

An aerial photograph of a city, likely San Francisco, showing a dense urban landscape. A prominent feature is a road that spirals upwards through the city blocks, creating a unique geometric pattern. The overall tone of the image is muted, with a purple or blue tint.

# SPIRALCITY

& OTHER VICARIOUS  
PLEASURES

Melanie Smith



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**Xxxxx Xxxxx** cat 6

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# **SPIRALCITY** & OTHER VICARIOUS PLEASURES

Text by **Cuauhtémoc Medina**

with contributions by **Dawn Ades, David Batchelor, Eduardo Abaroa**

Melanie Smith



# Contents

<b>Preindustrialpost</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Artificial Tastes</b>	<b>30</b>
Conversation with David Batchelor	50
<b>Spiral City</b>	<b>80</b>
Dawn Ades – Messing up Abstraction	86
<b>Urban Views</b>	<b>94</b>
Eduardo Abaroa – Megamorphosis	128
<b>Anatomy of Abstraction</b>	<b>140</b>
Melanie Smith & Rafael Ortega	146
<b>Monochrome and Beyond</b>	<b>184</b>
Catalogue	192
Spiral City and other vicarious pleasures	
MUCA-Campus 2006	196

# PREINDUSTRIALPOST

Melanie Smith's work provokes an overlapping of sensibilities that has nothing to do with the mixing of traditions and cultural predecessors. On the contrary, what is striking about her exploration of the city's visual repertoire is the haphazard proximity of two processes of modernization, a heterogeneous vision that has its origin in two moments of visual and social disarticulation, in two crisis situations. Smith's work relates two visual conceptions and two economies that would seem to be at opposite ends of a spectrum and yet, in fact, share the drift caused by a new general orthodoxy of global capitalism. This fact alone suggests a post-national condition: it is an aesthetic that accentuates the long-distance interconnection of the circuits of contemporary capitalism.

Having grown up under the violent adjustment of social and economic relations that took place under Thatcherism and the collective experience of the dismantling of the British industrial structure, Smith had acquired a certain awareness of industrial *détritus*. She observed the widespread erosion caused by the neo-liberal modernization project, the perceptible effects of the phase through which Margaret Thatcher had declared the social contract obsolete. "There is no such thing as society,"<sup>1</sup> Thatcher announced in October 1987 and under this slogan, she proposed to remove the welfare protection net and the bulk of public property the British government had constructed since the 1929 crisis. At the same time, when Melanie Smith emigrated to Mexico in the late 1980s, she came up against a territory that was no less eroded, where the violence of capitalist modernization coexisted with the resistance of the more traditional commercial and manufacturing circuits. In the midst of Carlos Salinas de Gortari's administration (1988-1994), with its policy of rapid privatization and mindless integration into the US economy, Melanie experienced something that seemed a counterpart to post-industrial development. Poverty offset by the informal economy, coupled with the dismantling of the state-sponsored corporate structure and of public companies that had been put in place by the post-revolutionary government of the 1930s resulted in a compound territory where the signs of global capitalism overlapped with those of the advanced deterioration of the public apparatus. An interplay of contrasts: hyper-consumerism and local impoverishment, the rapid circulation of products and cultures, the emergence of a sector outside the formal economy, the hasty banalization of eminently ephemeral products; all constituted a new historical phase. The whole of these phenomena provoked the emergence of a new aesthetic blend where design easily coexists with the transitory, the serial and the artificial and where the eroded landscape of modernity stands cheek by jowl with the seductive fragments of a multitude of products.

Smith was not only able to perceive the emergence of a strident visuality of global economy but also to recast her practice as a meditation on the everyday phenomenology of capitalism. At the end of the day she managed to create a contemporary aesthetic synthesis based on endlessly

<sup>1</sup> "I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation." Margaret Thatcher interviewed in *Woman's Own*, October 31, 1987.

reproducible, artificial and exchangeable objects and sensations, which, under the shadow of free trade and the dismantling of the welfare state, burst forth without any visual or social control.

*There's no such thing as satiety.* The first stage of Smith's work in Mexico was actually created in a much more intimate tone: it sought to evoke an inner din, rather than to refer to the muffled polyphony of the marketplace. In the spring of 1989, Melanie, who had just finished her degree in visual arts at the University of Reading in England, joined a vacation trip being planned by a handful of graduates from the University of Winchester: Richard Marshall, Pete Smith, Peter McDonald, Alex Veness and Georgina Corrie.<sup>2</sup> The fact that this holiday turned into a permanent displacement was not the outcome of a cultural obsession, political militancy or an existential search. That some of these young people spent several years in Mexico working as artists was largely due to the way they appeared at a very specific moment of effervescence, in which it was possible to operate as an artist without any market or academic filter. It was indeed as if the improvised nature of the emerging art circuit was able to absorb them, and made them emigrate to the other side of the Atlantic whether momentarily or permanently.

