

Imagination, transformation and place

Keynote lecture, Artesis University College, Antwerpen

13 February 2012

First, I would like to thank Christian Kiekens and the organisers of ADSL2012 very much for inviting me here today to be part of it, and giving me the honour of delivering the opening address of this year's event, which takes as its theme: *Transformer*.

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In his introductory text for the workshop, Christian Kiekens says that *Transformer* can mean many things. Two images are lodged in my own mind: first, the cover art of Lou Reed's album of the same name, with its iconic image, at once dangerous and profoundly ambiguous. The hard man of rock pictured in high-contrast is clearly made up, and ready to play. The second is an image of an electrical transformer somewhere in a city, its thick steel door emblazoned with emblems promising death for those who dare transgress it: a contemporary *porte d'Enfer*. What can one do with that? How might it apply to us lesser mortals who are not adorned with the glory of Lou Reed's ego, or who are not, like Shiva—destroyer of worlds—capable of transforming life into death with but a touch?

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The word *transformer* as a metaphor suggests an agency through whose action an entity or force is changed into something else: transformed. As artists or designers, we might think of the act of making being like this. A place, for example, is made by ascribing significance to a fragment of the world, an act that can be effected by either a society or by an individual. Ancient Roman settlements were made according to a ritual that consisted of the selection of a territory for appraisal of its qualities by an *augur*. If all had augured well, a sequence of acts followed, determining the space of the city, or *templum*; the setting out of its major axes, the *cardo* and the *decumanus*, the survey of the site and the setting out of its major buildings, the layout of all the streets by the *agrimensor*, and finally, the making of its boundaries and gates.¹ The last of these acts distinguished the space of the city from that of the rest of the world; the foundation of the city walls, with a plough shared by a cow and an ox, constituted a sort of pact between the city and the earth, transforming a fragment of the world into a place with a name.

Such an act is characterised by its necessity. Making art or architecture is similarly a necessary act, but one borne of desire rather than utility. I would suggest that even the making of a city

¹ Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town*. (Princeton University Press: Princeton NJ, 1976)

such as I have described is a matter of desire. Before any tools are raised, people interpret, imagine and, inevitably, represent the world before them. I am interested in how we confront the world and how we make it; how the world is encountered and interpreted; how it comes to be translated, represented and transformed.

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There are few opportunities to see how this happens in the present. The world is largely known; we understand that when we encounter those parts that are unknown or beyond our sight, we are infringing upon the space of others. This condition held true for the founding of the first European settlements in North America, which proceeded, at first, by the application of domestic urban models applied directly, if inappropriately, to conditions as they presented themselves. Later, abstract techniques were deployed, projected over territories considered as *tabula rasa*. The first strategies preserved the distinction between the world within and the world without that been forever germane to the making of settlements. A view of the settlement of Savannah, Georgia (1734) in the American colonies, presents the first method clearly: the settlement exists in a clearing, surrounded by the dark forest, the domain of the other, the unknown, and danger. In this situation, the colonising Self considers himself surrounded by the Other: the clearing distances him from the moment of confrontation, of meeting.

The latter strategies effectively liquidated the distinction between the two conditions. Recent sightings of new 'un-contacted' tribes in the Amazon have reminded us of that period from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century when Europeans breached the American space; of the projection of their desire, the genocide of indigenous populations that ensued and its shameful legacy. In the case of the United States, its space was usurped by a machine of territorialisation: the Land Ordinance of 1785, devised by Thomas Jefferson, cast a conceptual grid over the entire continental interior, rendering lands unseen and their occupants subject to an unavoidable system of division, occupation and destructive transformation. The Ordinance made it possible to command and occupy space without ever laying eyes upon it. The system was indifferent to conditions: neither topography nor demography would interfere with its logic. The other did not exist in this system, which ignored and annihilated the other. This conceptual and pragmatic device—a non-hierarchical, fragmentary system of antagonistic adjacencies overwhelmed the North American space. An infinite space shared by Man and nature was replaced by a system in which the Western invader was made to feel entitled to a parcel of land mapped out within a grid, upon a promise of self-realisation could be fulfilled.

