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## Luminous interstices

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The works of Elisa Sighicelli are metaphysical explorations of suspended places. Her photographs mounted on lightboxes and her videos seem to be located in an unspecified temporal dimension that corresponds to a spatial ambiguity, almost as if it were impossible to tell whether the images belong to this Earth or to who knows what other planet. Even when taken in places that still have traces of urban landscapes, Elisa Sighicelli's works seem to depict sidereal geographies of very distant spaces. Elisa Sighicelli's new photographs capture the reflections of artificial lights and headlamps that cut through the darkness of the night. They are mainly urban scenes: city landscapes shot in Asia, in the new megalopolises of the East. But the artist seems to turn her gaze away from the detail of people's lives, from the description of the environment. What interests her is not current events or the description of the urbanistic metamorphosis that seems to have overtaken cities like Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing. Rather Elisa Sighicelli's gaze is fixed on more marginal details, on forgotten spaces caught in a phase of transition, as if they were gigantic machines taken out of commission. The pictures of large advertising hoardings stripped of their images reveal the structure of these fragile rusting dinosaurs: it is a pitiless X-ray of the means to which we usually entrust commercial messages, dreams of blind optimism. Sighicelli's photos show them instead as spare, empty and mute. The effect is similar to a visit behind the scenes of a theatrical performance or to the recently abandoned set of a movie: it is an at once distressing and highly instructive vision, not lacking a sense of excitement, of the enthusiasm of someone who has discovered the secret behind a conjuring trick. It is as if the machine of make-believe had been dismantled and exposed in all its complicated banality.

Yet Elisa Sighicelli's work cannot be circumscribed within an ideological interpretation, a critique of the construction of commercial images. On the contrary, her photographs are steeped in that same power of seduction to which commercial photography has accustomed us. The paradox, the challenge of Sighicelli's work perhaps consists precisely in the way that she achieves that same seductive charge without relying on the subject: creating images that are fascinating but based on abstract or even banal,

prosaic subjects —turning the non-place into space, the negation of an image into image.

The true protagonist of Elisa Sighicelli's new works is light. The light that is supposed simply to illuminate the advertising messages in Sighicelli's pictures bounces off reflective surfaces, radiates, takes on substance: it is transformed from an instrument into a subject. It is light as narration, as writing. Light has always been at the centre of Elisa Sighicelli's reflection, right from the choice of her preferred medium, the lightbox. Unlike other artists who use the lightbox to depict a reality more real than the real, a hyperrealistic wealth of detail, Sighicelli inserts an almost handcrafted dimension into her creative process: she alters the industrial technology and makes it personal. Instead of printing her images on transparent film, as is usually done when preparing a lightbox, Sighicelli starts out from a C-print. The image is then printed on a sheet of opaque paper that is subsequently mounted on a Plexiglas structure. Sighicelli prints all her photos by hand, an aspect that, in the age of digital photography and outsourcing, bestows a unique element of authenticity on her works.

But the artisan dimension is not restricted to the surface of the image. Sighicelli, in fact, constructs each of her lightboxes as if it were a unique object. Usually the neon tubes that are enclosed in the lightbox are distributed evenly, according to a simple functional logic. In her lightboxes instead Elisa Sighicelli arranges the lights in such a way that they illuminate only some parts of the image, bringing out individual details. Sometimes the artist even masks some areas of the back of the image by painting them black, allowing her to orchestrate the movement and diffusion of the light and the shade in an even more controlled manner.

Anyone who has the privilege of looking inside one of Elisa Sighicelli's lightbox will find what looks like a strange, arcane mechanism. Neon tubes, electric wires, black signs like the marks of unknown ideograms that stud the back of the photographs, forming the map of a mysterious city in which it is impossible to get your bearings. For every lightbox the artist works on two distinct surfaces: one, visible from the outside, is presented to the viewer as a carefully constructed glimpse of reality, an image that is at one and the same time spare and sophisticated; the other, the invisible one, enclosed in the lightbox, retains the traces of the artist's handiwork, which remain sealed inside this mysterious object.