In the case of Smith and her friends, this insertion had a very specific location. Shortly after they arrived in Mexico, "The Brits" were incorporated into the program that artist and promoter Aldo Flores had arranged at the *Salón des Aztecas*, an exhibition space located a few blocks away from Mexico City's *zócalo* or main square, which Flores dreamt of turning into a sort of Mexican Soho, under the slogan of "Tenochtitlan Renaissance." Aldo Flores suggested the possibility of using the energy of art to revitalize an area that had been physically and psychologically damaged by the 1985 earthquake, and of the artist as a channel for increasing social energy. The foreigners that began to settle in the city center were a key piece in this project, giving the *Salón* a slightly cosmopolitan feel. Places like the *Salón* or Mel's Café that Smith and Francis Alÿs ran on Sundays in the early 1990s were charged by energy, enough at least to encourage the visiting artists to find expression in a country or city they had hitherto thought indifferent.

Smith needed to concoct a language that would give a voice to the urban setting she had chosen to move to. Straight out of university, Smith experimented with sculptures made of objects and words, creating small wall installations with tightened strings and cables and phrases made from old printing press blocks. This fragile and graphic vocabulary was suddenly challenged by all the new objects surrounding her in the markets, workshops and stalls on downtown streets.<sup>3</sup> Like Belgian Francis Alÿs and Texan Thomas Glassford, Smith fell under the spell of the hybrid, craft-industrial, self-reliant commercial and pre-modern capitalist territory that constituted the social fabric of downtown Mexico City. Smith was then faced by a proliferation of precariousness: manual work that intervened, repaired, imitated and completed mass-produced articles.

<sup>2</sup> This group was complemented by writer Lorna Scott-Fox and photographer Ian Dreyden, in addition to a variety of visitors from San Antonio, Texas: Thomas Glassford, Alejandro Díaz, Chuck Ramírez and Ethel Shipton, with whom Smith staged an exhibition at Studio Sho in the Plaza de Santa Catarina in 1992. See the review by C. Medina, "Dúo de instalaciones. Ethel Shipton y Melanie Smith" in: *Poliester. Pintura y no pintura*, vol. 1, no. 3, Fall 1992, pp. 72-73.

<sup>3</sup> Smith's fascination with the materials, substances and objects available at markets was obvious in *Estancia*, the installation she set up in 1990 for the Carrillo Gil Museum in Mexico City. Around a old worn-out armchair, Smith placed dozens of containers and shelves with fragrant spices, seeds and herbs that overwhelmed visitors' senses of smell and sight.

Manufacturing, family workshops and the recycling of all kinds of materials and objects were inserted into the cycle of fashion, consumerism, waste and obsolescence; the organic accompanied and lent shape to the synthetic. Strangely enough, this landscape was not that different from the post-industrial rubbish heap of England after the crisis of the 1970s and 1980s: At a time when early industry was completely replaced by automation and global merchandising, Smith was making works that suggested a concern with the creative nature of the product, as opposed to an interest in minimal aesthetics.

Smith's constructions, ensembles and contrapositions between objects and photographs in the early 1990s are striking because of their ability to introduce a number of bodily metaphors into everyday objects. As the artist herself suggested on one occasion, this is an extremely "hermetic" form of referentiality, since it silently translates some sort of bodily experience: "The post-minimalist work that I used to do was too hermetic, it submerged me too much in the personal, the body and in my own private world as a woman."<sup>4</sup>

In fact, at least until 1993, Smith would work from objects that are fairly common in the household (metal buckets and washing troughs, hosepipes, tubes, specially designed rubber cushions, rubber and wooden utensils and even feathers and spices) producing a form of sculpture consisting of metaphors and bodily similes, projecting sensations of emptiness, containment, circulation, wrapping, concealment, and expansion of the organism onto those assemblages. The physicality of these works was decisive: it suggested an inner void made of channels, ducts, recipients and flesh-like thicknesses, the tension between dead and instrumental matter and the ghost of living matter. It was within this sphere that several of these objects had a certain feminine interpretation: the mutual implication of the vessel and the uterus, the mother and bottles, pacifiers and dispensers, skin and waterproof rubber, desire and the lightness of feathers, the tension of rubber and the inner expansion of pregnancy. The geographical demarcation of her pursuits was not as decisive as the desire to create a sculpture from and to the inside.

This production culminated in the works Smith produced for an exhibition at L'Escaut in Brussels, Belgium, such as the corridor of hanging objects entitled *Jam Side Up, Jam Side Down* (1992), produced in collaboration with Francis Alÿs: a corridor inhabited by all kinds of hanging objects, conceived of as images and similes of the body. Despite their possibly gory implications, these visions dispel any macabre or abject allusion since they are made from synthetic, sterile materials, usually plastic.

