

MIRRORS

We don't need other worlds. We need mirrors.
Dr. Snaut

1

The mirror, along with the labyrinth, is often seen as a symbol of infinity, impersonation and illusion. Through the mirror, the viewer perceives a reflection from another space and time, one that is set apart from the viewer's "present" point of reference. Inserting its identity into diverse areas of artistic process, the mirror is restlessly moving on to new metamorphic states and contexts, nurtured by a culture that is attracted to the visual and sensorial seductiveness integral to its nature.

The title of this exhibition takes inspiration from "Mirror, Mirror",¹ an episode of the classic science fiction series *Star Trek*. This celebrated episode introduces the alternate reality "Mirror Universe", one amongst a potentially infinite number of parallel universes in the series canon. The characters in Mirror Universe are generally the same as those in "normal" *Star Trek* continuity, but their personalities are, on the whole, much more aggressive, mistrustful, and opportunistic. While the *Star Trek* Universe usually depicts the future as an optimistic vision that values peace and tolerance, episodes set in the Mirror Universe show a dystopian version. The series' strategy is heavily reliant on its expansion of the original episode into multiple story variations. The very inception of *Star Trek* alludes to the tradition of the B-serial. This narrative *mise en abyme* can be described as a reconfiguration of typical baroque canons;² the seriality succumbs to an open neo-baroque form that complicates the closure of classical systems. A polycentric system is favoured, one that provides the capacity to expand narrative scenarios infinitely. The polycentrism of seriality persists, but in this instance it is the intertextual allusions themselves that weave the audience seductively into a series of labyrinthine passageways — passageways that require the viewer, through interpretation, to make order out of chaos.

Much like the monadic structure proposed by baroque philosopher Gottfried Leibniz and the baroque "folds"³ described by Gilles Deleuze, each unit (here in the form of an episode) relies on other monads: one serial folds into another, and into yet another still. One allusion leads to an alternate path outside the given context and then finds its way back to affect interpretation. The series of monads make up a unity, and the series of folds construct a convoluted labyrinth that the audience is enticed to explore. Science fiction cinema relies on visual spectacles that themselves embody the possibilities of "new science". Its nature partly resides in a magical wonder that is transformed into a "spiritual presence" — a presence effected by scientifically and technologically created illusions.

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¹ "Mirror, Mirror" was originally broadcast by the American network NBC on October 6, 1967. It was written by Jerome Bixby and directed by Marc Daniels.

² The formalist dualism between classical and baroque was outlined by Heinrich Wölfflin, most notably in his *Principles of Art History* (Original title: *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst*, first ed. 1915). The five oppositions that distinguish the classical from the baroque, according to Wölfflin, are linear versus pictorial, plane versus depth, closed form versus open form, form that is weighed down versus form that takes flight, and unity versus multiplicity.

³ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (1988), translated by Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), p. 41.

Many thematic exhibitions tend either to delegate their focus entirely to a respective individual artistic position or to use specific works as mere pieces of evidence for an idea or subject. In this case, the idea of the mirror and its complex theoretical and visual layers can be seen as a topic general enough to allow a dually functional concrete context: on the one hand, the ability to strengthen the semi-autonomous presence of the single works and, on the other, to allow the viewer to experience the works as they relate to one another and within the exhibition's conceptual framework.

This project aims to show how historical and political references actually open up a much more complex reality than the one made explicit to the viewer. By breaking the rules of imitation, the exhibition aims to corrupt the notion of a perfectly timed reflection: rather than leaving the viewer in a temporal limbo of perplexity, the selection of works mimics the *doppelgänger* shadow-self and the sense of disorientation that the characters of the science fiction series experience when they see themselves duplicated.

The work of Italian artist Micol Assaël is particularly symptomatic of this disorientation. *Free Fall in the Vortex of Time* is a book composed entirely of a series of small drawings made in 2005 during a journey through Russia. On the uneven surface of tickets, invoices, diary notes, postcards and other ephemera, the artist adds geometrically shaped sequences of numbers. Assaël creates disruptions in time by breaching the feeling of its normal rhythms. The sense of time's universality is violated by personal memories that penetrate into past histories. In effect, the numbers breach the linearity of the narration by implanting a time-image mesh at the heart of an infraction in the steady flow of time. In another project developed during the same period, the artist uses tiny pieces of copper wires to reproduce the morphology of an active volcano in Iceland (*Eldfell*). Here, the dynamic relationship between shape and time contains a latent sense of threatening. Assaël complicates classical spatial relations through the potential collapse of the work's delicate form; rather than relying on a static and stable material controlled and enclosed by its limits, the artist has selected a dynamic yet unstable shape.

