

Liutauras Psilibskis, "Luisa Lambri: No sense of place" Flash Art International, n. 221, Milano, 2001 pp. 82--84

LUISA LAMBRI

No Sense of Place

Liutauras Psilibskis: You have often photographed sites that are ideologically charged: the functionalist architecture of Mies van der Rohe or La Casa del Fascio by Terragni, used as the base for the Italian Fascist Part, 'Electric City' in Lithuania, one of the most famous utopia of the communist regime...

Luisa Lambri: It's not so much about ideology, as it is about atmospheres. Buildings are living creatures: they preserve memories and they change according to the people that inhabit them. That's why all my images seem almost empty: I'm trying to restore an atmosphere that goes beyond the immediate function of each construction. After all, architecture doesn't interest me that much. It's more a matter of documenting the history of some places that crossed my paths. Images are built on layers: one layer is the actual building, with its own story and style, one layer can be the architecture and its function, but on top of them I try to cast the shadow of my own presence.

L.P. You often talk about atmospheres. What is it that you are after?

L.L. Anything that lies beneath the physical presence of architecture. Like those grains of dust that seem to flow through the window: you can only catch them for a second, when the light filters through the curtains and nobody is passing by. Somewhere I read that dust is mostly made of human skin. Maybe that's the memory you breathe in every building.

L.P. But how do you actually approach spaces? Can you give me an example of how you work?

L.L. In 1999 I shot a 16 mm film in the Sant'Elia kindergarten, which was designed by Giuseppe Terragni. It's one of the masterpieces of modernist architecture, but it's also the kindergarten I went to when I was little. So the different layers of history and biography were overlapped in it since the very beginning. As I was filming the kindergarten, I also started working in Terragni's Casa Del Fascio. In both cases, I was filming in a very straightforward style: a sort of classical documentary approach, which of course carried its own implications and ideologies. In the end, I edited the footage so that the two buildings could live in the very same image. The final result looks like a third building made of the superimposition of many different gazes. In this way, ideology becomes just one element used to build a composition, which also indulges in personal memories. It's like trying to find a balance between alienation and a sense of belonging to a place or a tradition.

L.P. When I saw the pictures in that series, I thought they spoke about that sense of ecstasy one can sometimes experience in very ordinary spaces.

L.L. I think it has to do with a certain feeling of distance. Like a sense of loss. Photography has this incredible power of making any space alien, even when the image is taken in the most neutral way. Recently I spent some months in Japan to take pictures of some buildings and private houses designed by the Sanaa studio, run by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa. It was one of the first time I was working with living architects, and when I showed my photos to Kazuyo Sejima, she just couldn't recognize her own work. The building didn't belong to her anymore. Any sense of place was completely lost. It was more like a soft struggle between the architect's vision and my own perception of her spaces.

L.P. Do you ever manipulate the environments you photograph?

L.L. I try to leave things untouched, shooting even in very bad light conditions. Buildings have been there long before I started caring about them, so it's not really fair to adjust them to my needs. Mine is a sort of documentary: I try to remain faithful to what I see. But at the same time the images evoke all the other spaces I've visited in the past. In a certain sense, each photograph is a reflection of all the images I have already taken. I like this paradox: you come close to the architecture, only to discover how distant you are from the present, and how close you've been to your memories. On the other hand, when I install my work, I like to change things, and manipulate spaces. For an exhibition in Japan, I'm collaborating with the Sanaa studio in order to install my photos of their buildings in a house Sejima and Nishizawa designed. It's like adding a new layer to the images, like complicating a chain of visions.

L.P. All your images have something immaterial to them. What is your relationship to objects?

L.L. I like objects that tend to disappear. They are there, but they are desperately trying to become something else. Most buildings function in the same way: they absolve a function but they try so hard to mean something else, something impalpable. I love this tension, it's as if some buildings were tragically trying to deny their objectivity.

LP: How do you choose which images to keep and which to throw away?

L.L. I work in a very repetitive and obsessive way. In each session I take hundreds of almost identical shots, to catch the smallest changes. In a way, I'm building a personal archive of similar views and locations, which tend to surface in the very few images I decide to print. The photos I exhibit are the ones that maintain a certain openness: they might seem abstract, but their vagueness can become a deposit for something else. I always thought of architecture as a mirror for emotions.

L.P. Often you take long trips before you arrive to the place you want to photograph. How come your images are always so still?

L.L. I like contradictions. But most of all I like them when they get resolved in a simple, empty image. The efforts you make to reach a place shouldn't be immediately visible. You must sense them in the image, in its distance and coldness. And I also like imaginary travels. Often, before visiting a place, I spent many hours reading about it, or looking for photos and other documents. So, when you get to the actual site you want to photograph, you already have some memories with you. Whenever you look at something, your gaze is never innocent: it brings something along. With my photos I try to measure this distance between what is already there and what you brought with you.

L.P. If you would think about photographing anything else than architecture, what would it be?

L.L. I really liked portraits: they are receptacles of gazes – there is the gaze of the artist, the one of the sitter, and then the viewer... Probably the photos I take today are portraits, but for some reason I can only find life in the interstices of architecture.