

Beyond a Thousand Doors, No World On Ryohei Kan's 'Endless Gallery'

Christian Hartard



One used to have two options on entering a museum: Look at the paintings or look out of the window. Sometimes, what was happening outside was more interesting. And sometimes, the paintings were more beautiful, fantastical or more real than reality itself. One could, however, always basically rely on finding the same world in the window frame as in that of the picture. Alberti, in his treatise 'De Pictura' from 1435, already compared painting with an open window, through which the artist sees the world (and us with him). And when, later on, as with Vermeer or Caspar David Friedrich, the window appeared in the painting, then it was a reflexive reference to a charged relationship between real and depicted reality, but also a metaphor for a world nevertheless accessible by art. This certainty was taken from us by the autonomization and abstraction upheavals of modernism. The symbol for art, which provides for its own context that it references, is the outwardly isolated 'white cube' of the contemporary museum: An aesthetic cleanroom, which, as a closed reference system, ascertains that art sticks to its own – but also does not mix with daily life.

Ryohei Kan's 'Endless Gallery' is a heightening of these relations to the absolute. The camera pushes stoically through an intricate suite of rooms and gropes its way through a glaring neon-lit passage, gliding across white surfaces of walls and the fine textures of the floor, from door to door. The total spaces contain nothing but themselves: No paintings into the imaginary world, no windows into reality. Their sterile emptiness emits a hard-to-grasp, disciplining violence, reminiscent of clinics or hospitals. They seem to be waiting: For visitors, patients, inmates. Thus, the 'Endless Gallery' is utopia and dystopia, concurrently. It tells of the autonomy of art, which makes up its own realities and thereby isolates itself from the rest of the world.

Ryohei Kan's critical parable of the 'white cube' is not just remarkable in that it paradoxically functions exactly within the conditions that it demonstrates, but also in that it contains moments in which the filmic imagery suddenly skips into reality: When the viewer feels as if he or she is being sucked into the larger-than-life projected spaces; when the ticking rhythm of steps or the nervous humming of a broken fluorescent light are burnt into our brains; when the rocking movement of the camera, the panning shots, the spinning-in-circles, causes a feeling of disorientation and physical discomfort after time; when we notice that the invisible body within this space – is us.

Some of the doors that we pass in Ryohei Kan's labyrinth remain closed. Maybe they lead into further endless loops or dead ends – or they are emergency exits into real life. The only skill lies in finding the right one.

translation from German:
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