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In the 1860s, the American West was pictured—for the purpose of military, geological and railroad surveys—as a new Eden; propaganda declared that it was America’s ‘Manifest Destiny’ to subjugate the continental interior: to occupy, master, and control it. The photographers working on the Great Surveys confronted a space that was strange to them, and hostile. They were impressed by the vastness of the space and its measure of time, and they made views that attempted to describe it. They photographed its indigenous people, both nomadic and settled, who had lived there tens of thousands of years. We know now that the photographers—such as Timothy O’Sullivan and Carleton Watkins—felt ambivalent about their part in the project of Manifest Destiny. The West was about to be torn apart: exploited for its geological resources; traversed by railways so that those resources could be transported to the growing cities; and militarised so that indigenous peoples were cleared, ensuring the promise of occupation for ‘European’ Americans. The photographers’ ‘views’ of the West were used as propaganda for investors and possible pioneers in the East, but there was another authority to these photographs: they made the condition of a primary encounter with the World and the Other first visible and palpable: that moment when one stands at the threshold of that which does not know, and touch it. It is a transformative act, a risky act: the boundaries of the self might dissolve; the self might lose itself in the World. The attitude of photographers such as O’Sullivan and Watkins involved movement toward the subject, and a loosening of ties with the self, so that in the picture, the specific nature of the subject is transformed, rendered visible, made present.

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Possibilities of primary encounters with a profound unknown were revived throughout the progress of the Apollo space missions in the 1960s. There were several positive outcomes to the missions: the most surprising, perhaps was the ‘rediscovery’ of the Earth from space. As astronauts flew around the far side of the Moon, the Earth disappeared and then reappeared, as Earthrise. This vision of Earth—familiar, a blue orb laced with a delicate veil of clouds—threw us back on ourselves, and made us want to know the Earth again as some sort of great Being, to revive our sympathy for our planet and all mankind upon it. This utopian sentiment seems almost impossible to imagine now. As for this other world, the Moon, the pictorial documentation from above, and in and around the six Apollo landing sites echoed the experience of the photographers of the spaces of the American West precisely a century before. They found themselves alone on another world, contemplating great

dimensions, beginnings, and the contingency of everything; the fragility of the Earth and the fate of Mankind.²

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I was a child in those days, living in a tract house in a suburb of Montréal, a city of about three million people that was the centre of a network of trade spread across the entire continent until the mid-nineteenth century. Our house was about 100 metres from the motorway that ran east and west from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific; the trans-continental train line ran parallel to it; the international airport was just a couple of kilometres to the east, and the city centre—downtown—was a few kilometres further east. The city was undergoing tremendous transformation in the 1960s, hauled into hyper-modernity by a radical plan to create a multi-dimensional, megastructural downtown core; the construction of a complete network of urban motorways, many of them aerial (described by the mayor as necessary as a circulation system is to the human body); the building of an underground mass transit system; and finally, the making of a Universal Exposition of the first rank, an ideal city of utopian architecture set on artificial islands created in the middle of the mighty St-Lawrence River, which set the scene for the whole city. In 1964, my parents arranged to have the driveway of their suburban tract house repaired. A clearing was made, and four wooden stakes were hammered into the ground; string was tied between them to form a sacred rectangular clearing of gravel. My mother had just taken me to visit the Tutankhamun exhibition at the Musée des Beaux-Arts, and I took the catalogue out to the clearing to read about the politics of Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty in the Fourteenth-century B.C., and to look at the mystical 'canopic' chests that were to have stored the king's internal remains. Sitting in the middle of that space, and looking around at the neighbourhood, the passing cars and trains and planes, I was suddenly and acutely aware of the place I was in being one place of many places, and that it was connected literally and in my consciousness to all other places and all other times. I understood myself to be in a location that was at once specific, and at the same time a place with intimations, suggestions, and evocations of other places, the World and the cosmos: a conceptual settlement of almost infinite dimensions. It was a revelation, a moment of consciousness of continuity, the contingency of everything. Thus, this clearing in the *banlieue* was transformed into a fragment of All through acts of interpretation (or misinterpretation) and imagination. I was, as yet, unaware of Marshall McLuhan's idea of the 'global village.'

