

ARCHITECTURE AS MONUMENT

When I visited the Nordic Pavilion late in the fall of 2002, shortly after the architecture biennial had been demounted and the Pavilion was ready to be boarded up for its winter hibernation, I felt slightly displaced and lost in the vast space, almost not able to recognize it as the bustling space that I knew from the crowded summer *vernisages*. The experience in the stripped, bare Pavilion could be described as “a *properly* architectural moment, ... the moment of the monument” (Derrida 1986: 324). The Pavilion did not look like an architecture that was meant to be used and we did not know how to place ourselves in it. Awkwardly standing, taking pictures, and filming while walking around on the grid of the tiled floor and around the house on the prescribed path, we felt no real motivation either for staying or for exploring. The transparency of the space, which illuminated and made everything visible at once, did not provide for any hidden adventures or unforeseen discoveries that would have impelled one towards further exploration and an extended stay.

Sverre Fehn’s Nordic Pavilion is not intended to house or engage a real user, Fehn’s architecture is rather almost self-sufficient. It is perfect and complete as it is, a monument that is sufficient unto itself. It is permanent, given once and for all, permitting no trace to appear on its body, allowing no room for transformation, permutation or substitution. The potential user of The Nordic Pavilion is never sheltered or integrated but detached from the house with the distance of a visitor, a viewer, a tourist. Apart from this monumental self-sufficiency, the Pavilion—like the Giardini at large—only gains function and life in the hustle and bustle of the opening days of the Biennial. In the one week in June every other year the international art crowd jet-sets to Venice in order to engage in social schmoozing, net-working, deal-making, and consumption of the latest trends in contemporary art from around the world, portioned out in digestible doses of national representations. Wandering on the beaten gravel paths of the *Giardini* we follow the road signs indicating the way to “GERMANIA,” “GRAN BRETAGNA,” “SVIZZERA,” and “VENEZUELA.” The picturesque pavilions in all kinds of architectural outfits—from neo-classicist temple to international-style bungalow—resemble dessert cakes: though you are already full, you have another, and yet another one.

THE DARK SIDE OF TRANSPARENCY

The transparency and visibility of the Nordic Pavilion characterizes modern architecture in general. But the promise of open-mindedness and generosity is partly an illusion that hides a restrictive patriarchal ideology. The modernist dogma of transparency removes all the obstacles, ornaments, and unknown moments. Because in the reality of the world, space is

always differentiated: “it is always sexual or racial; it is always constituted out of circulating capital; and it is always subject to the invisible boundary lines that determine inclusions and exclusions” (Rogoff 1987: 22).

The notion of the luminous space goes back to the Cartesian concept of the central eye/I that sees and controls the space that is laid out before it. This condition has been a valid concept of space throughout modernity, and is maybe best described in Henry Lefebvre’s account in *The Production of Space* (1991):

Here space appears as luminous, as intelligible, as giving action free rein... The illusion of transparency goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places. Anything hidden or dissimulated—and hence dangerous—is antagonistic to transparency, under whose reign everything can be taken in by a single glance from the mental eye, which illuminates whatever it contemplates.

From the Renaissance paintings of cityscapes to the geometrical city grid and glass surfaces of high modernist architecture, this ideology has been the prevailing one. In the Renaissance cityscapes, one usually sees the central plaza of the city illuminated by a bright light, beaming with clarity. The plaza is empty or maybe populated by a few representative male figures. The place is devoid of shadows or dark spaces, women, slaves, animals, unclean objects, labyrinths or any kind of spatial confusion. These represented spaces effectively symbolize the idea of the *civitas*, the public forum, in which a few represent others, and speak for those who are not allowed to enter the picture—the traditional notion of democracy.

HOW DO WOMEN OCCUPY SPACE

Taking a close look at the architectural structure that has been housing the Nordic exhibition at the Venice Biennial every other year since 1962 is not simply an exercise of good manners, a show of respect for one of the North’s most important contemporary architects, Sverre Fehn. Analyzing the Nordic Pavilion as a space was also intended to problematize the common notion that exhibition architecture is nothing but a pure and neutral backdrop for art. I would like to suggest, on the contrary, that the Nordic Pavilion, as well as all the other national pavilions and the architectural layout of the Giardini at large, produce space for cultural as well as political representations that reflect the dominating power-relations of the world we live in. Most visibly the international power-relations are reflected in the fact that most Eastern European countries as well as a majority of Third World countries are not represented with their own pavilions. On a smaller scale, the individual national pavilions, as architectural spaces, are