves because they have an unknown, frightening essence – the otherness that we are trying to wipe out dwells within us. Once it has been assimilated, it will expand the individual into territories of untold value to the purist. Much like the secluded individual who supports his supposed purity on fragile crystal foundations, cities too must embrace themselves as territories of confrontation and disagreement, the power of which is exactly the blurring of glass into new colours – something that even influenced the great part of our modern metropolises: Gothic cathedrals were the first shining utopias that brought pieces of paradise to earth, but they found their charm in the magnificence of their stained-glass windows. Therefore, perhaps the lack of personality in our stained glass is a sign of inner burnout. John Ruskin, not surprisingly, challenged industrial glass with the stained-glass windows of Venice, admirable for their unique craftsmanship. He was pointing to a different sort of humanity, perhaps a more monstrous one – or wasn't its flawed opacity closer to Medusa than Perseus?

Hornig's series of operations, combining control and happenstance, are designed to corrupt glassy transparency into a more meaningful, layered tapestry that accepts the dizzying spirit of true civic wisdom. In her works, transparency is not only the foundation for repeated experimentation, but also the stage that accommodates the surrounding circumstances at different angles, building a space of filters and reflections where everything is changed and entwined in a bestialising of the very fabric of reality, now more complex. A Platonic approach would reorganise such diversity into degrees of mounting illusionism. However, to oppose the idealism of the translucent truth is to contemplate all the aspects in equal wonder – to walk through them is to blend reality into a monstrous experience where fact and impression are merged under the vastness of human experience: to walk through is to synthesise opposites, turning walls into bridges.

The centrepiece *Wahlkabine (Voting Booth)* is a wall that also subverts its supposed function: its hollow materiality derides the sturdiness of bricks, and its snake-like shape warps the space to draw us into its depths. The mismatch here occurs not because of the architecture, but in the audience's approach, ignoring the dialogue suggested between the bars so as to enjoy democracy in solitude, finally being confronted by themselves – the table's glass is a double irony: it not

only comments on the hypocritical transparency, but also encourages a reflective encounter with the other in our innermost being. Its modular layout and suspended structure also alludes to the modernist residential model, whose multi-cultural city-buildings and pilotis cleared the land for the free enjoyment of all humanity, although it also separated private life from the public sphere. Its inventor, Le Corbusier, not only prioritised the universalism of his modular system, but also predicated its dimensions on the ideal anatomy of his *modulor*, a human figure inspired by the same golden rectangle the Greeks had once worshipped.

The repetitive structure of modern cities, with their modular windows and flat units, is yet another proof of a neutrality that is maintained by making what is different standardised. Its immaculate rationality is disturbed by Hornig not only in the plasticity of his methods but also through the content of his images, which represent spontaneous manifestations such as graffiti, scaffolding and wear on facades, anonymous quotes and marches. Because, once life is allowed to flow freely, nothing remains long enough to recur. Utopias, the utmost dream of hope, are also inhuman – their perfection allows only the tribute of the lonely dreamer, turning them into a tyranny of good intentions.

Like unscented glass bouquets, the fragile blossoming of these lofty dreams may disappoint the beloved giftee if they are not allowed to add their own fragrance to the identical flowers. The transparency of glass is pure and anaemic, and it also craves to be tampered with by external agents. In *Stativ Tripod*, two photographs of bouquets in windows echo the general motifs of the show – by virtue of its materiality and symbolism, the window is a unique sign of Hornig's practice: it is simultaneously the porosity that disrupts rigidity and its imposed repetition, the willingness to engage in dialogue between different environments and the hypocrisy of this forced openness, the reflection of the beholder and the oblivion of the self before the landscape. Heidegger believes that the bridge not only joins opposites but, above all, it creates the concept of margins by synthesising them into itself, a third territory. We are all fringe in this sense, as we occupy the middle point between the self and the other – those who imitate their own entrails expand their epidermis to broaden the surface of contact, digesting themselves in glorious transformations. This is also the way cities are, in their coarseness: they fold up the planetary surface for us to inhabit the most intense spaces of exchange.

This is also why we set bouquets down in open windows, to draw vital strength from their interaction with the world, blossoming their buds in the exercise of a new beginning on which all life depends. Their fallen petals are as much a joyful sacrifice of the imperfection that exists in every dialogue as they are a reminder of its precious finitude. The artist explores the fragmentation of her silhouette in *Glitch Raster*, maybe in honour of the exuberant monsters that contradict the cohesion of pure bodies. In *Stativ Tripod*, the audience can see two similar botanical species at different moments. As they are perpendicular to each other, a temporal reflection emerges: the future contemplates the past and perceives the blooming of another crystalline vase as its now lost peak. Maybe it harbours feelings of returning that violate its current state without perceiving it as arrogant nostalgia or myopic insecurity.

Sabine Hornig's *The Matter of the Glazed Fence* is at Galeria Cristina Guerra until March 15.

BIOGRAPHY

Tomas Camillis is an author and researcher based in Lisbon, working on fiction and on essays in the interplay between art, philosophy and literature. He has a master's degree in Art Theory by PUC-RJ. In recent years he has participated in researches, taught courses in cultural institutes, helped organize conferences and published in specialized magazines. He currently collaborates with the MAC/CCB Educational Service and Umbigo magazine.

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