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² 'For all Mankind' documentary film, 80 minutes; Al Reinert, director and producer (1989)

A little later—and perhaps under the received influence of the mediagenic McLuhan—it was natural that I should regard the products of the time, regardless of their purpose, to be kindred articulations of the state of mind of the epoch: Minimal Art could be seen alongside filing cabinets, office partitions, office buildings, or mass-produced tract houses, as poignantly described by Dan Graham in his piece *Homes for America*.³ Later, it was pointed out to me that this was a misinterpretation of Minimal Art, whose intent was to effect a direct and specific relationship between the viewer and an object in space, and not to allude to other things at all. My reading, therefore, was a misreading or misinterpretation; and it seems that this order of error permeated my reading of the city and its spaces, too. Habitually, I took one thing for being something else. Yet this is the premise of representation: one takes something for being something else, in an act of belief. Like trans-substantiation, it is a transformative act. The fundamental stories or origins of representation reveal moments of disruptive power: the outline of a shadow of a departing lover traced on a rock bears his life until he returns; Narcissus looks at his reflection in a pool and thinks that it is another returning his loving gaze. In more modern reflections, Shakespeare, in *The Winter's Tale* (1611), describes the perfect sculpture of a beloved woman thought lost and dead, a likeness that finally crosses the threshold from representation to life, with great emotional effect. All of the protagonists of these tales got it wrong, quite correctly.

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It is quite correct to take things and places, or more precisely, their appearances, to be representations. The appearances of things and places are outward resolutions of their intentions, and like all such undertakings, are compromised by shortcomings, interference or imperfection. Think of how one makes work, or even a photograph, and the object or image does not precisely resemble what one had in mind. Think of how normal objects assume slightly different appearances in different countries, despite fulfilling precisely the same tasks. For differences to disappear, an orthodoxy—an International movement of the normal—must be enforced. Perfection has no movement: it offers stasis. Appearances, as representations, reveal desire, hope and failure. Representations tell us what we want to say and who we want to be. Representations are utterances; in making the whole world, we speak our thoughts, often poorly, occasionally touchingly, with great beauty. Our towns and their buildings and places assume appearances differently, depending on where they are: they represent the way things are done and thought about in those places; their conventions, nuances and fashions; their fantasies of other times and other places.

³ Dan Graham, 'Homes for America' Arts Magazine, winter 1966/67

Oscar Wilde said, “To me, beauty is the wonder of wonders... it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.” It is right to acknowledge representation, and do precisely what it asks of us: to find the life within it.

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Michelangelo Pistoletto made art in the 1960s—such as his *Mirror paintings*, or the *Oggetti in meno* (*Minus objects*)—that suggested that the movement toward and through representation was necessary: it was the movement of self to other, and its symbol was the passage through the mirror. Once inside the looking glass, one might engage with others and representations and transform them — —and the world of representations—according to one’s desire.

This is the attitude I emulate as I make pictures and consider the nature of places, as I make objects and scenes and settings. I think of this work as making clearings for consciousness. I accept representation and its necessity; I accept representation as the vehicle to understand the World. I want to make pictures and places as vehicles, or frameworks or platforms through which people become more conscious of themselves and others and of their place in the World. I want to make specific places that are both here and *elsewhere*, whose specific nature is in the here and now, but—necessarily—contain ideas of other places, other people and other times. The issue of my work is the recovery of the World for the individual’s imagination; its object is consciousness, transformation and freedom. The work I make contrives its own, new, clearings in which both the work and its context appear as pictures of themselves: as pure representations. One finds oneself at once in a real place and within the space of representation: it is a space in which everything can be transformed.

