Urban Shifts: Michel Lorand's North-South Installations
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Michel Lorand created a trio of installations at the three hubs on Brussels' North-South rail link – at the 'Martini Tower' (#1, May 2000) located near the Gare du Nord, in the underground passage linking the Gare Centrale with the underground station of the same name (#2, October 2001), and in the station halls of the Gares du Nord and Midi, featuring the projection of a film of the route connecting the two (#3, autumn 2002). In these three urban projects, Lorand shows clearly that Brussels is a city that continues to wrestle stubbornly with its modernity. He chose locations that, in isolation, epitomise the modern metropolitan condition: places where high-rises, large infrastructure projects, mobility, crowds and a combination of functions and programmes crystallise. Brussels' North-South axis, however, delineates an urban planning and architectural trajectory along which a fatally flawed megalomania was reined in by a cosiness every bit as questionable and embellishment that is no less deceitful. Project developers and politicians embraced a faded modernism stripped of any socially utopian aspirations, before giving way to a new generation of builders, who sought refuge in ludicrous historical pastiches. Under the motto 'form follows finance', echoes of the Manhattan project in the city's Northern district have been allowed to blend seamlessly with imitation stepped gables at the 'Carrefour de l'Europe'. Brussels' North-South rail link functions in this respect as a magnifying glass that shows up the bankruptcy of both modernist urban planning and the post-modern patchwork. Such processes can, of course, be found in every city, yet they take on a specific meaning in Brussels, because this is a city that seems – reluctantly at times – to be the capital of several different political entities, leaving it embroiled in a permanent identity crisis.

It is ironic, to say the least, that any poetry should lie beneath the surface of this half-hearted situation. Yet it is Brussels' very lack of a fixed identity that makes it the ideal place for a wayward psycho-geography of artists, who are no longer interested in the grand monumental order of the classic urban skyline or in the spectacular and kaleidoscopic euphoria we encounter in great modern urban novels or pre-war avant-garde cityscapes. Artists today seem to be oriented more towards the interplay of everyday, banal and chance events that occur in transitional areas, elusive peripheral zones or heterotopias. Michel Lorand is one of them, performing an artistic operation on the urban syncline and the palimpsest of architectural visions that combine to form the North-South rail link. His three installations have attached themselves to this urban axis, yet their relationship is more than merely topographical – all three share a similar approach to the contemporary metropolitan. Through them, Michel Lorand gives new meaning to a strategy with a long tradition in modern urban representation: the city site is interpreted as an accumulation of casual, fleeting and ephemeral impressions and is translated into a series of shifting images. It is a procedure that goes back to the 19th-century impressionist cityscape – a variety of authors have linked the development of modern, fragmented painting techniques to the modern metropolitan experience – and which lives on in the post-modern reading of urban space as a stage for the uninhibited fetishisation of consumer goods and for the endless accumulation of symbols.

Installation #1 was created in Jacques Cuisinier's 'Martini Tower' (1958–60) – a link between the city centre and the Gare du Nord, which was relocated when the North-South rail link was built. The tower has become an exceptional city icon at an exceptional location, and not only because of its eye-catching neon advertising. Its status also reflects the multipurpose character it has assumed within its complex urban surroundings. The tower is more than just a stack of flats and offices, it also houses theatres, a bus stop, a petrol station and a mall with shops and bars. In short, with its self-assured yet malleable and playful modernism, the building has become a city within a city, which helps explain why it was able to survive the abortive urban reorganisation of the Northern district. Not that this rare and interesting contribution to the Brussels skyline managed to escape untouched – the building has been demolished.

Michel Lorand used the metaphor of the 'new architectural skin' somewhat more subtly in what he describes as his 'ultimate tribute' to the then mutilated and castrated Martini Tower. He attached strips of translucent green plastic tape to the six-metre high glass wall of the covered passage on Place Rogier. When the sun shone on them, you could almost hear the tape shrinking, transforming the commonplace, industrial material into a wrinkled skin. On one side, the pieces of tape resembled bandages on an architectural wound, while on the other, they imbued the building with a phantasmagorical metropolitan experience that no longer derived simply from neon advertising. The translucent tape created a type of microscopic botanical (chlorophyll) atmosphere within the interior of the passage. The whimsical, all-over structure of green tape even evoked the image of plants that had begun to overrun a ruined building, while after sunset, there was a hint of fluorescence when the glass surfaces were illuminated from the inside and the passage was transformed into a mysterious aquarium of green algae that sublimely captured the sense of architectural and urban decay.

We find the same optical, vibrating effect that was achieved at this architectural and planning bottleneck in *Installation #2*, which was created in the underground passageway linking the Gare Centrale with the nearby underground station of the same name. This again involves a location situated on the North-South rail link, the metropolitan potential of which was nipped in the bud. The headlong spectacle of the metropolitan crowd that is generally invoked by a capital city's central railway station is entirely hidden in this instance. The station, which Victor Horta designed in 1936, is not only a link in the North-South route, it also forms part of the problematic architectural consistency of the upper and lower sections of Brussels. Not only were the railway tunnels placed underground, a difference in level between the two adjacent sections of the city also resulted in a shadow metropolis of stairways, platforms, waiting rooms, car parks and pedestrian passageways. Effervescent public life is interiorised, while the square in front of the station – somewhat grandiosely renamed the 'Carrefour de l'Europe' (Europe Crossroads) – long remained a large and bare plain, before finally being embellished in the 1980s with a handful of hotels in Flemish Renaissance style, grouped around a lifeless inner court with concealed car park.
Just as he sought to invoke the urban aura of the Martini Tower, Michel Lorand confronted the 150-metre long city tunnel of the Gare Centrale with its own disguised

urban meaning. Every day, a colourful mass of commuters from Flanders and Wallonia, tourists, students, government officials and the homeless saunter beneath the rhythm of the fluorescent lights attached to the ceiling, prompting Michel Lorand to describe the tunnel as 'one of the most multicultural and democratic places in Brussels'. As with the Martini project, a forgotten or hidden urban diversity was given a new synthetic skin – in this case a yellow transparent film on which were printed thousands of photos showing the same tunnel at different moments. Once again, a public location was transformed into a weird aquarium. The urban flux of the crowd was momentarily captured in the abstract Rorschach patterns generated by endless juxtapositions of chronologically ordered photos.

Another common element between the two installations is their affinity for cinematic effects. In the one case, the skin was transformed into an illuminating surface of cinemascope proportions, while in the other, a chronological, photographic process was applied. Both installations were staged in accordance with the passer-by/observer's moving position, thereby producing an interplay of shifting images. It comes as little surprise, then, that *Installation #3* should consist of a film projected in the station halls of both the Gare du Nord and the Gare du Midi in a specially constructed, room-sized film theatre. The film, which lasts about seven minutes, shows the route – partly above ground, partly underground – of Brussels' North-South rail link, the plans for which were drawn up in the 19th century but which were not implemented until 1952. The theme of the passageway and of the shifting urban view to which both previous installations alluded is here presented literally. Michel Lorand skilfully integrates the train – the subject, appropriately enough, of the very first film and the requisite metaphor in any didactic explanation of the theory of relativity – into his characteristic visual idiom of movement, perceptual transitions and optical oscillation between transparency and reflection. Not only does the film evoke the city with its alienating, empty stations, it also transforms the train ride into a complex interaction of flickers and reflections between the camera lens, the countless windows of passing trains and the neon lamps attached to the pillars of the tunnel. Just as rails are installed to film 'travelling shots' and just as a filmstrip resembles a railway line, Lorand reduces a train journey recorded with a video camera to the interplay of optical stimuli and urban shifts.