

ASHLEY HANS SCHEIRL
L'OR DANS L'ŒIL

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Radiant Cladding
Pierre Bal-Blanc

Ashley Hans Scheirl poses in a frontal photographic portrait wearing two types of make-up, red for the lips and green eyeshadow for the eyes, with an impeccable blow-dry against a dark brown background, setting off her complexion as a businesswoman of painting. Dressed in a ribbed Prussian red velvet top with spherical bulbs at the chest, a floral silk scarf in autumnal tones covers her throat, like a colourful extension of the touches on her face. This mechanical image neatly sums up Ashley Hans Scheirl's epidermal approach to painting. Cells, pigments, strips and swellings are all expressed in her canvases. As a teacher of contextual painting, the way she prepares her materials is to take on the socio-political and economic trappings of the place in which she lives, interpreting them as she sees fit, and putting them down on canvas. She applies to herself – to her body, her skin, her teeth and her heart – the principle of cladding that Adolf Loos once developed for the interior design of furniture.¹ But before looking at her way of redefining the subject in its environment, or more specifically – in painting – the relationship between figure and background, we need to return to the history of a reform in the treatment of space with which she is familiar. Originally from Salzburg, but having lived for several decades in Vienna – one of the places where this twentieth-century revolution began – she has frequented its emblematic buildings, such as the *Loos American Bar*, and lived in counter-models such as the artists' studios on the Prater, inaugurated in 1873 by Emperor Franz Joseph during the Vienna Universal Exhibition.

“[Adolf] Loos once said to me: ‘A Cultivated man does not look out of the window; his window is a ground glass; it is there, only to let the light in, not to let the gaze pass through.’” Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme*, Paris, 1925, p. 174.

With this assertion by Adolf Loos, Le Corbusier formulated the difference between their two conceptions of architecture, conceptions that would structure the new century. One looked inwards, while the other, as we shall see, looked outwards. Nevertheless, both were reformers of the approach to spatial planning at the dawn of modernity, breaking with the gigantic buildings of the nineteenth century and their specialised organisation. According to Le Corbusier, “there is architecture that is scaled for fleas or for giraffes – we don't know exactly! In any case, it is not for human beings.”² His analysis of the inhuman nature of the spaces in the Palais de Tokyo, built in 1937, is identical to the one formulated by Loos. In seeking to define the proportions of their projects, both gave priority to the human scale. Thus an anthropomorphic, eye-level relationship with urbanism and architecture followed on from a bird's-eye view treatment of masses.

In “The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism,” her contribution to *Sexuality & Space*, a collective work which she edited, the architectural theorist Beatriz Colomina³ presents the two opposing approaches to space expressed by Loos and Le Corbusier. Their respective theoretical texts and the ultimately rare architectural works produced by the two men would lead both architects to conceptualise two

1 Adolf Loos, “The Principle of Cladding;” *Neue Freie Press*, 4 September 1898.

2 “Transformation d'une salle inhumaine,” *Modulor 2, Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, pp. 275-279, n°2, 1955, p. 275-279.

3 Beatriz Colomina, “The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism,” in Beatriz Colomina (ed.) *et al. Sexuality & Space* (Princeton Papers on Architecture), New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, pp. 73-128.

of the most important tropes of the twentieth century, the *Raumplan* for Adolf Loos and the *plan libre* for Le Corbusier. These two new principles of regulating layout based on domestic intimacy and control succeed the panoptic spatial organisation of the nineteenth century, associated with the public administration of everyday life.

Loos's *Raumplan* is introverted and concentric, organised around an interior that is treated like a theatre: "For Loos, the theatre box exists at the intersection between claustrophobia and agoraphobia. This spatio-psychological device could also be read in terms of power, regimes of control inside the house. The raised sitting area of the Moller house provides the occupant with a vantage point overlooking the interior. Comfort in this space is related to both intimacy and control."⁴ The window is only a source of light, not a frame for a view. The gaze is turned inwards, where the principle of framing is ensured by overhangs, levels, staircases or protrusions on the façade, a veritable theatre box turned inwards. But the voyeur in Loos's theatre always becomes the object of another gaze, which scrutinises him from another position, an alcove offered in this interior punctuated by the arrangements made in relation to the functions of smoking room, library or music room.

"Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant."