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Studiolo

In *Studiolo*, an installation I made in an art gallery in 1995, everything could be described as an art object, whether it was a painting, a sculpture, a photograph or a room. However, each object was incomplete, in that each was dependent on adjacent objects or the gallery itself for its existence. Each object was a version of or a substitute for something else. A black and white painting resembled a silvery surface of the same size on an adjacent wall that suggested an opening into another, shimmering but uncertain, world. Another sculpture looked like a wall under construction, but was made like a painting, with a stretcher. A large photograph right next to it apparently pictured it, and what appeared to be the arrangement of rooms of the gallery itself, while they were under construction (it was in fact a photograph of another, generic, gallery). A sculpture on the floor resembled a picture or painting of a Minimal sculpture and at the

same time, the arrangement of floor tiles of the gallery upon which it rested. In another room, every profile was drawn over with black lines, so that the room was simultaneously a drawing and picture of itself. The gallery, typically proposed as an ideal space, was, also, a representation. Each artefact and situation was, therefore, a picture of itself and something else: the viewer was inside a picture whose elements were contingent, unstable and mutable. The viewer was immersed in this environment of representation, and could become continuous with its artifice.

Photographs

In making photographs and films, I recognise that things and places are both what they are and what they are not; that in being tools or gestures or accommodations or arrangements, things and places embody ideas. They are subject to the characteristics of representation, and so bear both the aspirations and failures germane to representation. Making pictures requires a certain order of attention; one must be alert. One must be aware of the predilections and predeterminations of one's own character, knowledge and fantasy. In making pictures, as in making places, one is obliged—paradoxically—to be at once as open and as knowing as possible.

In making photographs, I have been looking for a very long time to find a place that I recognise completely, a place where the World *appears*. I have been looking endlessly for—and making pictures of—something that is completely indeterminate: clearings for consciousness. People have said that my photographs make everywhere look like one place, and to some extent this is true: although the places I picture have their own specific ways of imagining themselves and therefore of making their appearance in the World, they often make themselves with the image and fantasies of other places in their 'minds.' The imagination of a place—its *genius loci*—is defined by what it (the place, its people) knows, what it cannot know (the unknowable, the other) and what it wishes for. When one can see the World as it reveals its imagination, even momentarily, then the business of language and representation is dispensed with; one has arrived at the centre of things, where there is an intimate, continuous relation with the World, where there is no difference between the self and the other. All places become one, great place.

Places

In projects for places, I have tried to understand the fictions from which these places have sprung and that have structured their

existence at some time in the past or the present. By proposing simple but precise additions or modest alterations of existing conditions, I have wanted the present (and we who live in it) to be reconciled with these fictions and the past. In all these projects, interventions are contrived as thresholds or frameworks so that a kind of meeting between people and the city can take place, where the city is presented as something to be consciously seen, as something consciously assembled. I hope that my additions clarify or even re-invent the structures of the city in situations where it is its most vulnerable. The interventions, of course, become part of the city, and disappear.

1/6 Place Jacques-Cartier

This project, made in collaboration with Tony Fretton in 1990, proposed a monumental surface for *Vieux-Montréal's* Place Jacques-Cartier, an important urban space that had been sacrificed to the effects of tourism. The surface was shaped so that it would resemble the streets and unconscious places typical of the city's topography. The ground was conceived as a portion of the granite land mass or 'shield' that the city is built on, whose form emerges inadvertently in the profiles of streets and empty parking lots in the city: a 'psychic' landscape that people experience every day but rarely acknowledge consciously. The surface sloped down from the *Hôtel de Ville* to the *Vieux-Port*, filling the entire space available between buildings, like some granite glacier. Because of its exaggerated profile, views across the square were partly obscured. It was our intention that the continental topography, untamed, had reappeared in the midst of this city won from the wilderness. Adjacent to our geological 'incident' was a vacant lot, which was also opposite the neo-Baroque *Hôtel de Ville*: we intended this space to be planted with wild grasses and overrun with flowers and local wildlife. Beneath this field and the granite surface, we proposed an enormous underground car park, in which the foundations of buildings positioned above were visible and re-clad, like monuments, in marble. The ruins of an ancient *château* covered by the present-day square were also exposed to view and to use—cars could park right next to it—and the gathered ensemble of true and ersatz monumental forms were specially illuminated (very much in the manner of the foundations of the ancient *Louvre*) in order to confuse the high- and low- cultural spaces of Montreal's '*ville intérieure*.'

