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Interfacing Paris — Passing by Atelier E.B¹

Two institutions, two cities (London and Paris), two manifestations of a show that travelled under the title *Passer-by*: a title that already evokes a very particular mode of spatial traversal, as well as, arguably, rooting the concept of passing through space in a specific site, with a specific history. The English word ‘passer-by’ means a person who moves along, across, or past others (architectures, objects, occurrences). It evokes, and here the term’s specific history and roots may come into play, the French *passant* or, even more iconically in the feminine gender, the *passante*. She who passes by is, famously, the subject of a sonnet by Baudelaire that is dedicated or addressed to her (*À une passante*) which gives poetic form to a transient encounter that is in all likelihood set on the Haussmannian boulevards of nineteenth century Paris. In that encounter, the dissecting, analytical gaze of the subject that enunciates the poem grasps a few isolated, yet intensely experienced details of a woman who rushes by, dressed in an imposing, dark, yet elegant outfit, alternating between statuesque immobility and rapid movement. A transient appearance whose ephemerality has frequently been understood to signify the temporality of fashion.

The aesthetic and historical stratum of the age of classical modernity, which has in Baudelaire one of its founding figures, is clearly one of Atelier E.B’s central aesthetic points of reference (among many others). This is evident, for instance, in the meticulous and dense research that the Atelier has dedicated to the history of the classical mannequin (a frozen quasi-body), of which the duo has unearthed and included in the show a number of canonical modernist exemplars and representations. Think of Belling’s futuristic metal creatures or Charles James’s strangely compact yet streamlined models for a curved female body. Think of the careful interest bestowed here upon the uncanny and drastic plaster mannequins designed by Robert Couturier and manufactured by Siégel, which were on display at the Pavilion of Elegance at the 1937 Paris International Exposition. At the time these figured prominently—and were transfigured dramatically—in the pavilion’s press shoots executed by Wols: a project that is now, on the occasion of *Passer-by*’s Paris installation, taken up in Eileen Quinlan and Jazz Leeb playing Wols to Atelier E.B’s pavilion. They produced black-and-white shots for which they resorted to a whole array of techniques—some conventional, others not—from gel on the lens (onto which the two would sometimes add marker pen, even further estranging the result from a conventional photograph) to shifting the chemical emulsion on a Polaroid with tequila to end up as Risograph postcards presented on a rotating stand.

In Atelier E.B’s recent collection *Jasperwear*, we could turn to the design element of a neoclassical ornamental band, that runs (or passes) across sweatshirts and trackpants. In spite of its historical reference to antiquity it is, in its restraint and modularity, one of the most succinct design forms the modern age has to offer. (As a matter of fact, due to its graphic quality and clear linearity, the neoclassical idiom in design has been a favourite since its inception for use under industrial and mass-mediated conditions as it easily retains its essential visual features in reproduction). The form is open to many combinations and extensions, yet is of such visual tenacity that it sure-footedly crosses into a work such as Tauba Auerbach’s *Atelier E.B Table* where it appears in the modular stacking system out of which the piece’s legs are generated, as well as along the axis of a spread out, oversized printed t-shirt, tying the states of soft and solid together. Or, we could look at Atelier E.B’s tracksuits

¹ This essay was written in response to the exhibitions of *Passer-by* at the Serpentine Galleries in London and at Lafayette Anticipations in Paris.

which, besides encoding the history of tennis (Ivan Lendl...) as well as possibly the duo’s Scottish origins, also hark back to the reform dresses of Soviet constructivism.

Yet for all these potential ties back to the formations of modernity, the mode of passing-by which *Passer-by* explored was less the dramatic and heroic encounter with the majestic and monumental Parisienne, which Baudelaire’s aesthetic proposes. If Lucy McKenzie titles her textual contribution to this catalogue *Powersharing with the Muse*, we might understand this equalizing predicament (a redistribution of agency and acknowledgement from the no longer monofocally targeted position of the artist to that of that other, medial, messagerial, modeling entity—the muse) also as a programmatic recoding of what we are to understand by the term *Passer-by*. No longer exclusively a figure to be looked at, to be framed, as it is passing, rather, the concept here describes to an equal extent the position from which we are viewing Atelier E.B’s work—in passing and as passers-by. But, and this is perhaps the most fundamental transformation: all this is done in the spirit of the genuinely distributive and non-anthropomorphic aspects of fashion. For what passes by here can also take spatial form.

It could indeed be argued that the expression ‘passing by’ here points to the principle that informs one of the Atelier’s core pieces, the Faux Shop: a spatially shallow, meticulously constructed maquette of a shop window which displays the Atelier’s products, as if presented in a mid-century modern boutique in Vienna, Antwerp, Basel ... you name the city. (Constructed by artist Steff Norwood, the piece is based on a shop window initially facing passers-by in Ostend, Belgium).

In *Powersharing with the Muse* Lucy McKenzie points out that in our digital age window displays are taking on an anachronistic sheen. Yet this slight anachronism immediately vanishes if we think of Faux Shop in a different capacity. Focusing on the various formal moments in which the piece veers into trompe l’oeil, to-scale replica and even simulation, we could recognize in it and its exhibited contents—a variety of Atelier E.B garments—a model for how to conceive of *Passer-by* as a whole, and perhaps even a model that allows us to think about important features of the Atelier’s overall practice. The replica of a shop window, then, might be the occasion on which we’re passing by, visually tracking, a mode of organizing a rich and diverse practice that includes a host of collaborations.