The mirror is often a poetically resonant subject for filmmakers. In an experimental film⁴ by Maya Deren, made in 1943, the object, together with other symbolically charged elements such as an abandoned flower, a key falling, a knife in a loaf of bread, a mysterious figure with a mirror for a face, and an ocean, creates an obsessive rhythm of repetitions and latent violence. The central figure in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, played by the artist, is attuned to her unconscious mind and caught in a web of dream events that spill over into reality. Like Maya Deren's disturbing images, cinematic mirrors often intimate something unsettling: a lurking voyeur, say, or the possibility of a creature from a terrifying parallel universe suddenly popping into view. Not only does this film include dreams or related psychic states, but important characteristics of these sequences also seem to be transmitted to the composition and narrative form of the film as a whole, giving the overall composition a dreamlike structure. Like actual dreams, the film presents many irrational scenarios that are thus less transparent and comprehensible. The fragmentation of the central dramatic plot into episodic sequences and separate images is furthered by the frequent use of expressive shots that seem simultaneously autonomous and ambivalent. In the film, the mirror plays a pivotal role in the process of deconstructing the classical *fabula*. *Meshes of the Afternoon* is not only a paradigmatic example of a "plot-less" narrative; it also constantly confronts the spectator with visual and acoustic stimuli that have undergone varying degrees of processing. In this way,

⁴ *Meshes of the Afternoon* was written, acted in, and directed by Maya Deren and her husband Alexander Hammid. The music of the soundtrack, composed by Teiji Ito, was added in 1959.

the spectator is denied knowledge of whether he or she is seeing a real world, or a remembered, imagined, dreamed world.

With both Assaël and Deren, the practice of the uncanny gives rise to endless tensions between illusion and meaning, and to competing desires for fragmentation, dispersal, and stability. In paraphrasing the same game of disguise — the increasing tension created by the uncanny idea of a parallel dimension hidden behind an illusionary threshold — both artists' practices share a similar attitude towards displacement and reflection, repetition and obsession.

3

The point has often been made in aesthetics that art deals with the replication of reality. There is a profound significance in the ancient legends that tell how rhyme was born from echo, and drawing from an outlined shadow. But the magic function of objects such as mirrors — which create another world similar to the one being reflected, yet not the same, an “as if” world — is just as significant for the self-awareness of art as the metaphors of reflection and the mirror image.⁵

In his contribution to the exhibition, Giuseppe Gabellone recreates and intervenes in formal phenomena as a way of investigating perception. The artist chooses the ambience, positioning and lighting of his works and thus creates a space-oriented system, consisting of two sculptures composed of mirrors and a multi-media installation. The artist's “treatment” of the museum space is undercut by the uncanny hybrid of disparate formal references within the works. The space has been transformed by means of the sculptures, suggesting a kaleidoscopic view, a multi-perspectival way of sensing the world. Gabellone's work thus involves the voyeuristic act of seeing oneself reflected while also watching others, along with an awareness of this dual perception within the environment.

One sculpture is made up of a wooden structure encrusted with cut mirrors, each surface of which holds three differently oriented shards. The work results from randomly cutting and reforming basic elements to create new entities. While clearly based on organic forms, abstract and figurative elements are held in balance. Gabellone's object does not so much occupy, displace or divide space as permeate it. The sculpture is combined with a second work, a system which consists of coloured glass filters that project a geometric series of lights across an image of flamingos hung on an adjacent wall. There is a tendency in Gabellone's practice to present fragments of reality that convey emotional concepts and density. Furthermore, there is an expressive line based on the idea that, beyond simply collecting pieces of reality, it is possible to modify them by adding portions of “other” elements, which are destabilizing, sometimes even incongruous.