This trend was suddenly cut short (or diverted) by the emergence of an exterior factor: the claim for an urban aesthetic, based largely on the profusion of color and her control of surfaces. In 1994, Smith became aware of the importance of the color orange in the definition of urban space in Mexico City and in the flood of cheap plastic goods distributed by both regular stores and street stalls. It becomes immediately obvious that orange is a catalyst: it is both a symbol and a mechanism for producing energy, modernity and urgency. Orange emerges as the device

<sup>4</sup> "Archaeology of the Future. An interview between María Guerra & Melanie Smith" in: Melanie Smith, *Orange Lush*, Mexico City, Instituto Anglo-Mexicano de Cultura, A. C., c. 1997, p. 6.

that commercializes sensations, since its explosive force eliminates any connotation to context. This is the absolute color of the market in its process of becoming absolute, the translation in color of the eroticism of propaganda. This is suggested by several of the works Smith produced in the mid-1990s: collages such as *Come on Baby, Light my Fire* (1995) that identifies the orange product with the homoerotic advertising taken from illustrated magazines. Orange appears not so much as a symbol but as an “ingredient” of social conditioning that encourages consumerism.

Smith's attempts at sampling this phenomenon also tend to occur in a progressive chain. In the beginning, Smith devoted herself to collecting as many orange objects as she could to make sculptures and ensembles that reflected the concentration of color as a symbol of the global-contemporary. These ensembles, such as *Orange Lush I* (1994) and the minimal/explosive *Orange Lush III* (1994) attempt to show the various ways in which orange appears in the world of commercial objects, as though the artist were attempting to depict the saturation of its visual emergence in a single space. At the same time, Smith produced photographic documentation of orange's invasion of surrounding space. In the *My World* slide show (1995), the images pursue, almost in the same way as one follows a scent, the apparition of orange objects in Mexico City streets, stalls, furniture and walls. As if this double movement were not enough, Smith chose to take orange pollution to the territory of artistic references. In square canvases, she proposed a homogeneous, cheapened, reactivated vision of painting styles such as those of Monet, Warhol or Mondrian, translating them into orange too. Her wish to cover the entire visual territory in this color is obviously about taking sight to a point of saturation and overflowing.

The point about these operations is that they lack expressive aims. They were primarily intended to be subordinated to the imperative of following a specific social path: orange as an indicator of the expansion of the global economy and its impact on our senses. What effects does it produce? Let us look more closely at what Smith's images say –what is at stake in the presence of orange in the sphere of trade and circulation. Orange plastic appears to serve as a general marker of activity, a form of decoration for merchandise or more precisely, the specific local color for anything attempting to be contemporary. This orange is so widespread that it is almost impossible to detect. As the artist points out, it serves as a sort of archeological stratigraphy for a certain moment in material culture that takes place within “the chaos and natural homogeneity of the city.”<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence that orange and bright yellow are the colors used by shops to attract low-income consumers by flaunting their prices, almost as though they were forcing them to buy because of the attractive labels, since the goods lack any other quality. Orange is the color of the furniture in fast-food restaurants, designed on the assumption that this color encourages hunger and consumption. Looking at the images Smith offers, one would be forgiven for thinking that Mexico City is submerged in this orange radioactivity, and that it is up to the megalopolis to impregnate itself in the demand created by these points of intense color. Melanie Smith brings this brutal delicacy to the spectator in the hope that he or she will have the aesthetic ability to celebrate the inevitable replacement of craftwork by plastic.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

(...) with the *Orange Lush* pieces, I'm trying to bring people down to earth and then bounce them back off again. (...) My work pokes fun at a consumerism that, to me, is a form of filling some kind of emptiness in our lives. Basically, in my work, I'm talking about a crude reality but I want people to see it as something more ludicrous and absurd. I want them to find something attractive in the ugliness.<sup>6</sup>

Let us translate the excitement caused by this anaesthetization of the globally commercial in terms of its implications for art history. This orange, and not only in terms of chromatic complementarity, is the monstrous opposite of Yves Klein's utopian blue (*International Klein Blue*), the ultramarine blue in which, from the summer of 1956 onwards, Klein sought to concentrate his search for an area of pure sensitivity.<sup>7</sup> For Klein, blue was the color of utopian, non-dimensional space, of an expansion of deep nothingness and immateriality.<sup>8</sup> As the artist put it, in almost Biblical terms, "First there was nothing, then a profound nothing and then there is a blue profundity."<sup>9</sup>

Conversely, Smith's orange appears as the most concrete, psychological color possible, the color of limitation and control, suggestion and simulation, excitement and urgency. This orange into which Melanie Smith translates the "archaeology of contemporary aspects" is, if I might be allowed to use an image, a *Global Smith Orange*. It serves as urban and social make-up barely concealing the market of miseries located light-years away from the consumerism of style and fashion of developed countries. She records the aesthetic act of inducing anxiety in the midst of a generic deterioration. In her words: "For me the color combined with textures, or in the paintings, is a symbol of cheapness, realness and the contemporary as in the case of fashion."<sup>10</sup>

Seen in all its density and noise, Smith's orange was the color of the first phase of the globalized, preindustrial economy that desperately needed the added value of fake excitement in the absence of mercantile pleasures. At the same time, it was the post-industrial color *par excellence*: the fragment performing the task of being a signal, instead of a means of composition in an imaginary whole. *Global Smith Orange* was the means by which the first appearance of modernization was exercised as a synthetic, punctual concentration of chemically-induced enthusiasm.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6

