

Leggenda nera – Le Cercle fermé

It's no secret that images have the power to steer reality. They make us succumb to a physiognomic deception, as Ernst Gombrich put it. They enchant and seduce. Image may become reality, but it is always only a surface that can be changed or deleted at any time.

An example is our perception of Venice: In reality a languishing city, the image we have of it is a lively image of promise. A projection that is anchored in art and architecture. But artworks and buildings are not just the material aspects of a place or a city, they are the visible objects of an abstract logic by which a society has historically grown.

In their installation 'La Cercle fermé' Martine Feipel and Jean Bechameil take up this abstract logic and visualize the flip-side of the coin. It's like a counter-image to veduta painting, which perpetuates and glorifies the historical image. They show us the *Leggenda nera*¹, the dark side.

The installation originated *in situ* and represents a specific confrontation with the city's architecture, history and social fabric. But the installation is not so much concerned with historicity or a linear historical narrative. Rather, it represents a construction, describing the conquest of space in the course of globalisation and the identity-creating effects globalisation has, while at the same time deconstructing this very space. A construction in which spatial finitude and loss of identity (in postmodern globalisation) visually take shape. The visitor is drawn into a dialectical process of appearance and perception.

As always in their works, Feipel and Bechameil proceed from the physiological limitation of our spatial perception. Here lies the centre of their oeuvre. Abstract cognition is countered by sensual experience. It is a matter of 'felt knowledge' as Walter Benjamin understood it².

Like a hamster in a running wheel from which there is no escape, the visitor feels his way forward, confused and hard-pressed by drawers falling out, by sagging stairs and staggering columns, by a constantly

swinging candelabra and doors opened as if by magic. The innermost seems to be turned to the exterior. What is perceived as a threat – which the space of rationality, materialised in architecture and its order, was constructed to keep under control – breaks free. Views open to a hidden, hitherto invisible space. It seems madness, yet there is method in it. Instability is created to reveal a deeper threat to space and the universe. ‘Le Cercle fermé’ is a ‘negation of expectation’, to use Karl Poppers term. Deregulation confronts us with the unexpected, and that is exactly what our consciousness registers.

In their artistic method, Feipel and Bechameil are guided by so called deconstruction, especially its most prominent representative, Jacques Derrida, a philosopher who extensively dealt with architecture and reflections on space. Derrida tackles the meaning of boundaries, the meaning of space, which itself is part of a long tradition. It is not about crossing the line, not about the violation of law by transgression, but rather the ‘opening up’ of a space within traditional space; an opening which does not lead to a new space that can be occupied, but rather to a kind of soul in the body. According to Derrida, every traditional concept of architecture has a hidden space, with tradition, construction and architecture blocking the path to it. Thus, this triad represents boundaries – boundaries which always include what they are supposed to exclude.

In this space, this nowhere land, a ‘ghost’ dwells; a ghost that does not leave architecture, tradition, in peace. Its appearance is like a parasite; though not visible, it is always present. It is a secret roommate, hidden behind the old meaning of boundary. For Derrida, architecture and space are something mad, a place, where something happens – essentially an unreal place³.

Derrida’s concept of space is based on Plato’s understanding of space. Plato uses the term *Chora* (land providing a place) to designate his concept of space: According to Plato, space is a kind of hybrid, limited as well as unlimited, something that allows for a where-in and a there-in. Thus, the meaning of space gets fundamentally shifted⁴.

‘Une architecture de l’événement, est-ce possible? Si ce qui nous arrive ainsi ne vient pas du dehors, ou plutôt si ce dehors nous engage dans cela même que nous sommes, y-a-t-il un maintenant de l’architecture et en quel sens? Tout revient justement à la question du sens. On n’y répondra pas en indiquant un accès, par exemple sous une forme donnée de l’architecture: préambule, pronaos, seuil, chemin méthodique, cercle ou circulation, labyrinthe, marches d’escalier, ascension, régression archéologique vers un fondement, etc. Encore moins sous la forme de système, à savoir de l’architectonique: l’art des systèmes, nous dit Kant. On ne réponds pas en livrant accès à quelque sens final dont l’assomption nous serait enfin promise. Non, il s’agit justement de ce qui arrive au sens: non pas au sens de ce qui nous permettrait d’arriver enfin au sens, mais de ce qui lui arrive, au sens, au sens du sens. Et voilà, l’événement, ce qui arrive par un événement, qui ne relevant plus tout à fait ni simplement du sens, aurait partie liée avec quelque chose comme la folie’⁵.