4

The museum space — an exemplary model of the Panopticon, due to its previous function as a jail — can be viewed in different ways, and there is no prescribed route. The exhibition

⁵ In this respect, a mirror image is typologically the same as a cast or an imprinting. Things are different when a replica is made of a replica: the object and its representation are so glaringly non equivalent, and the transformation in the process of replication is so obvious, that attention is naturally drawn to the mechanism whereby the replica is made, and the process becomes conscious rather than spontaneous. See Antony F. Janson, “The convex mirror as Vanitas Symbol”, *Source – Notes in the History of Art*, vol. 4, nos. 2-3 (New York: Bard College, 1985), pp. 51-54.

architecture presents an overview but allows for through-views, thereby creating a number of particular connections. The architecture is not just the functional bearer of the exhibition; it itself is on show. On the one hand, it creates a somewhat labyrinthine sequence of rooms, and on the other hand, it repeatedly leads into functional empty spaces where it itself, always in relation to the existing architecture, becomes particularly apparent. The exhibition is not divided into distinct sections, but there are different starting points for the development of loose “groups”, which in turn also refer to one another.

Dan Graham is an artist who has been investigating the relationship between people and architecture and the psychological effects of reflecting and transparent surfaces since the late 60s. His work highlights the awkwardness that occurs when intimate moments or details are rudimentarily broadcast in an impersonal manner, as he continues to explore the voyeuristic act of seeing oneself reflected, whilst at the same time watching others. This aspect of his work is particularly evident in *Performer Audience Mirror*, a video documentation of a performance questioning perception and real time informational “feedback”. The performance is doubly reflected back to the audience by the artist's lecturing, and the architectural device of a mirrored wall. This is one of the many aspects of his research. In his recent project *2 V's*, the artist presents a model for a potential glass pavilion, a typology of works he developed in different directions, blurring the line between sculpture and architecture. Its strictly volumetric, colourless, transparent spatial composition at first appears cool, abstract and ephemeral. It is only at a second glance, or rather after experiencing the physical space created by the pavilion's architecture, that the work reveals itself to be essentially human, made for people. It is an artwork that has the ability to translate the most fundamental needs and demands into spatial form producing, at the same time, a feeling of uneasiness and alienation in the spectator through a constant play between feelings of inclusion and exclusion.

Metaphorically speaking, art is a mirror, a reflection of society with all its customs, beliefs, folklores, superstitions, and religions, or of the artist himself. The work of art may thus be a metaphorical mirror, but it can also be a literal one. Science fiction, in its continuation of the production of magical wonders (the magic lanterns, telescopes, cameras obscuras, and multireflective mirrors on display in *wunderkammers* like that of the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher) has never lost the baroque delight in conjuring illusions. Henri Focillon stated that baroque forms pass into an undulating continuity where both beginning and end are carefully hidden:

....[The baroque reveals] ‘the system of the series’ — a system composed of discontinuous elements sharply outlined, strongly rhythmical and... [that] eventually becomes ‘the system of the labyrinth,’ which, by means of mobile synthesis, stretches itself out in a realm of glittering movement and colour.⁶

Claiming itself as a continuation of a story, rather than a new beginning, Dan Graham's pavilion recalls Focillon's “hidden beginning” of baroque form — a beginning that lies somewhere in a mythical past. The baroque relies on the classical and embraces its “rules”, but in doing so it multiplies, complicates, and plays with classical form, manipulating it with a virtuoso flair. In the baroque's deliberate establishment of a dialectic that celebrates the classical in its system, the classical is finally subjected to a baroque logic. The baroque's differentiation from classical systems lies in its refusal to respect the limits of the frame that

⁶ Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art* (1934), translated by George Kubler (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 67.

contains the illusion. Instead it “tend[s] to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all its possibilities”.⁷ Like the (neo)baroque spectacle, which draws the gaze of the spectator “deep into the enigmatic depths and the infinite,”⁸ Graham’s narrative often draws the audience into potentially infinite, or at least multiple, directions that rhythmically recall what Focillon labels the “system of the series” or the “system of the labyrinth”.