<sup>7</sup> Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein*, London/Cologne, Hayward Gallery Cantz, 1994, p. 77. It is odd that on the subject of his own orange monochrome, *Expression de l'univers de la couleur mine orange* (1955), Klein declared that "orange is blue and vice versa." Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> As Klein was to say "Blue is outside of dimensions while other colors have them. Theirs are psychological spaces. Red, for example, presupposes a heart emitting heat. Colors always lead to associations with concrete, material and tangible ideas while blue, at the most, recalls the sea and the sky, which are the most abstract aspects of tangible and visible nature." *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Yves Klein to Pierre Restany, August 7, 1956, quoted in Pierre Restany, *Yves Klein. Fire at the Heart of the Void*. Tr. by Andrea Loselle, New York, Journal of Contemporary Art Editions, 1992, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> "Archaeology of the Future," *op.cit.*, p. 26.





Jam Side Up Jam Side Down cat 1





Orange Lush III cat 3









previous pages  
**Green Lush** cat 6



top left to right  
**Footballer** cat 7  
**599** cat 9  
**Winter Collection** cat 10

bottom left to right  
**Flash** cat 8  
**This Little Compact Is Loaded** cat 11  
**Nike** cat 12

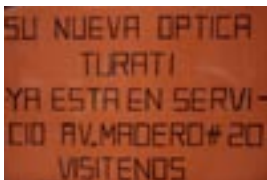




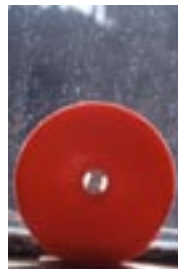
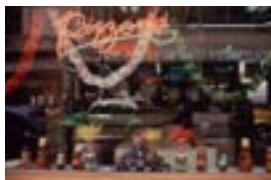




Hiperconsumismo Tropicana Mix 2 cat 13, 14













## ARTIFICIAL TASTES



■ Like several late 20th-century Latin American cities (but on a scale proportional to its size), Mexico City gradually surrendered more and more streets to street vendors. A significant portion of its historic downtown area, along with entire sectors of working and middle-class neighborhoods, is taken over everyday by hordes of illegal street vendors, who generally sell merchandise of similarly doubtful origin: tons of contraband, fake brand-names or pirated goods and often even stolen articles. Seen from the outside, from the point of view of the private driver and technocratic ruler, informal trade is both an anomaly and an obstacle: obvious proof of the failure of the development project and its deviation towards a new subsistence economy that occurs, notwithstanding, in the midst of and through deregulated capitalism. This “cancer” that blocks access to the streets in the colonial sectors of the city with piles of Korean TV sets and decorates the concrete jungle with Chinese toys would not even exist if it did not involve a certain bond with desire.

The underground economy has evidently spread so spectacularly because of its success in attracting buyers. The reasons why they prefer to shop and spend their time among makeshift stalls instead of spending their money at established stores and brands that are constantly advertised in the media is much less obvious than one might think. It is tempting to comfort oneself by assuming that the blight of street trade is simply the result of poverty, to believe that buyers are drawn to the claustrophobic areas of streets taken over by metal stalls covered in plastic, forced to weave their way through dozens of improvised meals on the sidewalk, simply because acquiring these goods would be significantly more expensive in a regular store that pays taxes, salaries and rent. As with any functionalist hypothesis, this assumption is limited. It overlooks the possibility that the consumer might find the myriad sounds, smells and sights of the street market exciting, precisely because of their excess.

Constant criticisms of the vendors’ violation of public space conceals an aesthetic hypocrisy: if informal markets spread the moment urban control is lifted or relaxed –and not just in the Third World– it is because the strident gathering of a mass of buyers, tons of packaged goods, streams of voices and the spectacle (as visible as it is in the stock market) of monetary circulation offers a particular form of pleasure, albeit complicated and mixed up but also convulsive and voracious. There is not, in fact, any room for contemplation. Perhaps by chance, one will experience an infinitesimal moment of distraction, an immersion into a detail, and the achievement of a satisfaction more ephemeral than the process of buying itself. Rather like supermarkets, informal markets must give buyers the thrill of a myriad of possibilities and stimuli. Rushing out to get the latest gadget produced by sweat shops in India or China makes one part of the ruthless appeal of global capitalism.

