

in speculum orbis terrae

Guy Châtel

Correspondents:

Dries Vande Velde, Madrid

Andrew & Ruth Stewart-Leach, Weber

40°24'904N-3°42'449W - Madrid, Plaza Mayor.

Dries Vande Velde, Friday 29.03.2002 -Viernes Santo.

For the first time since my arrival in the city, I miss the reassuring presence of an ordinary background public. They are there, the Sunday painters, the everyday terrace tourists, the drunken German beggars, but they are there differently. Less so, and more quietly, withdrawn into the protection of the galleries. On the square, there is a muted hush, signs of subdued life.

The rectangular space of the Plaza Mayor is particularly taut this evening. A typically Spanish façade surrounds nearly all the square: deep red, classical, four storeys high and trimmed with an almost continuous cornice. The four long façades – embellished walls actually – open at the bottom to the gallery in which music bands, tourist information booths and café terraces are kept: keeping silent.

The procession painfully creeps through one of the entrance gates, under the gallery. There has been several this week. But tonight, *Viernes Santo, el Paso del Silencio* is passing. All of Catholic Madrid haunts the square in penitent clothing; dressed as *Nazarenos*. Some carry the cross; some go on their knees. Heads covered by the long pointed cap. Just two empty openings at the spot where tomorrow there will be eyes again. His Passion is our sorrow. Penitence must speak. But rather than speaking, the emptiness in these holes and the silence in the air drive away any remains of subdued life from the square. A crowd of devotees shuffles across the square after the penitents and the Stations of the Cross: a silent inquisition blindly sentencing around itself, amidst an audience totally unfamiliar with the enacted symbolism. The whole procession finally performs a futureless demise: He in the dead, us in uncertainty, they in hell. The open space fills gradually with dark silence.

Dusk slowly draws itself down upon the enormous sky-room. And the walls seem to close themselves at the same time. In this encirclement only the place itself remains, undone of light, of sound, of exits. Slowly the realisation dawns on me that this place is a trap at night. That, once all ways out are closed off, only the possibility of the actual plane remains; that the symbolic demise of the procession was no more than the prelude to a phenomenal downfall -of the voluntary prisoners, in this sealed off emptiness, this night.

But again, on their canvas the painters are flirting with the gaudy female gaze staring back at them.

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I. Ver- Meer MDCLXVIII. He is bending over the table, dressed in a blue dressing gown. There is a large sheet of paper rolled out in front of him. It is almost white, overexposed. In the slanting light the heavy, piled up tablecloth is like mountainous land under an early sun. Perhaps he sees this on the paper: fields of green, brown and ochre with bright blue intarsia.

The geographer leans with his arm stretched out on the desk. In his right hand is a pair of dividers. His attitude suggests activity, yet everything stands still. Beyond the motionlessness that typifies painting, here the represented action is also frozen. The geographer is not measuring or plotting distances. He has turned away from his work. His gaze is sharp but indefinable, transfixed. He is looking inside himself.

Although figuration suggests it, painting is never a frozen record of a moment alone. All its properties as an object resist this. Here the immobility of the subject itself compounds this resistance. The geographer's gaze instates its own duration. As in so many works by Vermeer, the painting circumscribes a space in which an undetermined and therefore unlimited duration plays out.

The red lining of the dressing gown traces a divining rod designating a place to the face. Above the geographer, on the zenith of his shoulder, his stretched out arm and the right-hand stripe of the collar's fold, is the globe of Hondius; counterpart to the head.

II. L'homme blessé fills the canvas. The tree, against which he slumps, holds up his head. His left hand rests on his belly. His shirt smeared; he has a bleeding wound on his chest. In 1854, Gustave Courbet transformed a work painted ten years earlier in which he had portrayed himself, alongside a woman, relishing the afterglow of love. Now he bears a fatal wound. J'ai fait dans ma vie bien des portraits de moi au fur et à mesure que je changeais de situation d'esprit, he writes that same year in a letter.

A self-portrait is a representation of the condition of being an artist. In depicting his own likeness the painter of heavy, often dark materiality, and the pale-fleshed nude, has had to be content with his own mirror image. As I consider how this might have happened I feel I am being watched. A gaze slips out through his slightly ajar eyelids. Courbet holds his head up and looks down upon me. This wounded man expresses the artist's conceit. Pride and vulnerability are each other's mirror image. In this work, the hardheaded naturalist (registrar of hairs and veins, researcher of fat beneath the skin, and of perspiration) has stepped outside of himself. In the bitter hold of death, he meets the passionate cruelty of Géricault.

