

Projection – Injection – Incision. About Pablo Valbuena's 'Extension Series' **Pieter Van Bogaert**

Paper for Almost Cinema (2009)

Maybe you once read one of those stories by Borges about completeness and exactitude. You know, when he described how he met an exact copy of himself (Johan Grimonprez copied the story – 'August 25, 1983' – in his book, 'Looking for Alfred'). He wrote about a library that is so complete that it contains all books ever written. And about a map that was as large as the area it covers. The latter story is very short, so I might as well quote it in full: *On Exactitude in Science ... In that Empire, the craft of Cartography attained such perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City, and the Map of the Empire itself an entire Province. In the course of Time, these Extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that matched it point for point. Less attentive to the Study of Cartography, succeeding Generations came to judge a map of such Magnitude cumbersome, and, not without Irreverence, they abandoned it to the Rigours of sun and Rain. In the western Deserts, tattered Fragments of the Map are still to be found, Sheltering an occasional Beast or beggar; in the whole Nation, no other relic is left of the Discipline of Geography.*

Suarez Miranda, Travels of Praiseworthy Men, Book IV, Chapter XLV, Lerida, 1658 From Jorge Luis Borges, *The Maker*, translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni

This story by Borges gives rise to a number of questions. Such as "Can you live in a map?" Or "What defines the limits of a map?" "And those of a route?" "Or of a house?" And also "Is a plan the intention or the extension of space?"

The questions surrounding Borges's work resonate in Pablo Valbuena's 'Extension Series'. The artist projects a drawing, a map of the space, onto the space itself. This projection scans the space with laser precision. But while scanning it, it slowly starts redrawing the walls, the windows, the skirting, the floor and the floorboards. Scanning becomes copying; one image turns into two.

The logic of these projections follows the basic elements of the space: the first lines form the pedestal, the carrier, the outline. This creates a shape ready to be filled: depth is added for a radiator or a window. What follows is a logistic set-up: the lines on the floor follow the wooden floorboards, those on the wall follow the electric pipes and switches. The question that comes to mind are "Could one live in this?" "What are the limits of this projection, of this map, of this house?"

A map is a representation of reality, not reality itself. Sometimes it is a projection of reality, a potential reality that has not happened yet. In this case we call it a plan. Pablo Valbuena combines the best of both worlds. Just like a cartographer, he bases himself on existing spaces. Like an architect, he draws lines to expand this space. This way, he unites the actual and the virtual in one and the same reality. That is what makes this artist/cartographer/architect a philosopher as well. He quotes Gilles Deleuze "Le virtuel ne s'oppose pas au reel, mais seulement à l'actuel. Le virtuel possède une pleine réalité, en tant que virtuel... Le virtuel doit même être défini comme une stricte partie de l'objet reel." (Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Paris, P.U.F., 1968, p. 269)

Mirrors

'Extension Series' projects a virtual space onto the actual space. It virtualises what is real and actualises what is virtual. The result is a projected space: a visible space, based on the tangible space. The existing space and a thought form a new reality together. Both are absolutely designed spaces. The first one has been conceived by the architect of the building and its user, the second by the architect of the projection and the visitor. It is a projection that repeats itself. A step-by-step repetition on several levels. Parts of the existing architecture are projected onto that architecture, like an additional layer. Parts of this projection are projected on the adjacent wall, like a mirror. Parts of these projections recur, like a double mirror, on completely virtual walls that form an angle with the real walls. All these projections repeat themselves, like a projection in a video installation, in an endless loop.

All of these repetitions form a *mise en abyme*. This is the feeling of infinity one experiences when standing between two mirrors. In cinema, the term refers to a film-within-a-film. In graphic design this is called the Droste effect, where a picture recurs in the picture and again in that picture, and so forth. To stay in the spirit of Deleuze, a repetition with a difference. Always the same – recognizable similarity – but always different. A loop in a series - the series of the title – a repetition in situ, and therefore an extension. The work that is currently being projected in a Ghent space could previously be seen in Amsterdam, where it was adapted to another space. The work that is now being shown inside, brings to mind the work Valbuena projected on urban facades.

