



Exhibition «Cities: from the Balloon to the Satellite»
26/02/1994 - 08/05/1994

Position is what matters

The introduction of the relativist conscience in modern science—"trajectories only exist in relation to a reference body" Einstein once said—has confirmed the romantic idea that position is what matters. Ortega y Gasset expressed this idea in the famous phrase: "Perspective is one of the components of reality". He went on to explain that: "Far from being its distortion, it is its organisation. A reality seemingly invariable and identical from any point of view is an absurd concept".

Where is our observation point, then? The position of the observer is the first condition of cognizance. His position determines the object and its representation. Assuming that the sight is never naive, the place of observation—being the result of free choice and not of circumstance—is not naive either.

Modern science has also consolidated the importance of the instrument used to observe the object, so much so that behind every scientific step forward there is, like a set of Russian dolls, a new observation device that extends the field of vision, whether width-wise or depth-wise, or even both at the same time, thus enriching and transforming the object observed.

In the exhibition "Cities: from the Balloon to the Satellite", the position, the sight and the instrument are perfectly defined and manifestly presented. The object of the exhibition is the city. However, the perspective—somewhere in the sky within man's reach—is what sets the framework for the identification of the object. A perspective which is constructed and modified in line with the prosthesis that man himself takes the liberty of selecting. A new spring in man's capacity to be catapulted into the sky defines a new field of vision, a new space for exploration and, thus, a new city. And that involves new instruments of vision, that is to say, a different sight.

The degree of complicity in the truth game is such that, with the perspective, the instruments of vision and the object of the sight, we find that every moment in time—that is to say every technique—equates to a concept of the city. Thus, the city painted by the drawer from a balloon still has a human feel, a closed profile and a precise representation, as if it were posing for the portrait, whilst the city that is photographed or filmed from a plane has overflowed the boundaries and has set off a process of expansion and destruction, whether through city planning or through war, whether through utilitarian urban accumulation or hatred towards that place which is optimised in terms of the concentration of energy, people and memory. Later, from the satellite, computers would compose large coloured spots of human territory that spread out over solid ground with no continuity solution. These satellites, from the highest points of all, manage to reach the most extensive areas and the smallest points, the totality of planet Earth on the one hand yet the man sitting in his garden reading the newspaper on the other. In satellite times, the sight has stopped being human, and is rather more akin to the all-seeing eye of God.

We present a tailor-made portrait, in accordance with the sight at the particular time, of the three forms that the modern city has had. A global and apparently cold way of presenting the object of this Centre's work: the city. But what is the city we see from the sky? As the distance becomes greater, the presence of the human figure disappears. Not a single passer-by can be seen from the heights. Yet, however, in just hundred fifty years the changes that have taken place in the city, from one sight to another and from one instrument to another, are proof that the overall framework (the structure of



stone and steel) of the city has nothing of the nature's immutability, that is to say of the spaces where man has not yet imposed his ways.

The human element that we do not see is, therefore, present in the change. Because it is that element that breaks down the walls and gradually creates concentric circles around the old urban centre on its way to becoming a large city. It is also that element's hatred and vivid imagination to do wrong that turn the city into a target of destruction and fire over and over again. Destruction of the city is the most complete destruction of the Other: people are killed along with the reminders of their accumulated action. In matters human, nothing unfathomable. Urban occupation of the surrounding area and the transformation of the old city can at times assimilate the excesses and destruction well and erase the reminders more quickly than man has been able to transmit and extend them.

Therefore, this city as seen from outside that at times could seem like a simple, cold model, actually bears all the tension and all the tragedy. Becoming distant took us further away from the principle of that immediate experience that any view from the square or the narrow street conjures up. However, as our mind sees through the pretty hues included in the images, the power of the action and the intensity of the experience of the accumulation of men acquires a dramatically global and massive character. The change of position does not keep us safe from anything, perhaps it allows us to better assess the magnitude of the tragedy.

This exhibition is, therefore, a brief and triple-edged history of an object —the city—, of a technique—climbing stairs in the sky—and of a sight—more distant and powerful. A small history of the successive pushes that man has given to the modern city so that now the little walled city is unrecognisable in this continuous urban path towards the global village. In other words, man is the protagonist even though we can hardly see him in the hubbub of the streets and neighbourhoods. The composition of the object we are faced with depends on the position. Neither the position nor the sight is naive in any respect.