



Ângela Ferreira, *Maison Tropicale (Brazzaville)* no. 2, 2007/2009, one of four color photographs, each 11 7/8 x 16 1/2".

“Modernologies”

MUSEU D'ART CONTEMPORANI DE BARCELONA (MACBA)

A SPECTER HAUNTS CONTEMPORARY ART—the specter of modernism. For some years now, artists and institutions have been invoking the disparate shades of the modern in terms that vary from the melancholic to the hortatory, from what sometimes seems a relapse into ruin aesthetics to the urgent call for a newly expanded, even universal, avant-garde. As an instance of the former we might adduce the ubiquity of work that treats of the architectural remains of modernism and the Eastern bloc; as an example of the latter, the renewed question of what comes “after” (surely a question-begging preposition) postmodernism. Those tendencies are often hard to tell apart, but in sum the urge seems to be to revisit the aesthetics and politics of the modern with a view as much (avowedly at least) to reanimating its radical possibilities as to mourning the dwindling forms, and forms of life, that it has left behind.

The risks inherent in such an ambition are obvious, and in recent artistic and curatorial practice it has sometimes been hard to tell utopianism from archaeology, or nostalgia from catastrophism. In her contribution to the catalogue for “Modernologies,” curator Sabine Breitwieser surveys the historical landmarks that have tended (perhaps too

readily) to orient much commentary on the putative return to the problematics of the modern. There is first of all the end, or ends, of architectural and urbanist modernism, here pegged (following Charles Jencks's notorious formulation) to the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in Saint Louis, on March 16, 1972—a punctual ending now routinely mirrored or elaborated by easy reference to the destruction of the World Trade Center. Then there are the ostensible infrastructural and political ends of Communism and colonialism, also subsequently and respectively complicated by the advent of a certain *Ostalgie*—to which many Western artists have not been immune—and the unending hubris of a globalizing neocolonialism.

Breitwieser is well aware of the paradoxical nature of these narratives of the collapse of modernism. The familiar historical coordinates that she cites make clear the treacherousness of any discourse on historical ends, and a proper suspicion of announcements of our historical distance from the recent past surely carries over too into treatments of a vanished artistic or literary modernism. In her introduction to the "Modernologies" catalogue, Breitwieser quotes an instructive passage from Raymond Williams's 1987 lecture "When Was Modernism?" Williams writes, "The innovations of what is called Modernism have become the new but fixed forms of our present moment. If we are to break out of the non-historical fixity of post-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century . . . to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again." The contradictions in that exhortation are telling: On the one hand, we are "in" the static dehistoricized instant of postmodernism, and must perform the (almost caricaturedly modernist) act of *breaking* with its impasse. On the other, we can effect that breach only by acknowledging that modernism itself advanced at different speeds, in overlapping moments, and was decidedly unpunctual.

It was around this perplex of competing modernist impulses—rather than, say, a mere archaeology of styles or declared resurgence of a central universalizing imperative—that "Modernologies" sought to organize more than one hundred works by some thirty artists and collectives, most of them resident in Europe, however expansive the geopolitical histories by which they were exercised. I say "modernist" because, in truth, the wider topic of *modernity* flagged in the exhibition's subtitle seemed comparatively occluded in most cases. Or rather, it seemed that at those moments when it was a process of modernization that was at issue—the works that engaged certain colonial histories were the most obvious examples—it was precisely in terms of a cultural modernism that the stakes of the situation were most fully expressed, modernism providing (as Fredric Jameson famously put it) an accelerated response to, or critique of, the predicament of

modernity. This was a crucial caveat to the critical and recuperative ambitions of the exhibition, because one inadequate response to Williams's demand for "an alternative tradition" would be simply to exhume the hidden or marginal practices as yet unrecognized in official histories of modernism. At its most successful, "Modernologies" instead revealed the complex imbrications of official, "minor," and (post-)colonial modernisms alike with the machinery of modernity.

Especially apropos in this regard was Ângela Ferreira's installation *Maison Tropicale*, 2007, which in scale models, drawings, and photographs reworked elements from the design and history of a specifically colonial modernism and its neocolonial aftermath. Only a handful of prototypes of Jean Prouv 's Maison Tropicale—a prefabricated dwelling of steel and aluminum, designed in the late 1940s—were built and flown to Niamey in Niger and Brazzaville in the Republic of the Congo. Since stripped from their sites and sold on the art market as retro-futurist instances of modular living, the structures stand not only as examples of the peremptory imposition (and withdrawal) of modernism but also as lessons in the West's recycling of its own defunct utopianism. Ferreira has photographed the sites where the houses once stood—in one case, the reinforced-concrete pillars of the Maison are still extant, like limbs torn from their sockets, while the juxtaposition of images of construction and ruin recalls nothing so much as Robert Smithson's Passaic, New Jersey: a half-imaginary place stranded between utopia and catastrophe. Ferreira's wooden scale models of the houses, flat-packed for delivery, suggest she is both enthralled by Prouv 's vision of a late- or post-colonial future and quite aware of the ironies of the shift from political paternalism to market opportunism.