Artist and writer, Falke Pisano produces architectural spaces and sculptures in relation to the construction of meaning through language and other logical systems. She examines the way structures, materials, and colours determine human behaviour. *Object and Disintegration*, is one of her most recent projects. The installation is composed of three videos projected onto a sculpture. On one panel, the animated geometry of Pisano’s black maquettes twists and turns on the flat white surface; a second shows the artist’s hands holding typed documents, which are reflected in the mirror in front of which she sits; the third panel displays a black screen printed with white text. The central characteristic of the installation is a complete lack of respect for the limits of the frame. Closed forms are replaced by open structures that favour a dynamic and expanding polycentrism. Stories refuse to be contained within a single structure, instead expanding their narrative universes into further serials. Distinct media cross over into other media, merging with, influencing or being influenced by other media forms. Pisano always points beyond the categories of the art system and into the realms of the social, the public, the democratic, the mass-produced, the architectural, and the anarchic.

Generally concerned with everyday experience and collective consciousness as the substance of his projects, Ryan Gander’s photograph *Errata Tossed Back to the Horizon* shows a black and white image of a mirror propped up against the wall. The English artist draws attention to the specific space between the object and its given context, an enigmatic fragment representative of a particular event or individual as well as of more automatic responses to a singular moment or image. The work plays with reflection, light, and dimension; the combination of these elements creates ambiguous meanings that evoke the complexity and confusion of memory. This dichotomy between visible form and thematic content is further investigated in *A Future Lorem Ipsum*, a photographic documentation of a minimal act where the artist demonstrates how the newly invented word Mitim is a physical palindrome. By embracing photography’s fundamental contradictions as well, however, this work also unearths its fictions, exploring the way the camera misunderstands what it is seeing. Ultimately, Gander’s photographic dimension excavates the residue of language’s ephemeral materiality, leaving the viewer to make sense of what is lost and what is found.

The spatial value of sound defines the relationship between visual and acoustic culture, the eye and the ear, in new and surprising ways. Scottish artist Susan Philipsz, best known for her numerous audio works, explores in her practice how the interaction between sound and space can question the premises of perception, communication and interpretation. Philipsz contributes to the exhibition with her rendition of *Long Gone*, the elegiac Syd Barrett song⁹ after which the piece is named. The loudspeakers are installed outside of the museum, including the public dimension as an integral part of the work. In this way the city and its population become the *mise-en-scène* of, and players in, a melancholic dialogue involving the listener, the singer and the new perception of a familiar space. The references embedded in

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁸ Mario Perniola, *Enigmas: the Egyptian Moment in Society and Art* (1990), translated by Christopher Woodall (London and New York: Verso, 1995), p. 93.

⁹ The song, included in the first solo album titled *The Madcap Laughs* (1970), was recorded on July 26, 1969, and produced by David Gilmour and Roger Waters.

the work express the pain and pathos of transition and loss. In that sense, the traditions of *vanitas* and *memento mori* are resurrected in a contemporary and completely new context. Philipsz is able to define a mental space in which repetition and wavering identities, as well as places and temporal structures, evoke the very act of creating a memory.

5

In an essay presented to the 16th Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association in 1949, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan located the formation of the self in the mirror reflection. Identity, as Lacan understood it, arose in the recognition of the image as oneself. For the most part, the representation of the human form in art has followed the same model: by playing the role of the mirror, the artwork re-enacts the moment of recognition in an exchange that ultimately reassures the viewer.

One could characterize the artistic attitude of Isa Genzken as a constructive interpretation of discarded things, one which transforms old into new while also incorporating the very process of transformation into the work. A similar position also defines Oscar Tuazon's practice. In the development of both artists' works, the surface of the surrounding world is always present as the subject matter, both in form and content: in cultivating their materials, each artist uses easily obtained supplies for the construction (such as metal, wood and glass) and "classical" photography and painting techniques, as well as the visual material of history and reality themselves. Genzken's series *XXL* presents black laminated fabric panels vandalized by spray paint, stickers, reflecting surfaces and other incongruous elements. These works reveal themselves as a product of mechanical reproduction. A mixture of primary sources, letters and signs are also abstracted and made singular by the violent intervention of the artist. The resulting images' misregistrations and asymmetries reveal the multi-step process.

