

THE PROMISE

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Middelburg Airport Lounge com parede Niemeyer.
De Vleeshal, The Netherlands. 2001

International airports are the vista of post-industrial society. They form a world where disciplined crowds noiselessly move around in a carefully constructed ambience of orderliness, luxury and perfection. It is a world that commands respect for its underlying organizational ingenuity and mass psychological insight, and for the material subtlety of its design. Nothing may be reminiscent of the chaos, arbitrariness and dangers of the world beyond customs. Everything is under control and, at the same time, full of promise: we have left, but we have not yet arrived. Things have yet to happen; time, for the moment, is suspended.

There are thinkers who call airports 'non spaces', by which they mean generic places: waiting rooms, stations, industrial zones. The airport does indeed evoke a sense of being a gray zone, a vacuum where the very concept of identity crumbles like a dried out label. However, the term non-space is not entirely appropriate. Airports such as those in Amsterdam, Shanghai and Tokyo do have character, if only because they have been thought out not in terms of the past or the present, but in terms of the future. What, exactly, do these visions of the future

encompass? What are the concepts behind the design? Where does all this leave people, now and in 2015? These are questions

that Brazilian artist Ana Maria Tavares, too, must have contemplated when she decided to transform De Vleeshal into a futuristic Airport Lounge.

Tavares has not needed much: long stainless steel poles reaching up to the ceiling; turn stiles and crush barriers, also stainless steel; two enormous mirrors; and two large screens onto which video images are projected. This proves sufficient to create an imposing minimalist spaciousness and an atmosphere in which the future floats as a cool, dazzling light.

This coolness is often seen in environments designed to reflect a positive orientation on the future and great expectations of high technology. Stainless steel's unapproachable quality generates an image of discipline and inflexibility, of, in other words, a society governed by functionalism and spurred on by an almost superhuman will, the will of the technological system. The resulting alienation of our existential basis was strikingly depicted by director David Cronenberg, a few years ago, in his film *eXistenZ*. In the film a young couple rebels against a 'mind fucking' technological invention, both of them wielding weapons made out of flesh and bone: jagged and bloody, but impressive for being purely natural.

Tavares' rebellion is not explicit. She dissects and reassembles, fully aware of the enchantment brought about by beauty and power.

Her point of departure is the notion that an airport is a marvel of rational and technical ingenuity; transcending all that is earthy, humanity included. And so she has first captured the panorama of the airport. This is largely achieved through the gigantic, slightly sloping mirror on the floor. It reflects the beautiful arched ceiling, but simultaneously changes the ground into a dark firmament, a sensation heightened by the black and white video projection on the wall behind the mirror. It shows an empty escalator slanting upwards towards something enveloped in darkness. In the mirror, this darkness deepens, becoming a hole in the ground.

Another video projection, this one in the artificial colors of a video game, provides a variant on the suggestion of endlessly moving masses. Now we see a path, strewn with semicircular stainless steel gates, seemingly leading towards an underground space. The gates look as if they are supposed to keep long rows of waiting passengers on course, but there is no system to them. We slalom aimlessly around the gates - and still there is more confusion to come. The mass exodus towards the unknown at the end of the hall is doubled by the enormous mirror on the opposite wall. The effect is overwhelming: beginning and ending, projection and reflection all become interwoven. It does not matter anymore what is real and what is not.

Airports, so the mirrors and projections echo, are imposing both because of their 'mise en scene' and because of their streamlined boundlessness. They reduce people to an ant colony in which each individual has a function, but where all individuality dissipates. In this sense, they are metropolises like Los Angeles or Sao Paulo. But international airports are also capitalist enterprises: they flourish when customers are happy, be they passengers or shopkeepers who have leased a bit of airport ground (the most expensive land on earth). And so everything possible is done to prevent feelings of alienation and panic. We all need to get into the 'lounge mood' as soon as possible.

The lounge is a mood maker. Here, people placidly sit passing the time, reading, looking around, drinking, but without feeling pressured to interact socially as they would do in a pub. It is a kind of meditation center, where you can be alone amidst others: a luxury filched from a hectic existence geared towards mobility. In this sense, the lounge has a regulating effect. Panic subsides, reins are loosened, things are left to run their course. This is the perfect mood for the air traveler, the mood the airport's design aims for. It moves us to relinquish control over our lives and to step out of time: ready for take off.

In De Vleeshal the lounge consists of eight stainless steel poles that stand in a semicircle, reaching the ceiling. Each pole has a round seat fixed to it, covered by a fat white pillow. There is some distance between the poles, so you don't have to chat with your neighbors if you don't want to. You can intensify your self-chosen isolation by slipping on one of the cordless headphones hanging invitingly from a barrier. They emit groovy music from the fifties/sixties, alternated with typical airport sounds: the tranquil buzz of a shopping, strolling crowd; the professional, yet friendly messages transmitted over the PA system; the faraway rumble of airplanes landing and

taking off. Listening to these agreeable sounds, your 'lonely planet' becomes a pleasant vantage point from which to look up at the heavenly arch

overhead and, reflected in the mirror beneath your feet, the gently moving escalator and the slalom manoeuvres of the gates. Everything exudes perfection and a feel for the grandiose.

As an airport, this place, no: the world itself, has acquired a new, architectural style, that inspires awe for its openness, lightness and monumental seclusion.

In this frame of mind you readily agree with what the young Dutch pair of architects Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos write in their book *Move*: "In architecture, the Made in Heaven effect is expressed most purely in perfectionist buildings that give you a rich feeling and cause you to continuously gaze upward and to the side. To enter their hollow bodies with your own body enlightens you.

To walk through them is to walk through a painting: you see what you choose to see, your gaze swerves and orients you through color, shininess, light, figuration and sensation."

The world as architecture, architecture as painting: this vision of the planet as a piece of art is truly majestic. And yet something is up.

Is it because of the long, smoothly polished fences on either side of the horizontal mirror that a sense of restriction seems to loom over this manmade paradise? Surely their sole purpose is to prevent you from leaning too far forward and drowning in the mirrored ceiling. Or is it the clustered turnstiles, standing among the seating poles like fan shaped sculptures? You look around. There are the poles with the swing gates. For the moment they permit free passage, but the feel of control lingers about them - and all of a sudden 'control' is palpable everywhere. Control aimed at imposing discipline and compliance. Control designed to steer us, mentally, in the right direction: towards the shopping mall and the lounge. Control, to prevent inevitable rebellion: 'Evil' lurks everywhere.

No paradise without fences: we knew it, but we needed this art to see it sharper than ever.