In London, after confronting head-on a set of replicas of neo-classical sculptures—gestures towards the mannequin, as well as to the corresponding stylistic elements in the *Jasperwear* collection—the visitor of *Passer-by* was led onto a roughly quadrangular path, including two cul-de-sac situations, around the floorplan of the Serpentine Galleries. The works of Atelier E.B’s collaborators were interspersed with densely populated vitrines displaying a wealth of material pertaining to the history of fashion exhibitions, the work of Bonnie Cashin, for example, whose (until today) widely underrated contribution to the realm of design the two have made a mission to bring to their audience’s attention.² There were situations in which elements of the exhibition were placed in front of mural-like backdrops; an intensely yellow and orange Fogal ad, designed by Alan Jones, comes to mind. Fred Wilson’s *Sacre Conversazione* complemented the assortment of mannequins as well as information about Käthe Kruse’s dolls. On a pair of mannequins, folk costumes, trachten, from the Austrian region of Tyrol were displayed. The density, the interweaving of two-dimensional elements

² Cashin is of importance not just due to her work as a designer. She also figured prominently in Cecil Beaton and Michael Haynes’s 1971 show *Fashion—An Anthology* that was presented at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and became a fundament for the presentation of fashion in the format of a museum or gallery exhibition. In this sense, we here also encounter a historical touchstone for Atelier E.B’s own practice of presenting fashion and its attendant practices in exhibition spaces.

and anthropomorphic figures and figurines, and the wall-based imagery created the impression of stepping into and passing through an anthropological or ethnological museum.

Compare the Paris presentation: the number of exhibits was pared down and, grouped into islands or separate zones on the ground floor, the contributions by collaborators were placed separately in the upper gallery. Here, the material was reordered in a manner that recalled a *grand magasin*, in response to the location of this manifestation, with each section focused on a specific problem or producer, like brands or types of commodities presented at a department store. The impression was, in fact, more than a mere reverence: from the Galeries Lafayette archives a set of complementing handrails had been secured that was placed on either side of a number of movable floor elements which had been elevated to form a central set of stairs on which the visitor could climb onto the upper floor gallery. In this manner, the otherwise spatially separate ascent between floors had been pulled into the exhibition space. In a gesture at once generous and of precise historical referentiality, this set-up also transformed the high-end facilities at Lafayette Anticipations into the image of an austere yet somehow grand retail architecture. It was as if, by investing the various contents of their show and arranging the spatio-technological device in the right manner, Atelier E.B had generated an equivalent to the Faux Shop: an interface, a site to be seen, contemplated, passed by, reflected upon. Not only did this reiteration make the London installation retroactively readable as somehow reconfiguring the image of museum display, it also dialled into the biography of Lafayette Anticipations’ architects. Rehailed by OMA, Rem Koolhaas’s architectural firm, the particular spatial modulation which Atelier E.B implemented recalled the highly adjustable elements, the display screens, the enclosed mannequins and, in the case of its New York implementation, the grand and curved staircase of the so-called Prada Epicenters that the office had designed in the late 1990s.

Extending the temporal axis once again into the depths of history, as well as probing potential longterm genealogies of the Atelier’s practices, this configuration of *Passer-by* in the form of a grand magasin may, in fact, lead us once again back to the point of origin of the very figure with which we started—the Parisian *passante*. For, the boulevard was certainly among the spaces in which she attained flash-like, momentary, heightened visibility, in which she became an image, as it were—a social and visual conditionality explored, for instance, by art historian and critic Molly Nesbit.³ Yet it was within a different spatial arena, within the boundaries of a particular architectural dispositif that her movements slowed down, that she was freed from the pressure to rush or promenade the streets in company, that she was allowed to look in comparative calm, that she attained a status akin to that of her nearly exclusively male-gendered contemporary counterpart, the flaneur. As media historian Anne Friedberg once pointed out: it was within the department stores that something like female *flânerie* was achieved, spaces in which woman was not only allowed, but incited to observe.⁴ Under the auspices, or even the spell of the commodity and capitalism, certainly. Yet contemplate she did.

Passing from London to Paris and onwards through various forms, Atelier E.B’s practice can perhaps be described here as offering the opportunity to become a *passer-by*. In order to do so, one of their main techniques is to create interfaces: the fake shop window, the various displays, and the interfaces with the history of architecture and fashion retail. And of course, a commercial interface too: after all, design, production and sales are central elements of their practice. Yet, in addition to these there are also the collaborations, their own works made explicitly for the show, and the sheer

³ Cf. Molly Nesbit: “In the absence of the parisienne”, in: *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 306–25.

⁴ Cf. Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping. Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 32–37.

volume of research, historical finds, documentation etc. We mustn't forget the mannequins. How is such a diversity meant to be brought together, or, even more fundamentally, organized? The answer is, again, through the creation of displays. Not for the various constituents of the shows, but by them. Rather than pointing to some beyond, behind or before, Atelier E.B is straight upfront: interfacing as much with its collaborators, historical precedents, heroes and heroines, as with the visitors to their show who become passers-by. What better place than Paris to insist on the formal qualities of display? What better place to insist on the display as form? What better place to declare the interface to be a medium in its own right?