A similar historical narrative—though in this case unfolding largely according to the interior stresses of a nascent nation-state—ghosts Katja Eydel's photographic installation *Model ve Sembol: The Invention of Turkey*, 2005–2006, a record of Turkish national holidays and the architectural backdrops against which their associated celebrations take place. Following the institution of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, modernization soon came to include, at Mustafa Kemal Atat rk's insistence, the construction of a modern capital in Ankara. Contemporary Ankara is filled (as is the country's former capital, Istanbul) with relics of a midcentury secular modernism that vies today with the architecture of global capital and tourism. To live among such buildings is to be constantly reminded of the intimacy of modernism and the political construction of nationhood. The force of Eydel's photographs lies precisely in their juxtaposition of monumentally overdetermined buildings with the rituals of daily life.

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Several of the artists in the show seemed dedicated to the reanimation of aspects of Western European modernism that had fallen into unmeaning desuetude or had lost their original political charge and become mere reminders of a vanished aesthetic. One of the virtues of “Modernologies” was that it traced the exploration of aging modernism back to work that was made uneasily close to the era of architectural modernism itself—work such as Stephen Willats’s *Compartmentalised Cliff*, 1977, a diagrammed representation of the controlled but potentially liberated lives of the inhabitants of a Paris tower block. Martha Rosler’s 1993 video *How Do We Know What Home Looks Like?*, made as part of a collaborative project at Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation at Firminy in France, is also not yet of a moment when the dilapidated building could be seen as the embodiment of a recuperable (rather than simply decayed) utopia. Nor had the contemporary sense of nostalgia for the future anterior of modernism yet consolidated itself in 1987, when Dan Graham and Robin Hurst made the six photomontage panels of *Private “Public” Space: The Corporate Atrium Garden* (subsequently repurposed as *Corporate Arcadias* in *Artforum* at the end of that year). Graham and Hurst present a history of artificial environments that—somewhat in the manner of Peter Sloterdijk’s writings on architecture and atmospherics—links nineteenth-century arcades to science fiction via the vitrined precincts of Manhattan office buildings.

More recent work risked a kind of antiquarianism when seen alongside this slightly older critical heritage. (Christian Philipp Müller’s new installation-cum-archive of “Forgotten Future,” his 1992 show at the Kunstverein München, also suggested that the current critical-nostalgic approach to modernism has been in the air for some time.) Three works, however, stood out for their enigmatic but charged resuscitation of aspects of modernist architecture. In Dorit Margreiter’s *zentrum*, 2006—a black-and-white video transferred to 16-mm film—a long-dead neon sign attached to a GDR-era housing complex in Leipzig, Germany, is briefly brought back to life (of a sort) when its tubes are wrapped in reflective tape and spotlights are trained on the building at night. Domènec’s installation *Existenzminimum* (Existential Minimum), 2002, consisted of a leaflet, video, and sculptural hut or bunker modeled on Mies van der Rohe’s 1926 memorial (later destroyed by the Nazis) to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Conflating two signal instances of prewar modernism—Mies’s monument and the “minimum dwelling” proposed at the Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne in 1929—the work imagines a utopian crawl space in which those histories might be dreamed again. And in Runa Islam’s film *Empty the Pond to Get the Fish*, 2008, the Austrian pavilion built for

the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair by Karl Schwanzer, a structure since relocated to Vienna to house the Museum of the 20th Century, is inscribed by Islam’s swooping camera with the text of her title, taken from a sentence in Robert Bresson’s 1975 book *Notes on Cinematography*. In all three cases, what might be taken as purely formal obliquity is in fact a revelation of the possibilities of the space in question.

“Modernologies” was by no means solely concerned with work that engaged the aesthetics and politics of architectural modernism. A recurring theme was the presentation of information and the display of the artwork itself, notably broached in Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann’s *Atlas (Updating the Arntz and Neurath Atlas)*, 2003–, in which Neurath and Arntz’s pictorial renderings of statistics are updated to include the global cultivation of soybeans and the prodigious expansion of Dubai. The most intriguing, if not immediately engaging, work in this respect was Falke Pisano’s series of videos, sculptures, posters, and found books, in which modernist abstract sculpture was not merely the subject of text, conversation, and a dense lecture (on video) by the artist but was notionally translated into other forms and genres. In Pisano’s video installation *A Sculpture Turning into a Conversation*, 2006, a narrator reads, over enigmatic footage of the work in question, a text in which the transformation in the title is effected. One had the sense, as in the best of the work in “Modernologies,” that when confronted with the specter of modernism we might usefully mistake it for something quite alive.

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