III. The self-portrait renders the intimate but extra-sensory realisation of an uneasy strangeness: a displacement from the world. It delimits a space not immediately given as a premise but rather constructed within the work of art itself. The self-image and the globe are metaphysical objects, products of a projection placing the subject outside itself, alienating devices of a disturbing objectification.

The globe represents the super-sensory knowledge of a cosmic place. Old maps were the report of a journey, the transcription of a course. The represented territory unfolded itself in the network established by the trajectories. It took a long time before the earth's inhabitants could gain the knowledge of the earth as a sphere, before they could postulate that a continued course has to return upon itself. The images procured by space travel have made this more fathomable. Yet, only the contents of books, the mathematical models of cosmography, could gather and verify this knowledge.

Globe and self-portrait embody the tension between experience and reflection. Both constructions demand a kind of mental separation, the removal of the subject at hand from the world of experience in order to view it from without. They are mental constructions uninhabited by their makers, the places of memory of alienation, of a completely fulfilled, actual absence. The geographer and the artist are elsewhere.

IV. Behind the geographer, beside a few books, high on the cupboard is the globe, hung on a wooden frame by the poles, forever fixed in a position that only reveals the ocean to the viewer: a hemisphere from which all land has escaped.

This view resembles Dante's representation of the world. But the globe's immobility undermines the verisimilitude of the poles. Beyond the fact of cosmic rotation they are devoid of meaning, this then filled in by the story. With Dante, it is about good and evil, or about ether and matter. Creation knows only

two principles, God and his antipode: Dis, the repulsive hairy worm. He inhabits the world's frozen core, the point at which all the world's burdens meet-at one with the mass.

Purgatory is a personal adventure, but it follows a forceful scenario: a journey with an elsewhere established trajectory and timescale. To achieve a resemblance to the story of redemption and the resurrection it must re-enact them. On White Thursday, the surrender takes place. The actual journey commences on Good Friday, at dusk. Simultaneously there is identification, and a distance to the earthly condition maintained: to sin and repentance. The wandering ends following submission to the logic of opposites.

Dante crosses the earth on a course that traces its axis. The poet passes through the mirror. Once reached, the deepest point turns descending into rising. There is a reversal. With Courbet, the immersion in matter sublimates into ecstatic romanticism. The world seems so simple when you only have eyes for the opposites; and it can be enticingly beautiful too, symmetrical.

V. Every work that reaches high enough searches for its reversal, for the mirror through which to go. This search tests disciplinary registers, questions methods. However, it remains uncertain whether this redeems expectation. In fact, it is a matter of waiting. Waiting until the solution appears and the wandering ceases. Often the work only allows knowledge of itself after that expectation. There is nothing shown for the work that conjures up waiting.

Atelier Hofraum by Luc Deleu does do this (though I wanted to address his work all along). The pieces that document the design, redirect the story to a simple scheme: a contra-position of 'before' and 'after' -the beginning and the end. In 1985, Deleu received a commission to convert the Dépendance, a freestanding building in the immediate vicinity of Hotel Furkablück. He was unsure what to do. The commission was unclear, yet the place impressed him, right on the highest point of the pass. He began with a precise survey. The façades especially: they determine the final image; they are constitutive of the unmanageably picturesque. The drawings are a witness to the continuous attention, the effort, and the topographical precision. Paper records everything: each stone, the cracks around the windows, scars and holes in the plastering. It is unclear how this could contribute to the actual work; except from the formalisation of its delay. It took until 1997 before it was finished. There is now a remarkable concrete building on the west side of the Dépendance. Little is done to reconcile the old with the new: the built-on section has the aspect of an organ grafted onto the outside of the worn-out body. It says nothing about the way in which it participates in the organisation of the whole. With its sharply outlined chunky slits, it resembles a bunker that is guarding the pass. Part of the building is inaccessible from the ground floor. Access to the higher floors is via a route encircling the entire building. The trajectory departs from the east side and climbs upward along the rear side of the building, between the façade and the mountainside. It leads to a platform above the addition, completely on the other side. There is the entrance to the upper floor and an outdoor staircase leading to the attic.