The extreme artificiality of this territory obliterated by commodities is one of the promises of a modernized city: it proves we are involved in the otherwise unimaginable chain of flows of the world economy. Like the airports, museums and malls for the middle and upper classes, the street market of the megalopolis offers visitors a glimpse of the sublime nature of capitalist

economy. It enables an overflowing, exhausting and yet concrete view of what is otherwise impossible to represent: the economy regulated (as Lyotard said) by the idea of “infinite wealth or power.”<sup>1</sup> Where else can one witness the emergence of capitalism as “an immense accumulation of commodities?”<sup>2</sup>

More than with the object-fetish of specific commodities, Smith's work engages in a dialogue with the extremely palpable, not to say far more obvious commercial aesthetics in the underground economy of the south rather than in the hyper-capitalism of the north. Her approach to this commercialized aesthetics is not essentially thematic or anecdotal but rather defined in terms of the abundance of market attractions, their cheapness and disposability, the extreme artificiality of the visual territory they deploy and their eminently exchangeable nature, which is mainly reflected in Smith's interest in transmitting to the media and disciplines themselves the substitute and contingent value of the objects and images of the new urban territory. Particularly since 1998, when she consistently switched between photography, painting and video, Smith has researched the eminently artificial, vicarious and overflowing taste of capitalism in its global phase. In fact, she tries to show how our views have already been entirely colonized by synthetic materials, colors and shapes and how our sensitivity has therefore developed a sophisticated understanding of what is transitory, gaudy, bright and fake. The title Smith used for her solo show in 2001 is extremely telling in this respect: *100% Acrylic*. She does not only proudly assume that the paintings she exhibited contained no other medium than a plastic polymer, which is also the main component of a whole range of cheap clothes. Like polyester, Spandex (or Lycra) and nylon, acrylic has been one of the essential components of everyday life since the second half of the 20th century, a time when paint ended up being made from plastic.

The championing of acrylic in painting is equivalent in Smith's nomenclature to a form of taste for polyester suits and dresses: *100% Acrylic* provocatively suggests giving up any kind of naturalness that attempts to please the spectator with even a small proportion of inorganic matter, tradition or authenticity. As opposed to the manual values linked to the tradition of painting, it offers a production of surfaces and images akin to photographic printing by Cibachrome or ink-jet, the use of all kinds of prefabricated building materials and the constant bombarding of our senses by moving images, artificial and colored lights and the universal kingdom of plastic gadgets, toys and furniture.

<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” in: *The Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, Tr. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Contribución a la crítica de la economía política*, Mexico City, Siglo XXI, 1980, p. 9.

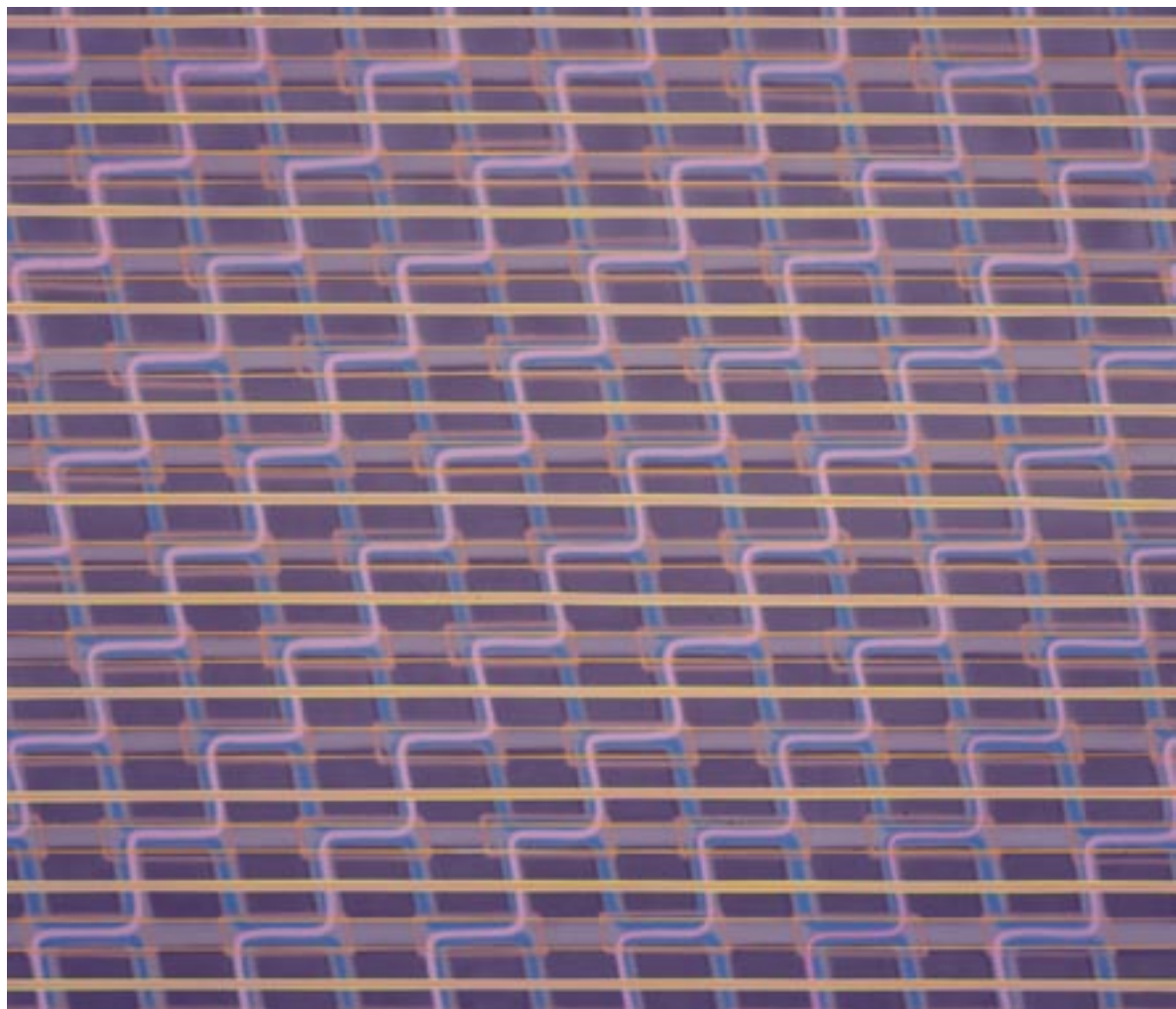
By responding with media related to the urban landscape and produced by the exhibitionism of merchandise, Smith assumed the task of activating an art opposed to the modernist search for discipline and visual purity. On the contrary, both technically and aesthetically, her works overlapped with the pleasure and experience of the modernized.