In contrast, with Le Corbusier's principle of the *free plan*, everything in his houses seems to be arranged in a way that continually throws the subject towards the periphery. According to Beatriz Colomina, for Le Corbusier, the new urban conditions were a consequence of the media, which instituted a relationship between the artefact and nature that rendered the *defensiveness of a Loosian window* useless. With Le Corbusier, the inward gaze of the Loosian interior becomes a gaze of domination over the outside world. "But why is this gaze horizontal?" asks the theoretician in her text. A debate between Le Corbusier and Auguste Perret provides the answer. For Perret, "A window is a man, it stands upright," while for Le Corbusier, "The view of the house is a categorical view." By framing the landscape, the house places the landscape into a system of categories. It is a classification machine. It collects and classifies views. The house is a camera. Replacing Perret's vertical view at eye level with Le Corbusier's horizontal optic produces a floating view with *no link to the ground*. If the window is an optical device, the house becomes a camera and a movie camera for Le Corbusier, who defines the inhabitant and visitors to his houses as actors in a film, the interior and exterior architectural cut-outs, walkways, levels and staircases being so many montage sequences that compose this film of a looped walk. While Loos uses the theatre as a matrix for the scenography of his houses and Le Corbusier uses the cinema for his buildings, both place the occupant or visitor in a free, open space where the idea of interior and exterior is no longer structured by load-bearing walls but is brought to life by flexible partitions, mirrors, transparencies and opacities, on several levels.

This taste for the distribution of motifs, limbs, partial objects or accessories can be found in Ashley Hans Scheirl's paintings. The background of her canvases is a coloured cladding that varies according to the family of paint chosen, which may, in some cases, stand in a line, erect on stylised feet like a battalion ready for battle (installation for Art Basel Hong Kong, 2023). In the latest series of canvases (2023) it is Barbie pink, just as it tended towards baby blue in the one produced for Athens in 2017. The tones of these matte, sharp colours are reminiscent of the green and yellow of the Villa Müller (Prague), a house designed by Adolf Loos. The prints of stylised or figurative flowers that sometimes cover but do not fill the surface of the painting echo the motifs that cover the benches or line the top of

the walls inside the Brummel House (Pilsen, Czech Republic), whose sober exterior gives no hint of the generosity of the bursts of colour inside. Those who are too quick to draw conclusions about minimalism or utilitarianism from Loos's famous manifesto "Ornament and Crime" can discover the meaning that Ashley Hans Scheirl gives it in her painting. Like Loos, she places the physical and somatic experience of space over its mental construction. The principle of cladding goes back to the origins of humankind, which sought to protect itself from the elements by covering the surfaces of its shelters with plaster with insulating properties, in the same way that man has a skin and a tree a bark. The history of Western painting – up to and including painting on stretchers – is the matrix from which, like Loos with the theatre and Le Corbusier with the cinema, Ashley Hans Scheirl organises the regulatory layout of her installations. If we go back to *h_dandy_body_parts* (2014) – which inaugurates a particular pictorial devotion within the multi-genre transitional practice of Angela (musical performance from the 1970s-1980s), of Hans (experimental cinema from the 1980s-1990s) and then of Ashley (contextual painting) – or to "Painter's Parody" (2016), at documenta 14, in Athens, we may note the introspective gesture underlined by the presence of an ejaculating organ, a weeping paintbrush, an erect finger and the expropriation movement embodied by an open eye wearing a wig, triggered by Ashley's practice of easel painting. Loos protects himself with an introspective architecture that makes the exterior irreducible to the interior: "The interior speaks the language of culture, the language of the experience of things; the exterior speaks the language of civilization, that of information. The interior is *the other* of the exterior, in the same way as information is *the other* of experience." With the design of his houses on stilts, Le Corbusier asserted an "off-ground" attitude that subordinated the exterior to his image-hunting vantagepoint. For Ashley Hans Scheirl, the porosity of the fibres of the canvas that receive the paint has the depth of the skin that absorbs and sends back emotions. As we saw when she collaborated with Jakob Lena Knebl on *La Poupée, le Doigt d'or et les Dents : Fou de rage*, at the Lyon Biennale (2019), or for *Soft Soft Softmachine*, made for the Austrian pavilion at the Venice Biennale (2022), the motifs (hair, turds or small intestine) and textures (impasto, brushstrokes, solid colours) of the painting break free of their support to join us, like a diorama, in the exhibition space. The interiors and exteriors of Ashley Hans Scheirl's membrane paintings structure our journey and the journey of the organs, accessories, jewellery and toys of everyday life, through the lubricated orifices and cavities of the radiant cladding that she invents.

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