In the framework of 101e %, a project initiated by the Brussels regional housing Association (SRLB), Michel Lorand, also from Brussels, designed a work for two residential high-rises, Esseghem I and Esseghem II, owned by the social housing society, Le Foyer jettois. The two flat buildings, each 16 storeys high, were built in the 1970s. They are about 100m apart, flanked with some trees and shrubbery, and together house some 1200 people. Initially, the context has nothing uninhabitable or dismal about it, the characteristics sometimes associated with this type of housing. The buildings look well-maintained and, in an evening in June, when I visited with Michel, children were playing on the grass and in the small playground. Their bicycles were randomly strewn around, birds were singing, the busy traffic of the city seemed far away, and the concierge was happy to chat with us. At most, the hallway has a more anonymous air than one would expect of a residential building, with a bare emptiness reminiscent of the forever temporary housing lining the Belgian coast.

By inviting visual artists to interact in neighbourhoods with low-cost housing, the BGHM hopes to encourage new approaches to the problems of social housing. In the Jette neighbourhood, Michel Lorand was especially struck by the isolation to which many of the residents seemed to have succumbed. Not only does the Jetse Haard site create an enclave, a kind of artificial implantation without much connection to the rest of the community – generally already suburban and for a large part residential –, but the cultural, social and economic backgrounds of the residents also contribute to a tendency to be introverted, withdrawing into the secluded security of their flats.

One of the principles underlying the 101e% project is that in some way or other, the residents need to be involved in the creative process. Michel Lorand was equally clear in his decision not to refer directly to factors that are personally familiar to the residents or to their everyday comings and goings. Nor would he play the decoration card. He focused his intervention on what is an ultimately impersonal, communal, purely functional part of the building, yet one that is perhaps the busiest: the lifts, two at each of the three entrances to each of the flat buildings, six pairs of lifts in all. His intervention moreover has nothing pushy or obtrusive about it. The work has no sound, and its 'carrier' – a television screen – is so commonplace that it verges on the banal, and anyone choosing to ignore the work can do so without disturbance.

In the framework of previously scheduled renovations of the lifts, Michel Lorand had a 19" flat video screen installed in each lift. Through the Internet, 24 hours a day for a year, the screens are connected to a camera that is filming the sky in a major city 'on the other side of the world', beginning in Santiago de Chili.

The cities in which the cameras are placed are intentionally selected so that there is a significant time difference between the places where the images are being recorded and Brussels, where they are being 'broadcast'. Users of the lifts – viewers of the art work – will be confronted with nighttime skies in the middle of the day or sunny skies in the middle of the night.

Although Michel Lorand is testing the potential of the web cam and real time transmission for the first time, on several levels, the concept relates to some of his earlier works, and perhaps not coincidentally, most notably to the installations he has completed for public spaces. In both Installations #1, #2 & #3 (three installations at the junctions of the Brussels North-South Connection, 2000) and 6 Scene a Venezia (Lorand's entry for the 50th Venice Biennial in 2003), the concrete passage of time and/or the irrepressible transformation of (and contrast between) day into night and vice versa not only served as the theme, but also as the motor driving the work. For the first of those projects, Lorand applied green, translucent plastic foil to the glass walls of a covered passageway on Rogier Square. The effects of sunlight and artificial lighting after dark meant that both the interior of the passageway and its appearance from the outside were subject to constant change. In Venice, between 9:30 and 11:30 at night, around the fountains in six different city squares ('The rippling sound of the water reminds us of the passage of time, from past to present, from day to night.'1), he used floodlights to create a 'daylight space' in which loudspeakers reproduced the sounds recorded in each campo during the day, in a 'visual and auditory melting together of day and night.'

In more recent works as well, such as the films Cut (2004) and Camera Obscura (2005), both of which were presented as parts of three-dimensional installations (argos, Brussels, 2004 and Het Kabinet, Ghent, 2005, respectively), the contrast between day and night, light and dark, the remembrance or the working through of impressions gleaned during the day, form a central theme.2

In the lifts of the Esseghem buildings, this motif is now in a very specific context. The images of the heavens depicted on a ceiling inadvertently evoke a whole series of art historical associations, from the oculus in the Pantheon in Rome to the countless ceilings painted as 'the heavens' in religious and profane architecture. Consider the spectacular trompe-l'œils of Correggio, Veronese or Tiepolo, which negated, imagined away as it were, the closed character of the architectural construction around them.3 Lorand's screens can be read as a breach, an opening that suggests contact with 'another world', an invitation to break out, gaze at far-off stars. This time, there is no reference to a supernatural dimension, but rather to an 'inverted world', as if the lift did not simply go up and down within the enclosed context of the building, but could drill through the centre of the earth to let us have a look at the other side. Is it an optical illusion, or a window to the world? If it is the latter, what then? Does the sky look so very different from down under, from where our 'opposites' live? Isn't this more

about a quiet contemplation that can offer a counterbalance or even an escape from the agitated stream of consumer-oriented visual production that keeps us so imprisoned?

The ‘twisted’ application of the web cam seems to confirm that. Here, a device ideally suited to spying, to security surveillance, to forced entrance into another’s intimate space, now serves to show that which belongs to everyone, conscious that nothing more dire will take place than the descent of darkness, a thunderstorm, a cloud drifting past or – should the occasion arise – a bolt of lightning.

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