On the one hand, Smith overcomes the assumption of paintings as the invention of a higher aesthetic experience in contrast to the mass production of a series of false satisfiers: at most, it promises to be a physical manifestation of the increasingly volatile cycle of the circulation of visuality. By painting colorful patterns drawn from the body of textures and patterns characteristic of commercial goods and those that deliver them, Smith came to understand the painted object as a summary of the feeling of excitement and visual deception of the urban experience: a frequently identifiable and explicit parallel of the images recorded by her camera and the confusion of objects, signs, lights and reflection in all kinds of commercial spaces. One of the defining characteristics of Smith's works is her ability to produce an industrialized, transitory representation of a visual field that is also mass-produced. The painting would therefore have to resign itself to performing an intermediary function between mediated experiences; it can no longer appear as the signifier of what is legitimate, but rather as a means of distilling some sort of perfection out of what has been cheapened.

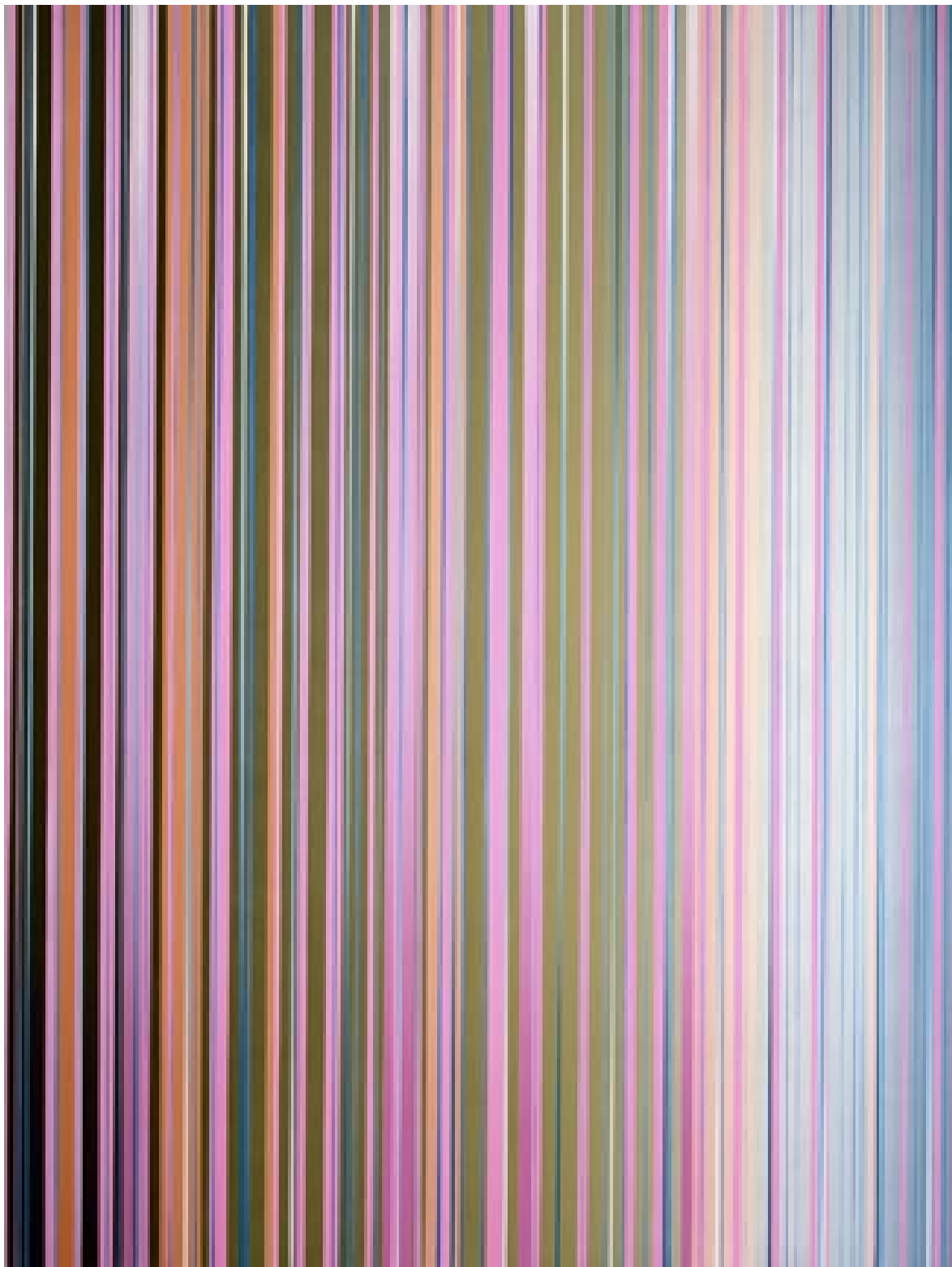
By extension, Smith's painted surfaces, photographic images and videos operate with the same mobility and ductility as objects put on sale by the market. This vision of the contingent nature of contemporary aesthetic compromises led her to practice forms of installation that suggest the perishable nature of the works shown in themselves. For example, by arranging paintings to be displayed stacked against a wall, Smith does not evoke the casual situation of a work in a studio, but rather suggests the fragmentary and always replaceable value of the experiences her work records and/or produces. Avoiding any discourse that attributes the value of an irreplaceable totality to the installation, Melanie Smith has come to create a number of sets in which she combines, superimposes and coordinates her works in various media (paintings, objects and even performance settings) to create structures that are subsequently taken down and dispersed, since their elements are works that can be autonomized, displayed, sold or circulated separately. Like the city itself, there is no part of the set that is essential: several assembled works are integrated into a far more complex program than each of its parts, but this addition never ends up being a "whole."

