

Something to Bump

Into. On Jean-Baptiste

Lenglet's Collage City

Text by Enrico Camporesi

The most simplistic assumption about the museum's architecture (as a man-made construction) would be: it needs to be the ideal carrier of the objects it contains. What does 'ideal' mean here? Maybe a certain kind of aptness, or functionality, though sometimes an urge for the spectacular kicks in. On the other hand, I am seeing flashes of a dissonant image – the figure of a man approaching the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin. It is a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Torn Curtain* (1966), in which Paul Newman enters deserted galleries, and finds himself trapped in a dreamlike situation. The neoclassical stillness turns the museum into a mysterious space; moreover it becomes rapidly enough "an environment where the senses are fine-tuned."¹ Fine-tuned: an aural stimulation (hearing a man's steps; trying to guess which directions he has taken) turns into the ideal counterpoint of the virtually soundless contemplation that the works of Thorvaldsen, Schadow, and Canova might ask for.

1. Steven Jacobs, *The Wrong House. The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2007), 60.

When exploring *Collage City*, the virtual exhibition that Jean-Baptiste Lenglet has conceived for the second iteration of the Virtual Dream Center (opening January 26, 2017), the environmental sound appears to be a guiding element, much like the precise score of ambient noises that regulated the museum sequence in *Torn Curtain*. One major difference occurs though, not as much in the unfolding of the museum structure, which remains certainly uncanny, but rather in the shift of aural properties from the 'actors' to the set itself. In *Collage City* the architecture of the exhibition space becomes a sound source. There is no spy plot to recover, no narrative mystery that emanates from the aural stimulation, and the beats and loops activated by the visitor's promenade are ways of orienting oneself in this labyrinth-like structure. And what is there to look at? A visit to *Collage City* does not seem to be, at first, a matter of 'what' to look at, but rather 'how' to look at. The visual vector for the exhibition is a first-person point of view, much like the ones depicted in first-person shooters. Inevitably, the thought can go to the earliest examples of those games – the most apt comparison could well be *Wolfenstein 3D* – and yet a significant twist seems to appear. One of the key elements in FPS is the presence, within the frame, of some kind of weapon, possibly in the right part of the screen.² A reminder of the active role that one is supposed to endorse through gaming, the armed right hand is crucially omitted in *Collage City*. The haptic simulacrum is abandoned and I think a certain irony underpins this visual apparatus. Riffing on the modernist ideal visitor (a disembodied eye), the frame through which

2. See on this point Alexander R. Galloway, "Origins of the First-Person Shooter", in *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis – London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 56-62.

one explores the exhibition makes the visitor suddenly aware of his/her own bodily presence. Much is linked to the FPS paradigm and its well-known interface, but I do not think such model is used only as a reference to a popular culture that the artist usually feeds on (his realm of references and quotes is as wide to encompass gaming culture, techno music, and horror films, among a myriad of other objects). I think there is something much more compelling in the overall Virtual Dream Center project, and even more in the way *Collage City* functions.

The screen memory from *Torn Curtain* did not fail me somehow; if I scientifically examine these shots I can see where the dreamlike quality comes from. The floor that Paul Newman walks on is real (a real studio floor) but the walls are optically printed within the shot.³ The juxtaposition of the two is at the source of this visual uncertainty. Is this space real? In a manner akin to Hitchcock's uncanny gallery, *Collage City* does not seek to produce an impression of a plausible space. The architecture, though, is certainly bold. It originates from a process that Jean-Baptiste Lenglet has been exploring in depth in his production. The artist produces objects that allow him to transfer from one medium to the other (the *Horizons Perdus* exhibition, 2017, is the latest example: in its display one literally sees, albeit masked, the tools that produce the video works, the silkscreen prints, and a variety of other media). In *Collage City*, the guiding lines of the architecture come directly from the urban exploration he conducted in Phnom Pehn.

3. See Patrick McGilligan, *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light* (New York: Regan Books, 2003), 668.

The production process is layered as the images itself suggest. It could thus be resumed: *Amnésie générale* is a collage video in which shots taken from the city streets and the architectural environment are layered accordingly to patterns that can be found in the images themselves. The principle lying behind silkscreen printing is applied to video, and its consequences are fully developed in the abstract version *Amnésie générale Redux*. The images of the first version are cast into colored flat surfaces. Starting from these elements, the tridimensional exhibition space is conceived; its patterns, based on the images of the videos, articulate the entire gallery of *Collage City*. The space functions in a twofold manner. On the one hand it is a concrete manifestation of the previous works of the artist. It becomes, rather than an archive, a form of spatial memory of the works that bear the title 'General Amnesia' - and this is not without irony; those virtual walls and halls constitute a theater of memory. On the other hand, the exhibition must function, for the visitor, as a memory apparatus. Since the endlessly changing surfaces are unreliable, the visitor must keep in mind the shapes and volumes - the architecture - in order find the exit. *Collage City* conjures, via its references to certain genres (thriller, science-fiction); a dystopian model of the exhibition format, or rather an eccentric twist to this ideal model.

It is indeed significant that the exhibition space conceived by the artist has risen at a timely junction with the contemporary art context. In a realm in which one could explore exhibition spaces just through the countless, constantly proliferating, exhibition and installation shots

(clean, aseptic, excruciatingly 'optical'), the idea of turning to an oppositional genealogy of display seems particularly appropriate. It seems that Jean-Baptiste Lenglet is trying to rethink the display of artworks by looking at a mannerist (or proto-mannerist) history. One could see the ideal roots of such project into the spectacular architecture of Giulio Romano, or even in the Sacro Bosco of Pirro Ligorio. *Collage City* presents itself as devoid of functionality, a perpetual, virtually endless game, whose structure is conceived as a means to entertain, rather than contemplate. And yet, in this playful (and uncanny) operation, the exhibition model regains what it has lost in the long history of 'exhibition views', conceived around the primary role of the 'optical' visitor. This supremacy is the same highlighted by Ad Reinhardt's ironic remark about sculpture as "something to bump into when you back up to look at a painting".⁴ *Collage City*, by offering the visitor a serpentine path disseminated with obstacles, provides something that could be synthesized precisely as an exhibition to bump into. The frustration, amusement or awe it can provoke becomes the tangible proof of the need to recover an actual experience of the exhibition space, with its full aural, spatial, and volumetric stimulations. The fact that it had to happen through a 'virtual' experience does not contradict the project; on the contrary it targets the web as the primary source of the mass of virtually interchangeable exhibition shots. *Collage City* establishes itself as the unpredictable counterpart of the images through which we are used to document, or even 'experience', exhibition spaces. In such intricate repository

4. Quoted by Lucy Lippard, "As Painting is to Sculpture: A Changing Ratio", in *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, edited by Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), 31.

of artworks the visitor is able to visualize the idea of display not as rationally functional, but as obscure and enigmatic. No wall panels or captions are available. You will just have to find your way through it.