Elisa Sighicelli utilizes light as a genuine medium, almost like paint on a palette: perhaps more than to Jeff Wall, Sighicelli's work refers to James Turrell. The light of the neon tubes installed in the lightboxes is split and directed toward some specific points of the image so that it emerges with the force of an otherworldly revelation from beyond

this world or a small, everyday epiphany. The light takes on an almost plastic, sculptural force: it is no accident that in this new series of photographs the light is materialized on objects endowed with a brutal physicality like electricity pylons, signs and castings of concrete. Light seems at the same time to lighten these bodies and endow them with a material presence: the two-dimensional surface of the image appears to be unhinged from the light that stirs and inflates the forms.

In *(Untitled) Sphere*, for example, the artist portrays a circular element that at first sight seems to sink into the photograph as if it were a dam that has suddenly interrupted the urban landscape. In reality it is a planetarium that emerges from the profile of an anonymous metropolis. The skilful use of lighting behind the photograph and the masking of some areas allows the artist to play with the alternation of concave and convex, turning the plane of the photograph into a sort of three-dimensional construction. The luminous border that surrounds this strange work of Martian architecture ends up dissolving its weight as well: the object has the mammoth scale that is suited to an ambitious work of contemporary engineering, but has the lightness to be found in a drawing by Boullée or an engraving by Ledoux. *(Untitled) Sphere* is an image that unites the brutal force of the documentary with the mental perfection of a utopian work of architecture—a strange combination of contemporary junk space and neoclassical Apollinian clarity.

*(Untitled) Sphere*, like the other works presented in this exhibition, distances itself distinctly from the series previously realized by the artist. In the past Sighicelli constructed her images around a closed grid, dominated by horizontal lines of force, with low perspectives created by placing the camera almost on the ground. In this new series of photographs the artist seems to want to turn away from a classical composition and seek a more complex organization instead, one based on a sort of radial dispersion. Works like *Horizon Series* or *Parlour* from the beginning of 2000 are examples of Sighicelli's investigation of linear planes and the geometric structure of the image. In those years the artist photographed scenes of banal interiors: hotel rooms and lobbies, details of indeterminate places, explored in their minor details like floors, carpeting and drapes. The framing has an almost theatrical perspective: the image climbs a steeply tilted plane that follows the surface of a floor, bed or table taking up half the photograph. Thus the foreground is often out of focus: the lower part of the picture seems to open onto a sort of limbo, an undefined space that can be seen as a simple abstract patch of colour. It is a zone of suspension, an integral part of the image but almost alien to it: an important mechanism for creating the sense of disorientation and expectation that characterizes all these works. A feeling of motionlessness

pervades these shots, where the human figure is never present but always alluded to by the objects. Chairs, beds, tables: they are objects and places that immediately evoke the absence of characters and actors. The cut of the image is cinematic, an establishing shot from a road movie but one that is perpetually in suspense: in this series of photographs Elisa Sighicelli uses the image not as illusion or narration, but as threshold. The pictures offer us a glimpse of another dimension that is drenched in a light reminiscent of Flemish painting: but another dimension to which we are not given full access, into which neither we nor any other human figure can enter. These are microcosms, not mirrors of our world.

Her more recent works, like the series of advertising hoardings in Hong Kong and that of *Untitled (Grid)* recently shown at the Venice Biennale, shun an orthogonal layout and open up instead to a confusion of dynamic lines of perspective. It is as if the artist's vision had absorbed the abundance and multiplicity of points of view which are imposed on us by contemporary megalopolises like Hong Kong, Bangkok and Rio de Janeiro, which she has recently visited. Elisa Sighicelli's new images are metropolitan symphonies, in which the tradition of the urban sublime—from Walter Ruttmann to Dziga Vertov and Fritz Lang, to cite just the most obvious examples—is transplanted into cities that have grown at a more unpredictable and hectic pace.

