Cultural Daily

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# CITY STILLS: Socializing Urban Reflections

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, April 30th, 2014

**With eyes all around**

You have seen others do it…

You have done it yourself…

You know the irresistible attraction to look at oneself in the mirror-like windows of parked cars or of certain shop windows when it is darker inside than outside.

I have done it often enough to become aware of the fact that together with my reflection I could see the reflection of the street and buildings behind me, as if I had eyes all around.

*In a way one can say that through those "eyes-all-around," the city, wrapping itself around us, looks at itself in something of an urban selfie.*

(This became the subject of a series of photographs eventually exhibited in 2001 in a *Maison de la Culture* of Montreal, aptly titled ***White Noise***, and from which I have selected the two photographs I present and discuss below.)

**Where is the photographer?**

At first sight, when viewing the above photograph, I feel I am inside a flower shop looking at the photographer in the street, and photographing him from where I am standing … yet there is only one photographer!

Hence a level of spatial ambiguity lending visual interest and depth to this *urban selfie*.

There is little of that ambiguity when viewing the above photograph.

Since the mannequin cannot be in the street, I sense that I am in the photographer's place in the street, photographing the mannequin directly with the reflection of himself and the one of the buildings behind him.

The *urban selfie* effect is rather indirect, the mannequin being the main source of visual appeal.

*In both photograph the presence of an item of interest right behind the shop window (plant leaves in one and the mannequin in the other) plays a key role in establishing playful spatial depth.*

**What then is being photographed and why the different impressions?**

In both photographs, the photographer is photographing his reflection and its urban context off a shop window.

In the top photograph, the focus and depth of field combination produce a clear image of both photographer and street/buildings behind him, hence the impression of looking directly at the photographer, and the street, from inside the store and not at his reflection from outside the store.

In the bottom image, the focus is clearly on the mannequin in the tight draped dress producing an off-focus blurring of the reflections of photographer and street buildings behind him, hence the impression of my being in the photographer's place, in the street, looking at his blurred reflection through the shop window.

**Discussion**

What produces the different impressions lays in the fact that the reflection of the photographer is being photographed with *eyes all around*, producing a *Me-in-and-of-the-city* type of *urban selfie*.

As provider of opportunities for *urban selfie* type of portraiture, the city enriches them with visual-social-spatial effects that lend themselves to playful and metaphorical interpretations. .

The *Me-in-and-of-the city* may, regretfully, be a lost dimension of urban culture in the *Me-first* selfie type of portraiture.

***PS.*** *The master of urban self portraiture is of course Lee Friedlander whose shadow and reflection can be see surfing window displays and unsuspecting others. Check Lee Friedlander in Pantheon Photo Library.*

*Photos and collage credit Maurice Amiel*

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