2/6 To other places, Volgograd

In two unexecuted projects for Coventry made in 1998, *To other places* and *Volgograd*, I wanted to re-evaluate the utopian constructions of the 1960s and 1970s, and reconcile their positive origins with the negative

and dismissive associations that they had accumulated. Here, the motorway was to be inscribed with a motto—*To other places*. The flyover became, briefly, a monumental bridge, instructing passersby those distant, destroyed cities that Coventry was ‘twinned’ with. The motto also functioned precisely like a motorway sign, dumbly pointing to the myriad destinations that the flyover indeed served. Under the flyover, a restored 1970s concrete ‘park’ (designed by Soviet architects as the cities of Coventry and Volgograd—formerly Stalingrad were ‘twinned’) was to become a fantastic landscape, experienced by the passerby as though from an airplane. Its various mounds would suggest hills studded with little lights to call to mind villages illuminated at night. Other mounds sprouted fountains, which, with coloured light, would become, for a moment at least, volcanoes.

3/6 Guinguette

This project for Birmingham transformed an unwanted part of the city—again, under an inner city motorway flyover—into a pleasure garden, or *Guinguette*, akin to those which existed outside the walls and legislative structures of Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. It was inspired by the marginal character of the site, its specific, albeit generic, topography and its relation to a tiny fragment of urban ‘nature,’ which for a moment made one believe while looking under the flyover, that one could leave the city and find somewhere to wander. The flyover provided a shelter from the rain, and directly beneath it, the little patch of land visible from a distance assumed an even greater importance. I strung a loose network of lights under the concrete structure, so that it was festooned for a festive occasion. Patches of light projected onto the ground suggested pathways and areas of dappled sunlight in glades of trees.

4/6 La scala

This work emerged in the context of a visual arts competition for a permanent artwork for a university campus plaza in Aberystwyth, Wales, on the west coast of Britain, next to the Irish Sea. The plaza, which is in public use, is high above the town, overlooking the landscape and the sea. It was designed in the late-1960s in a Brutalist style, executed in pre-cast and *in situ* concrete. Everyone knew the plaza as the *Piazza*. The architects’ drawings described it as such, and people took it to be so. It was surrounded by a number of the University’s quasi-civic buildings: the Arts Centre, Library and Student Union. An exhaust tower for the main boiler room situated beneath the Union building standing on the piazza was known as the *Campanile*. A ten-metre wide staircase pierces the piazza’s surface,

descending to the rest of the University campus and the town below. The appearance of the ensemble was forlorn: very few people had stopped to enact the civic life that the architects and the heads of the University had envisaged and hoped for. Nevertheless, people stood or sat at the open side of the *Piazza* to look at the town and the sea, and there is a heroic as well as a civic character to the original architecture.

I proposed a monumental object on the *Piazza* that would act as a partner and a foil its existing components. It is a great, isolated staircase, detached from all other structures, ten metres on each side and six metres high. Loosely angled towards the sea, it provides a series of terraces upon which students, staff and visitors (it is a public rather than exclusively academic place) can sit, sunbathe, talk and look at the view. During summer months, the staircase is used as an outdoor auditorium for a variety of performances. Visually, it is connected to the foyers of the Arts Centre building; the Student Union building uses its sheltered space as a *loggia* for eating and drinking. Arriving at the *Piazza* from above, the stair forms a monumental partnership with the *Campanile*, and appears as a strange object, at once monumental and tenuous, mute and transient. Arriving from below, the stair looms above the *Piazza*, its great steps appearing to climb to the sky.

I called the staircase *La scala* in deference to the entire ensemble, and to participate in those conscious evocations of 'elsewheres' that informed the making of this part of the campus. The piazza was intended to be a great platform for observing the World, ennobled by buildings for thought, entertainment and sociability. The architects used the imagery of the classical world and the Italian Renaissance to excite a sense of nobility to those studying at this place at the edge of the World (or at the edge of Britain, at least). I wanted this idea—an existing idea—to become visible and vivid again, and real. From the piazza, whose monumentality is revived, one climbs the stair in an earnest effort to be closer to the sky and to be high above the earth. I wanted people to feel as though they were suspended in the air, poised above the World, as noble—or as divine—as the architecture and landscape around them.