It is an account of delay, of waiting and guarding. The maker imposes the condition of waiting upon the building itself. The ritual intake, the gestural and mental identification that speaks out of the first drawings, has endured in the project: consolidated in the course of protocol that delays entrance, in the vigil of the bunker. Atelier Hofraum is a reflection of the initiation, a mirror in which the maker proudly reveals his vulnerability.

VI. The Journey around the world sets out trajectories for the exploration of territory. The work outlines the place inhabited by our kind. It is all that we have. Water predominates. In the antipodes lies New Zealand, isolated in the

ocean. Madrid-Weber-Madrid: always the same beginning and the same end. An arrival is also a departure. Repetition is the tide of the cosmic course. The red-white meridians make the planispheres of Mercator and Van der Grinten swell at the travel-poles. The sphere reappears in the plane; and so the maker in the work: his distance and his proximity - mathematical calculation and painstaking transcription. This work is not a project, nor is it a proposal. It is yet again an expectation. The Journey around the world is a self-portrait. In its cosmic course the earth appears as a vessel, the ship that keeps us shackled. We travel without cease, with no destination. Everything returns and it lasts forever.

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40°24'904S-176°17'551E - Weber.

Andrew and Ruth Stewart-Leach, Saturday 30.03.2002 -sunrise.

We arrive a little late, eyes fixed as keenly on the dawn sky's expanding glow as they are on hawks and possums threatening to suicide under our speeding car: we should have left earlier. The sun teases grey clouds into life, smudging ever-lightening rose and pink streaks, igniting the underbelly of Weber's morning sky. Magpies chant an eerie welcome; a lone dog's howl of mournful delight echoes in the emptiness: Weber, sunrise.

An orange billboard announces Tui East India Pale Ale as "the beer around here", the adjacent pub quietly nursing a Saturday morning hangover as we cross the town's boundary. A transportable building hovers alongside the pub -either a new arrival or an imminent departure.

The single street -State Route 52- is 300 metres of structure-flanked gravel. To the right: Weber school, run-down prefabricated buildings complete with a gate-side recycling depot (a wool-sack in a metal frame); a small memorial reminds the living of those who left Weber and paid with soldiers' graves in Crete, Tobruk, and Egypt; a corrugated iron farm shed holds its place next door, heaped firewood in casual vigil alongside rusted farm machinery and concrete tanks. The local fire station, typically painted red, sits before a paddock of felled trees. A gravel road breaks off at a right angle, loping off to endless farmland. On the left, two houses clad in weatherboard, each with smoking chimney and small veranda; the local church; another similarly utilitarian farm building, shaped like an airplane hangar, then a final house.

We double back and take some photographs of the pub. The publican's barefoot, flannel-clad son bursts out, marching towards us across the car park, demanding to know what we are doing. We explain: Luc Deleu, *DW&B* and *Landfall*, Plaza Mayor in Madrid, sunrise, global positioning. He slows and responds with shuffled feet and a furrowed brow; a vague gesture towards the nearby deer farm and an introduction to the decidedly more interested Mr Pig seem to signal some understanding. But we clearly do not belong here.

We move the car again, trying parking spots outside one house, then another, before settling on the 'neutral' fire station driveway. We feel like invaders. As our fingers stiffen in the cold air flowing through open car windows, we hear, one by one, each house receiving a single phone call; Weber's inhabitants know we are here. Behind opaque curtains, morning eyes peer, locals monitor our movements. Dawn does not bother the sleep of this town as much as our presence, this taunting the tension of its protective bubble. The farm animals grazing adjoining paddocks beyond the invisible yet tangible boundary seem the only disinterested participants in this scene.

Why are we here? Because here is directly opposite somewhere.

Leaving, after an hour, we sense different values in this town's timelessness. Home, friends and community here mean something foreign even to us. Things here are different, the trappings of our world making no sense in this utilitarian, striking landscape. This place is self-complete, self-sufficient. Even had we

arrived earlier, we would have seen little more, simply waking Weber too early from its perpetual slumber.

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Guy Châtel is an architect and professor in the Ghent University Department of Architecture and Urbanism.

Luc Deleu (b. 1944) is an architect and artist, based in Belgium.

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