*Untitled (Grid)* is composed of five square lightboxes just over a meter on a side, installed one next to the other. The pictures portray, from close up, the bamboo scaffolding that plays such a fundamental part in the building boom in the Far East—an object symbolic of the region's growth, and of that peculiar combination of optimistic belief in progress and do-it-yourself spirit that seems to characterize the urban planning of this Chinese century. In Elisa Sighicelli's pictures the scaffolding—framed in a series of dramatically foreshortened views—is transformed into a sinuous musical stave that traverses the image with a syncopated and fragmentary movement. The light that illuminates the photograph from behind is also an integral part of the image and radiates from the streetlamp at the centre of the framing: this superimposition of the illusion of the image and the construction material of the lightbox confers on *Untitled (Grid)* an almost tactile presence that throws the space open in an explosion of vanishing points.

A similar passage from a more regular structure to a more open and dynamic one is also discernable in the videos that Elisa Sighicelli has been making since 2004. Short non-narrative intermezzi, the artist's films and videos seem to extend her fascination with light and the architecture of vision into a new spatial dimension. *Nocturne (Left Bank)*, (2006), for example, is a sort of brief travel journal filmed on the Chao Phraya,

the river that runs through Bangkok. The nighttime shots flow past like a diorama: a tracking shot of horizontal images in which the surface of the water takes up half the frame. The signs of stores and the streetlamps are mirrored in the river, whose banks seem to ripple delicately. *Nocturne (Left Bank)*, like all Elisa Sighicelli's videos, appears to be constructed on a hypnotic rhythm, almost as if the moving image were trying to obtain the sense of suspension that characterizes the artist's photographs. If Elisa Sighicelli's lightboxes draw on some stylistic features of cinematic language, which the artist then takes in new directions, her videos and films utilize photographic techniques in the same way to create a sort of hybrid in which painting, cinema and photography seem to be combined in an absolutely original manner.

This experimentation becomes even more evident in *Untitled (Mollino, Agitato)* (2003): shot on 16-mm film, it portrays the switching on of the lights at the Teatro Regio in Turin, one of the most extraordinary examples of an interior decoration designed by the famous architect Carlo Mollino. *Untitled (Mollino, Agitato)* is literally an explosion of light: it is cinema degree zero—a spectacle of lights and forms, a ballet of light sources. The reference to theatre and dance returns in *Non-Stop Exotic Cabaret* (2007) in which Elisa Sighicelli films the sinuous undulations of a body swimming in a pool, while in *Phi Building* (2006) the artist continues her research into the architecture of Shanghai by filming the LED lights that illuminate the façade of a building in the Chinese metropolis. All these works are based on an almost maniacal gaze in which details stolen from the dimension of everyday life are repeated *ad infinitum*: it is through this prolonged observation that the artist turns the concrete element into abstraction. To use a cinematographic term, it could be said that Elisa Sighicelli is working on the creation of a new form of fade in which the image does not turn into a black screen: rather it is the object which dissolves into light.

One of Elisa Sighicelli's most recent video works is *Untitled (The Party Is Over)* (2009) also shown in the Italian Pavilion at the 53rd Venice Biennale. *Untitled (The Party Is Over)* (2009) makes the fade the work's entire theme. Like in a film that mysteriously runs backwards, the artist has shot some fireworks in China and mounted the images in reverse: the result is not just estranging; there is also something melancholic about it, as if the climax of the explosion had turned into an implosion, into a suppression of the image—euphoria transformed into dysphoria. But Elisa Sighicelli does not stop at an emotional interpretation: the loop runs endlessly and mixes up beginning and end—the fade out is reversed into a fade in.

Sighicelli's works are wrapped in a profound silence: it is as if the artist wished to halt the flow of time and immortalize it in an eternal, suspended moment. The media she

prefers, like photography and video, are not utilized in the usual way to record reality in documentary fashion but to open doors onto parallel, invisible dimensions. Combining mundane elements and ethereal atmospheres, Sighicelli's works open out in front of the viewer like still lifes, like sacred apparitions of an unknown world. That the reality portrayed by Sighicelli is simply an image of our world seen under a completely different light is a detail that bears witness at one and the same time to the simplicity and the richness of her work.