5/6 World

This is a public square, proposed as a permanent work of art for the BBC, in the centre of London, called *World*. It connects the buildings of the BBC's expanded Broadcasting House to each other and to the city around them. The project is complete, yet access to the site is not possible until next year, 2013. People can stand on it and walk over it, like any other pavement in the city. Its surface describes an imaginary fragment of the globe, marked with lines of longitude and latitude and

the names of hundreds of places. Lights scattered across its surface suggest the habitats of Man as they might be seen from high above, or the stars of the Milky Way in a flight of one's imagination. Voices whisper in different languages from the ground, drawn from foreign language broadcasts of the World Service.

Names of places have been chosen based on things I remembered over the years, picked up along the way. All sorts of places are there, and each evokes all sorts of things: capitol cities, great rivers, sites of catastrophes, resorts, the origins of Man, even myths. As one walks across the surface, it is inevitable that they are read. The names and the sounds they create as they are read together create the possibility of a poetic litany that rouses myriad—either vivid or disruptive—associations and images.

Inspired by flying over the earth at night and listening to late-night broadcasts, the entire square as it is seen, heard and felt is intended to evoke the mystery of elsewhere; another world, familiar, distant, strange: our great dwelling.

In making *World*, I thought, again, about the second astronaut to walk on the Moon, Buzz Aldrin. He spoke of flying in orbit over the Earth at night, and looking down to see the fires of nomads scattered across the desert, imagining them under the stars in whose midst he was suspended. This image of the Earth as the home of Man provoked profound empathy in him.⁴ The continuity, the unity of Man and the World in its entirety was clear to him. Perhaps it is this consciousness that is the great transformer we should seek.

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6/6 Piazzasalone

To end, I will describe briefly the installation I made in collaboration with Tony Fretton at the last architecture Biennale in Venice, in the Arsenale, called *Piazzasalone*. We assembled objects and spaces that we had worked with for a long time, drawing on our own built works, and re-presenting them as figures of a place whose character was at once urban and interior, a complex of places where people could meet and be conscious of themselves and their relations to other people, places and times.

The character of the place subtly shifted from the urban to the domestic through the placement and relations between representational objects. Their play evoked a small, monumental *piazza*, and a *salone grande*, redolent of Venetian *palazzi*. One's point of arrival affected one's idea of where one was and what things were.

⁴ 'For all Mankind' op.cit.

From the main entrance, the viewer first encountered a street scene festooned with lights (*Festoon*, 2010). A car (*Alfa Romeo GT1300 Junior*, 1970), its interior an empty lounge, was parked in front of a loggia or monumental staircase (*La scala*, 2010). Caught in the car's headlights, a great pile stood in an opposite corner, as though a building viewed from a distance (*Lisson Ghost*, 2010). The place was at first like a *piazza*, though the presence of objects of inconsistent scale lent it an increasingly ambiguous character as one moved through it and the installation.

In one instance, *Lisson Ghost* reverted to being a simple rack of shelves, and the *piazza* briefly assumed the guise of a chapel, *La scala* became a *baldacchino*, inflected by a diminutive, archaic basin (*Font*, 2010) caught in a beam of light. Its tiny pool cast shimmering light high onto the walls, reminiscent of the play of light from the lagoon. Tall, empty painting stretchers stacked on top of each other in another corner sketched a succession of illusory interiors, a *trompe l'œil enfilade* of unmade pictures (*Trompe l'œil*, 2010). Standing next to them was what appeared to be a large, empty bookcase that looked like a building (*Tietgens Ghost*, 2010).

One carried on: the space was now a room, a private interior. An image of the dense foliage of trees, their branches swaying slightly in the wind flickered on the wall, suggesting a window to another place (*Trees*, 2010). A pale object stood nearby, its volumes empty, apparently looking at this image, waiting (*Red House Ghost*, 2010). A desk sitting in a pool of its own light (*Architecture as Performing Art desk*, 1986/2010) was an intimate refuge turned to the wall. Next to the desk, another opening reflected the viewer, and pictured him to himself, situating him within the places through which he has moved (*Mirror*, 2010).

On leaving the installation, the viewer turned, and looked past the furniture to the waiting city, through *La scala* to all the players of the scene, before returning to where he began: to its lights, its movement, its fantasy.