Oscar Tuazon, on the other side, works with different typologies of works, mixing them up to create an ambivalence between categories and genres. In his *Abstract Sculpture 1 (last kind words)*, the American artist balances the materials' trivial qualities with formalist exactness. Incorporating references to minimalism, design, and social space, Tuazon infuses the manufactured aesthetic of 60s sculpture with an ultra-modern sensibility, eliciting narrative associations. Through his sparse presentation and refined media, his arrangement engages with almost fetishistic elegance; its domestic size and "naughty" details create an evocative subtext to the austerity of the composition. The same kind of attitude can be seen in works like *The Concrete Paintings* or *Vandalized Mirrors*. In this specific case, the pulverization of the focal point by a kaleidoscopic image initiates an anarchical quest for the absence of hierarchy, not just between the different elements of the composition (which acquire greater equality by virtue of being identical, duplicated, literally reproduced by the reflections), but between the work and its space.

Hreinn Fridfinnsson's art is rooted in his memories and experiences of his native Iceland and its contrasting landscapes. At times, he echoes the lyricism of a wandering bard, recounting legends, rumours, secrets, and dreams, sometimes telling a story, other times describing a place or an event. In the early 70s, he moved to Amsterdam but never fully lost contact with his homeland, using instead its specific qualities and its culture as a resource. Another reference in his work is the school of Dutch painters that concentrated on interiors and still lives, with their intricate play of visual and material symbolism that forms a bridge to his use of glass objects and mirrors.

This recurrent element is proposed in *One Step Up — Right*. The work is composed of two glass shelves, to which gold leaf has been applied. Its reflective surfaces showcase the subtle

dynamics of natural phenomena over time. Alongside this work, Fridfinnsson presents *From Mont Sainte-Victoire*, a series of fifteen *frottages*, lovingly tracing the very ground of Cezanne's muse as if Fridfinnsson were making a brass rubbing. In *Eleven Drops*, a row of eleven crystal glass teardrops climbs the wall and catches the light. This work belongs to an open series starting from one to infinity. Here also, the reflective nature of glass naturally relates the continuous line to the surrounding environment and its constant alternation of light and shadow. At the same time, the work represents a poetic meditation on the concepts of limit and infinity. This selection of works provides a large scope of an artistic project that is rich in its expressions, but which nevertheless remains relentlessly focused upon aesthetic fundamentals. The diversity of media that Fridfinnsson utilizes consistently reflects the artist's complex visual language, each work imbued with simultaneous instances of humour and wonder.

6

The perfect monochrome is a surface without any marks: uniform, textureless, polished: a mirror. "Nothing" turns into "anything": the perfect monochrome throws the world back at the spectator. This statement perfectly describes some of the objects created by Kitty Kraus. Her compositions incorporate a variety of transparent and smooth material. *Untitled* consists of a transparent glass sculpture, the shape of which she defines as related to synthetic and simplified positions of the body; in a way, they could be described as anthropometric. The artist has a specific interest in the functional purposes of social space and its psychological and social conventions. This interest manifests itself in objects that almost become hidden obstacles in the space; they silently threaten the viewer through their invisibility. By contrast, the environment created by Kraus' mirror-lamp is powerfully charged, extremely visible and aggressive, activated by the tension between the sculpture's cool facades and a very dramatic use of light. But common to both typologies of work is the question of the dynamics of power reflected in architecture, behaviour and action, not to mention a fascination with the potential sensuality of surfaces and materials.

Both confronting the peculiarity of the space and exploring the ways in which physical reality is defined, *Mirrors* brings together radical and experimental work by an international and inter-generational group of artists. All of them share an interest in observing the manifold expressions of the rise, flourish and fall of pictures, figures, ideas and attitudes that discharge into new material, new limitations. Much like these artist's attitudes towards images, a mirror draws on the properties and form of a surface and thus, in concrete terms, offers a content that is necessarily constantly changing.

One of the main characteristics of the mirror is, in fact, to complicate the relationship between the object and its context, as if to dissolve the solidity of the unitary form into multiple reflections of the space. Indeed, mirrors seem to epitomize an attempt to resist the viewer's reading of depth, centre, and internal stability, while exposing the contingent character of the unitary form's intervention in the circumstances under which the viewer views. Yet mirrors also present contradictions, confusing and playing between different orders of space. As a result, they explicitly open up questions concerning the relationship between fundamentally different but interdependent orders of space, on whose opposition the stability and formal identity of the work depend.

Like the precious baroque mirror, culture and its cultural products nurture and reflect back on one another in a series of endless folds, producing reflections that fracture into multiple, infinitesimal pieces, which ultimately also comprise a single entity.

Gyonata Bonvicini