

Eric Hattan's Transitions and Passages

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Crossings

Into the bright side of the hall or its darkened other half full of boxes, lids and tarps? The question already comes up from afar at a first glimpse of the division of the glass cube of the FRAC d'Alsace in Sélestat into a shabbily outfitted space and an untouched, transparent space, and it has to be answered by the time you get to the entrance right in the middle. Either you go to the left, where storage boxes are hanging from the ceiling, or to the right, where there is a video installation, also made of storage boxes. As visitors make their way through the exhibition, though, it becomes clear that they had to make their choice only to discover that each side of the installation contains the other. From outside, it may seem at first as if the left half were open and the right half closed, but inside it is the other way around: to the left, the boxes chosen by Eric Hattan more or less at random from the FRAC art warehouse are closed; to the right, they are open. Yet despite the obvious conclusion that the opening of the boxes started the images moving (in the monitors and projections in and on the boxes), the contrary observation is no less accurate: the closed boxes with labels indicating they contain an 'Armleder' or a 'Raynaud' slowly turn, forming a mobile as monumental as it is playful. Even the distinction between purely visual experience and the experience of the body in motion, between video image and installation, cannot really be maintained. The video installation forces spectators to go through a narrow obstacle course, as well as (in order to be able to see anything at all) to bend down, look up or put their eye to a small hole, a peephole. In contrast, not only does the mobile make the heavy boxes hanging from the ceiling seem to be gently hovering, the spectators walking between the obstacles of the dangling weights experience a mobilisation of their own body mass, as if gravity had lost a little of its reality or had been deflected from the vertical into a rotating horizontal. Whether between heavy bodies or flickering images, whether in front of closed or open containers, whether in glass architecture or in a black box, we never know what side we are on at any given moment. Our peripatetic perception, in which seeing always involves walking, standing, bending down or stretching, seems to follow a Möbius strip leading us unexpectedly inward or outward, into the light or into the dark, into the world of bodies or into that of images. 'Vous êtes chez moi' – but where and when? The distinction we would have to perceive in order to decide where and when this 'chez moi' begins is repeatedly displaced: does it begin in the exhibition space, in a box, in the monitor in the box, in the building that appears on the monitor? But perhaps the exhibition's title, *Vous êtes chez moi*, should also be understood as an exclamation, a surprised reaction to a neighbour who, as sometimes comes to pass, unexpectedly turns up 'chez nous' (say, with the tip of his drill).

Neighbouring

Eric Hattan is undoubtedly an intruder. He goes into the FRAC warehouse, has a few boxes randomly removed and even opens them, in the process discovering that one of them contains the model of a project by Diller & Scofidio. The unpacked miniature, in the middle of which a photographic negative was once stuck, establishes an unexpected relationship which becomes the starting point of Hattan's exhibition: what can actually be done with the FRAC collection? It is supposed to be an art warehouse, not only purchasing art but also having the works circulate. How can the complex temporal and dynamic structure of the not-yet and no-longer of storage (its paradigm the undeveloped print in the Diller & Scofidio model) be made fruitful?

During the unpacking, surprising contiguities appear, and during the packing as well, when each box on one side of the exhibition was outfitted with monitors or used as a surface for projection. For example, in a box and in a monitor, a red and white striped plastic bag can be seen, repeatedly moved and carried away by the wind or the draughts of passing vehicles. Life inhabits the wrapper as it goes its unforeseeable way. The skin that once held things together prefigures our own movements. The aimless, groundless animation of the light plastic membrane allows us to follow the wanderings of a new comet: the spirit of things has slipped away; the rambling attention is the soul. While art-boxes, on the basis of their physical and just as symbolic weight, dangle in the exhibition space, the monitor presentation of the plastic sack, of a remnant drifting around, is enclosed in a box, thus gaining its own weight, a context, a presence. This form of inversion or turning inside-out, the exchange of inside and outside, or of life and emptiness, which the plastic sack makes its theme, comes up again and again in Hattan's lively images: the sheep projected on a surface of boxes and cardboard drags its fur along behind it, as if the wool hanging down could be turned into a kind of protective housing, while the hanging dags also suggest an unrolled inner life. Wrapped and unpacked at the same time, the sheep may seem heavy and immobile precisely because it drags its peculiarly multifunctional jacket around

with it. Here, then, it is the recording (and not the box) that gives the moving image its gravity. It is different with the other animals: the observing presence of the camera is met by an owl with its alert, unflinching, panoramic gaze. The inaccessible monitor, too, is located, like a surveillance camera, in the uppermost opening of a stack of boxes. While the owl turns its head in every direction, we can only observe it from a fixed position. Every time these asymmetrical gazes meet, who the intruder is must be redetermined.