Blank walls suddenly have windows. Moving elements are added to vast volumes. Fully designed and therefore closed projections open up the space. This architect breaks without dust. He builds with light. He brings buildings to life. His constructions take the place of humans, in the city, in the building. Ghost architecture.

Projections in the city – think lighthouses in the harbour, lasers at a nightclub - or in a space – think the movie theatre, home cinema – are like beacons. They create a frame, they steer your eyes, they show you what is important. Not so for this virtual architecture. By inserting itself in existing buildings without ascending them, these *projections* are not dissimilar to *injections*. Injections of light that make the space implode (not explode. Again: think of Albert Speer's column projections during Nazi rallies). Valbuena injects light *into* the seams of the wooden floorboards, *into* the electric cables, *into* the veins of the house. His light *becomes* a seam, cable or vein: it does not expose, it connects. It connects by opening. Joining by cutting. The *injection* is in fact an *incision*. One that cuts deep into the matter. One that performs scans in depth.

Folding

'Extension Series' is very contemporary, but flirts with Baroque *trompe l'oeuil* effects. The building Valbuena constructs while we are looking has several levels. Just as in Baroque architecture, the house opens itself to the world through windows and doors on the ground floor – the equivalent of which we have called the pedestal or the carrier earlier on – and envelops the individual, the inhabitant on the first floor. Or folds itself around the individual, as Deleuze, inspired by Leibniz, describes it in his book on the Baroque. The superstructure of the Baroque house is like a monad that carries the whole world in itself, yet shuts itself off from that same world (Gilles Deleuze: *Le Pli*, 1988, p. 7). A closed, individual, and therefore indivisible unit that is, however, entirely connected to the world. That is how Valbuena's virtual architecture is based on the tangible architecture of the spaces that he uses.

The fold could be seen as a guide for this work. The lines from which this architecture sprouts fold into each other and thus create volumes. The angle is a key element. The mirror is created in the angle, and it is here that the different images merge. But at the same time, the angle is the biggest mystery of this work. Because all the lines that form perfect right angles on the wall are produced by a projector whose position is inevitably square to the areas it projects onto, and which form a three-dimensional angle together. This gives rise to small shifts. Small imperfections that add a little humanity to this computer-driven work; details that inject a craftsman's touch into this technological projection. The straight lines of the architecture become serrated in the projection. Diagonal lines become dotted lines. This way, this virtual continuum, this smooth space that cuts its way in and through harsh reality becomes a striated reality.

(If you look closely, these lines recall the metal formwork used for reinforced concrete. The metal is not as smooth as the concrete itself. It permeates the building, instead of sitting on the surface. I remember when I was in Senegal, I saw people using rebars to make furniture, forming the ribs of real tables, chairs or cupboards. Here they are the ribs of virtual walls, windows and radiators.)

This serrated imperfection, this technological hiccup, refreshes the connection of the work to reality. A reality where it is perfectly possible to build with light. Not like Speer's light columns in Nazi architecture, but more like clouds of light that subtly fill the space. A light surface on one wall sheds a cloud of light on the other. A light volume on the floor casts a glow on the wall. Light does not *form* space, it also *fills* space. It is the mist of virtual images that always surrounds reality (Gilles Deleuze: 'L'actuel et le virtuel'. In: Deleuze & Parnet: Dialogues, 1996.)

The result is a game of light and dark. On and off. Present and absent. Virtual and real. A binary system made to measure for the digital age. The age where light does not mean anything without the reference to dark, and 'on' does not mean anything without 'off'. Where the present always refers to the absent. Where you cannot see what is virtual without reality. Together they form one reality: the space, the map, the plan in which we are.