



Exhibition «The City that Never Was. Fantastic Architectures in Western Art»
23/10/2003 - 01/02/2004

The City Without Bustle

The City That Never Was, co-produced with the Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, is the third in a series of exhibitions planned by Pedro Azara for the CCCB. *Spirit-Houses* and *The Founding of Cities* preceded it. A recurring theme in all three is the real or imaginary nature of a certain kind of representation. The models in *Spirit-Houses*—usually made for funerary reasons—bore witness to buildings—often the actual house of the dead person—about whose reality a whole set of fantasies were possible. It was up to the visitor to go in imagination beyond the “truth” of the archaeologists, for this is also the gamble and the meaning of an exhibition. In the founding myths of cities, these are lost—in their origins—in the obscurity of their natural roots. Men, animals, water, the struggle to establish a base keeps the earliest ideas of a city in that nebulous region in which the dissociative laws of the logos have not yet completely lacerated the veil of myth.

In *The City That Never Was* the gamble is a little bit different. The artist—for the most part deliberately—creates an image of the city that is at first sight suspect, capricious. From Pompeian paintings down to contemporary installations, the exhibition brings together a set of examples in which the depiction of the city is not credible. Often the prime cause of this feeling of unreality is the absence of people or the decorative, rather than lifelike, position they assume. And the city, as we all know, is plurality and conflict: the madding crowd. Utopias are not involved, although in some instances it may seem so. They may have a place, but what happens is that the humans don't really know where to put themselves. And without humans the city becomes unreal; it's impossible for it to exist. The malaise of human beings in the city is undoubtedly a contemporary issue.

It is odd, this recurring idea on the part of artists to deny the city its soul. To try, when building it, to take it beyond the reality of life. Art has long been haunted by the obsession of harmony, and when it seemed that this idea was losing ground an obsession with order made its appearance. And in reality the city is very close to disorder. At times the artist—like God—cannot put up with this and burns the city down: he converts it into an impossible city. He wipes it off the map as if it had never existed. Such cities also have a place in our exhibition.

In the current process of urbanising the world, in which *urbi* and *civitas* don't always combine to make a city, the caprice may sound like a lament for lost Arcadias. These never existed. And we can see some of them here, like those which are an outcome of the artist's ambition to go on imagining different worlds.

This exhibition, then, is in fact a reflection on the limits of the city. There where the city ceases being one, because it is a mere echo of an archaic myth, because the city is nothing more than architecture and monumentality, because the city defies order (and is burned down), because the city remains without humans. And all these things which seemingly have no place in the imagination of the artist or in the wrath of the gods exist in the actual contemporary city. Archaic cities which, emptied of people and preserved as the heritage of mankind, are nothing short of mythical; cities trapped by an exaggerated, divine media presence, like Jerusalem; cities invented on a map that never come to life, from the cities of Soviet science to Jewish settlements in Palestine; destroyed cities, from Grozny to Sarajevo. Why do gods and the powerful (and artists in their fantasies) raze cities to the ground from time to time? Because the city is pluralism and complexity, and absolute power only likes order and



Prologues by Josep Ramoneda to the CCCB's catalogues

simplicity. Careful, though—modernity rehabilitates an ancient form of aggression against urban culture: the extermination of human beings without destroying houses (in Rwanda, for example) or the selective destruction of a building or a house that creates a hole and leaves the rest of the city intact (as in New York or Ramallah).