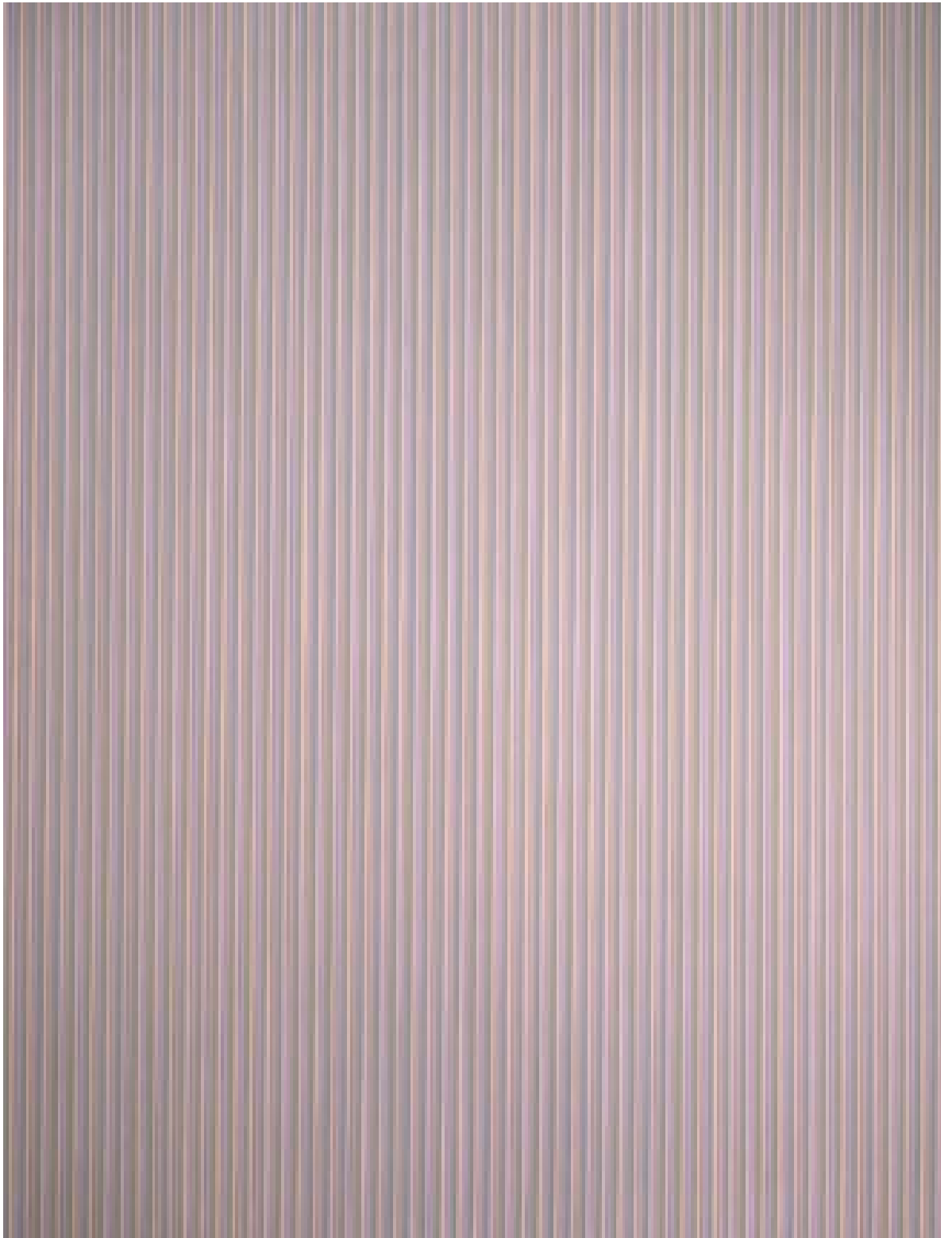
















Installation view, Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich cat 22, 23