But what kind of appearance is ‘Le Cercle fermé’? The city’s historical architecture –especially the Doge’s Palace, the Biblioteca Marciana, the Arsenale, the Dogana and other sacred and secular buildings of distinction – originates from a time ‘in which objects are still part of a life process’ (Hans Belting). They represent the front side of a state brimming with political, military and economic power, a ‘miracle of urbanity, wealth and scholarship’⁶ whose territory and sphere of influence are constantly increasing; a front side which in the course of time increasingly loses its glamour. By the time of the Napoleonic invasion of 1797 at the latest, Venice had fallen into insignificance in every respect. Already in the 18th century, the city was notorious for being ‘Europe’s fairground’. In the age of modernisation (19th century) Venice practically became a projection screen for an archetypical ideal: John Ruskin’s scary and beautiful ‘Paradise of Cities’; a city that only exists in the imagination, in a free construction; a city that removes boundaries, but does not adhere to anything, in order to finally (in the postmodern era) mutate into a space of the ‘spectacle’ Debord-style where the city loses its secrets, only displaying itself as pure surface. Thus, the city has turned into a

structural object in Roland Barthes' sense; an object only existing by its name and its form.

Paradoxically, it was the very attempt at the end of the 19th century to turn Venice into a vibrant and modern city again and to free it from its rigor mortis that led to this total loss of identity. The idea of breathing new life into the city by staging an international exhibition of modern art, a *Biennale dell'arte* – thereby taking up the past greatness of the Venice of Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese, when the city was setting standards for cultural development reaching far beyond the city's territorial bounds – turned the city into a postmodern showcase for event culture and mass consumption, while at the same time providing a platform for the public display of an international jet set. Culture in Venice today also means capital turned into image. Unlike in the glorious past, Venice no longer creates an identity for a community, but destroys it. It seems like a late revenge of history; globalisation, which made the city great and created its identity, is now leading to its terminal decline. The circle is complete.

This circle is also reflected by the history of the Ca'del Duca, which houses the Luxemburgish pavilion. Its history summarises *in nuce* the process already described. It was originally (1461) constructed for Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, as part of an ambitious city palace at the Canale Grande never to be completed, and with a (by Venetian standards) unusually fortified exterior. Thus, it represents that particular part of Venice's history when the city expanded and became one of the most powerful centres of Italy. However, at the same time the Ca'del Duca highlights the loss of power and aura. Only the column of Filarete, the Sforzas' architect, reminds one of the magnitude of the planned residence⁷. The rest has deteriorated into an inconspicuous block of flats. During the Biennale, however, and made possible by the Luxemburg presence, for a short time the apartment block seems to regain its former glamour and awakens from its years of slumber. The presence of visitors is not, however, a sign of regained vitality, but a kind of visitation, a flash in the pan triggered by social interactivity.

‘Le Cercle fermé’ is a confrontation with space as a shaper of civilisation, but also with its crisis. The installation shows us Venice as a cautionary example of a development where – with our eyes open – we lose our identity, our worldviews and moral concepts, determined by the globalisation of a narrow way of thinking only concerned with efficiency and growth – and with devastating effects on society and individuals alike.

¹ Robert Hewison, Ruskin on Venice, (Yale University Press, New Haven/London, 2000), p.2.

² Walter Benjamin, Das Passagen-Werk, Vol.1, (Edition Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1983). Introduction by the editor, p.19.

³ Mark Wigley, Architektur und Dekonstruktion: Derridas Phantom, (Birkhäuser Verlag, Basel 1994), p. 147-157.

⁴ Stephan Günzel: Philosophie und Räumlichkeit, p.4, in: (ed.) Fabian Kessel, Christian Reulinger, Suzanne Maurer and Oliver Frey, Handbuch Sozialraum, (VS Verlag, Wiesbaden 2005).

⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‚Point de folie – Maintenant de l’architecture’, no.4, 1986, in: Bernard Tschumi, La Case vide, London 1986.

⁶ Martin Schwader, ‚Venedigbilder. Geschichte und Mythos einer Stadt’, p.11, in: exhibition catalogue: Venedig. Von Canaletto und Turner bis Monet, (Riechen/Basel, 2008).

⁷ Aldo Rossi, A Scientific Autobiography, Cambridge/Mass. And London 1981, 1984, p.6: *‘I always observe this column and its base, this column that is both a beginning and an end. This document or relic of time, in its formal purity, has always seemed to me a symbol of architecture consumed by the life which surrounds it.’* kindly cited by the Luxemburg artist Bert Theis.