

3 + 1

A Circuit

Sam Smith

19.01.17 – 04.03.17

Sam Smith, *The Horizontal Window*

The central theme of Sam Smith's work is a self-reflexive analysis of the language of cinema. In his second solo show at 3+1 Gallery, Smith presents new video and sculpture works, where he explores a series of continuities between image and architecture. Investigating the contemporary representational regime, inspired by the works of Eileen Gray and Le Corbusier, this body of work analyses the fluid frontiers between the two languages and highlights the uncertain contexts and meanings that both project and contain. The video *The Horizontal Window* uses the "Villa Le Lac" by Le Corbusier as a set that generates a wide range of associations between elements like window, mirror or screen, which can be found mirrored materially in the sculptures-models that evoke Eileen Gray's E-1027 house. This analogue method aims at researching the impact of different representational models on our perception and, specially, to analyse the transition of a pictorial model centred in the human being to a current regime that is independent from it. Even though it looks at the past through quoting modernist architecture, the narrative of *The Horizontal Window* comments on our contemporary condition, marked by a computerized digital system.

The coexisting of different images typical of a computer screen is constantly projected in the video's pictorial surface through many overlays: in the groups of photographs, in the reflections we can see in windows, and in water and light movements visible in the villa's interior or in the landscape, in particular in the surface of the lake where the house is located. We can establish a parallel between the reflection game of *The Horizontal Window* and the famous hall of mirrors of the Palace of Versailles, that Emily Pethick interprets as an ambivalent space: on one side reflecting and underlying the sovereign power of the monarch, on the other side the multiple reflections and refractions can be considered as a destabilizing phenomenon for the image of totality that sustains that image of power¹. The model of representation spread by the digital system is, in the same way, heterogeneous, respecting the principle of unified visual space held by the screen and, at the same time, exploding that integrity through the multiplication of coexisting images, an image represented in the name and logo of the most popular operative system: *windows*.

In 1435, Leon Battista Alberti publishes *De Pictura*, a work that instructs the painter to interpret the rectangular shape of the canvas as an open window. The treaty has influenced greatly the whole history of visual culture, including the theory of painting, of architecture and of the moving image. Nevertheless, and as Anne Friedberg argues, since the 19th century and mainly during the 20th century, the unidirectional perspective and its correspondent symbolic system were contested in a number of fronts: the several modern painting movements like cubism for example, by replacing the window "of perspective" for the horizontal window or "wall of images" in the field of architecture, and by moving image technologies that add a temporal component to spatial perspectivism². Besides the "wall of images", the title of the video has another reference: the transition of the format 1.33:1 typical of the early stages of cinema to the anamorphic format 2.35:1, used

¹ Emily Pethick "Hall of Mirrors" in *Kinomuseum: Towards an Artists' Cinema*. eds Mike Sperlinger and Ian White, Köln: Walther König, 2008, 97.

² Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2006, 1-2.

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by the systems CinemaScope and Panavision till about 1970. Both are used in the video singularly and simultaneously; their juxtaposition highlights pictorial areas neglected by each configuration, and, by doing so, underlines the control mechanism that any format embodies and demarcates. In cinema as well as in architecture, this transition marks the distancing from the established horizontal model that has as reference the human body, in the direction of a system of representation that abandons a point of view that is unique and corporeal, and that can be observed in regimes as the typical bird's-eye view from a satellite or drone, but also in the multiple faceted screen of the computer.

In Anne Friedberg's perspective, even though it remains within the limits defined by the screen's framework, it is in this new space of post-Cartesian, post-perspective, post-cinematic visual mediation, that we find a multitude of windows-perspectives that imply new laws of presence: not only here and there but, also, then and now, a multiple vision, many times expanded and other times minimized³.

This ambiguity that structures and is disseminated by the contemporary visual regime, explains the almost obsessive attention of *The Horizontal Window* for glass, that, similarly to perspective, had a major role in the development of today's representational regime. In *The Role of Glass in Interior Architecture: Aesthetics, Community, and Privacy*, Matthew Ziff analyses the material and symbolic components of the element and argues that its main function is the establishment of visual contact with the exterior, a movement of ambivalent results that derive from the fact that it is also a physical barrier, despite its transparency and translucency⁴. Other ambiguous aspects of glass relate to questions of durability and fragility, privacy and visibility, safety and danger⁵. Initially used to allow the entrance of light inside, the surface of the glass also allows the acknowledgment of the exterior space. Ziff defends that this aspect is essential to allow a self-location of the human in relation to symbolic and concrete elements potentially important in the obtainment and maintenance of a continuous feeling of identity⁶. Another relevant dimension is its common association with natural elements as water, the sky or clouds⁷, a characteristic that *The Horizontal Window* repeatedly reflects. The glass, both because of its composite structure between solid and liquid, as by its ambivalent symbolic components, is a highly complex object, a fundamental agent that relates and intervenes in areas as architecture, psychology, culture and economy⁸ - one could also add science -, all essential territories to Smith's investigation.

The multiple reverberations between the elements and narratives of *The Horizontal Window* extend themselves beyond the screen through the several echoes with the sculptural set, a hybrid between the material representation of a house and support of an immaterial projection. The group of works formulates an analysis of today's representational mechanisms and their impact on our understanding of the world, being structured by the materiality and presence of glass and the figure of the window, which as Anne Friedberg refers, is a common metaphor for diverse contextual framing modes, presenting virtual analogies in painting, photography, cinema, computers and other communication mobile devices⁹. The elusive triangle between

³ idem, 4-5.

⁴ Matthew Ziff, *The Role of Glass in Interior Architecture: Aesthetics, Community, and Privacy*, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter, 2004), Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 11.

⁵ idem, 12.

⁶ ibidem, 15.

⁷ ibidem, 16.

⁸ ibidem, 21.

⁹ Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*, Cambridge MA and London: MIT Press, 2006, 5.

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window, mirror and screen identified by the exhibition, produces a precise portrait of the paradoxical and ambivalent control processes that rule the contemporary pictorial model. The ambiguity of its mechanisms is reflected in the metamorphosis of fire and steam experienced by the glass through the video and in the polyhedral representation of the house emerging out of the interaction between window, landscape, and camera. The lens and the screen become tools with meditative qualities, capable of shedding light to everyday codes that frame the world. Surpassing rational engrained principles that rule the mechanics of the cinematographer and architecture, Smith explores the visual domain as a process that close to alchemy, where objects and their images find themselves in constant flux and reconfiguration.

João Laia, London, 11.2016