Topologies

Anyone who, like Hattan, is interested in the contiguous relationships that characterise a space, is a topologist. The fact that an owl, of all things, flies towards him and raises the irritating question of proximity (who can now say 'vous êtes chez moi?') will not be a surprise to those familiar with the history of topology, for it was none other than Leonhard Euler (the German word for owl is 'Eule') who solved the problem of the seven bridges of Königsberg, one of the first results in the mathematical discipline then called *analysus situs* and now called topology. Surely, nobody will want to attribute this connection simply to the whim of a bird (or to the person who gave it such a euphonious name) as soon as it becomes clear that Hattan, in his explorations of contiguities, was faced with a problem like that of the old Königsbergers, who tried to figure out why it was impossible to cross the city's seven bridges and return to one's starting point without crossing any bridge twice. A similar task, also consisting of not going down the same path twice, confronted Hattan after he broke into a dilapidated building outside Paris. He found all the apartment doors bricked up but could still move around between the apartments through various holes made by the deconstruction workers. The path from one interior to the next, the unexpected rediscovery of the stairwell, then the return into another interior that seemed to have turned away from the outside world forever – the camera moves through deserted rooms containing the scattered remnants of an abruptly abandoned life, follows a path from one interior to the next, and finally escapes into the open, finding refuge on the roof. During this trip into the underworld of a housing project high above street level, we are ourselves gazing into the interior of a box that can only be peered into through a small opening. Not only is the principle of unexpected contiguity ('Vous êtes chez moi!') thus expressed in having radically different things beside each other in the narrowest possible space, mostly only separated by a thin wall; the opposite case is no less surprising, when we intrude into the adjacent space only to be met by our own intrusion again, as in a dream – that is, we always remain outside, no matter how we try to get inside. An emblem of this contiguous relationship, in which it is impossible to arrive 'chez eux' because we are met again and again by a new barrier or wrapper, is *How Big Is Big (The Chinese Box)* from 1998: a peephole is installed in a box; whoever looks through it sees another box deep inside the first. This can also be seen in the formal construction of Hattan's installation in Sélestat. The boxes and cartons are built into and on top of each other; they are nested one in another; they are unfolded into surfaces for projections or pushed together to form bunks. The observer keeps entering an intermediate space where the contiguity of two places can be approached and experienced, either for the first time or in a surprising way – not least the contiguity of the exhibition and storage spaces in Sélestat. But how does one move in this in-between?

Rambling

Hattan's topography includes marginal and transitional zones: condemned buildings, empty lots, ruins, abandoned and forgotten objects, the remnants of the world, landscapes of carelessness. They are visible to a peripatetic eye; in gentle curves or in the restless rhythm of an obstacle course, Hattan follows trails that are sometimes blazed aggressively, through neglect and destruction. With his camera, he approaches car wrecks left behind in the barren no-man's-lands that are everywhere. He documents the stages of their decay, the rusted, now dysfunctional ingredients of lost guarantees of mobility and motion. Or the scarecrows, whose colourful scraps of cloth flapping in the wind may reveal their bodiless and weightless shape, but which have still not succumbed to their lack of resistance. Hattan pursues such phenomena, attentively moving forward, sometimes stopping for a moment; passing by what has been left behind and left to itself, he animates it with a fleeting glance, strokes it, as it were, with the camera's eye, but without becoming fixated on what has been seen and recorded or making it a fetish of sentimental attention. Rambling gaze, rambling world. Yet this motion, which repeatedly leads Hattan into buildings or caravans, always involves reproduction too (even when the artist becomes an intruder): to accept the rejected and repressed again, to turn to them and thus give them a frame. 'Vous êtes chez moi!' can also be understood, then, as the caring realisation that even here, among the ruins, a 'chez moi' can be established. The 'here' that was just discussed, though, only ever comes to light 'there', in a different space, that of the exhibition into which such

rambling has been transferred. Hoarding and storing, stacking, nesting and other procedures of physical aggregation are thus always means of allowing the rambling to be experienced in the space of art, which, however, is distinguished by how somebody (the artist) first blazes trails – paths that do not establish boundaries but are transitions, themselves evanescent.