following pages

Installation view, Tamayo Museum, Mexico City cat 24

pages 46-47

**Tupperware** cat 25, **Globos** cat 26, **Conjunto** cat 27

pages 48-49

**Florero** cat 28, **Frutas de plástico** cat 29, **Muñeco con cesto** cat 30, **Tres ollas** cat 31















## CONVERSATION WITH DAVID BATCHELOR

On 7/15/05 11:32 AM, "Melanie Smith" <[melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx)> wrote:

Dear David,

Well I've finally had the baby after what seemed like a long long wait for her to be born. We went to Mexico City for the last stretch, thinking she would arrive early and ended up staying a month, waiting in an unbearable heat wave for her to pop out. I really felt like a zombie in the end. For however tired we are now, I feel much better that we're actually in the next phase instead of just being in the waiting room.

Anyway, I think if you are up to it, I could take a bit of question answering by now. I did send a couple of mails before but I'm not sure you got them. I thought the best thing would be to send you Cuauhtémoc's text for the exhibition, so you get an idea of the sections within the show.

The catalogue is called *Spiral City and other Vicarious Pleasures*, with the central theme being of course the video of *Spiral City*, and branching out from there. It sort of goes from a microscopic view of the city to macrocosmic, i.e. from inside and out. I will



include the *Orange* series in the show, *Six Steps to Reality* (which is the white piece I talked about in the Tamayo talk, with you), the *Spiral City* paintings, and a piece similar to the big painting installation I showed in *Sodium and Asphalt*, though this same piece will not be included (but could be talked about). Perhaps we could start off with some more general questions to get going. I can also send you specific documentation of pieces if you need it.

I hope that Alejandra García from Turner editions will contact you soon with regards to payment, and probably deadlines too! We do have until the end of August or mid-September. I hope this isn't a bad time for you. I know Cuauhtémoc told me you were caught up with your mother right now, going up north a lot...

I'm ready for those questions when you are. Sorry for not getting it together sooner, I've been such a space-head. I'll send Cuauh's text.

Hope you're both well,

Mel x



On 8/10/05 5:17 AM, "David Batchelor" <[db@david-batchelor.co.uk](mailto:db@david-batchelor.co.uk)> wrote:

Dear Mel,

Finally I get to reply to your e-mails. I'm sorry it has taken so long but I've been desperately trying to clear my desk after our travels. That and my mother thing. Actually she is a lot better now so the pressure is off, more or less, for the moment. But then you have been a little busy too, I guess. And you must have spent a little time with Claire and Francesco, no? By the way I haven't heard from the publisher yet, but between now and mid-September should be fine for me in terms of getting this done.

Anyway it's conversation time. I've read the introductory text and outline you sent and I've been thinking about overlaps in our work, and that this suggested a few areas we might attend to. For example, the city, or rather the cities we each live in, materials, plastics, artificiality, colour, monochromes, readymades, abstraction-and-literalism, all the usual guff. Hopefully as we converse that will bring up more and less obvious areas, but for no obvious reason, here's an opener:

What is art?



Ha, ha, only kidding. Although I do like to throw that one around from time to time as it's so weird and so embarrassing. Instead: can you imagine an art, any art, that might interest you, that wasn't somehow a response to living in a city? And not just any city, but a megalopolis, like Mexico City or London. Suddenly that sounds like a tired old chestnut, but I think it's always a good thing to get nature out of the way at an early stage. Please feel free to ignore this opener, I'm just trying to warm up a little.  
xxxD

**On 8/18/05 5:56 PM, "Melanie Smith" <[melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx)> wrote:**

David,

Been a bad week, everyone ill and no sleep, but I guess it's going to be like that from now on, so i'll try and answer...

I've always liked Romantic landscape paintings because they work with clichés, which turns them into an ideal of beauty. When I look at them or think of that kind of landscape, it makes me ask if that's still conceivable today, or whether it's just the



viewer's projection of nostalgia onto a fabricated beauty. For me they're actually quite deceiving: the paintings (perhaps in my thwarted eye) are somehow telling a lie. That's what interests me in these paintings, that the landscape itself doesn't change, it's totally impartial, it's our projection onto them as viewers that deciphers them. In the same way, my work deals with the idea of a kind of corrupted landscape, which yes, comes from the direct experience of living in one of the most destroyed urban landscapes possible. I suppose I'm also fabricating beauty, but by synthetic rather than natural means. There's no way you can avoid the gritty or raw aspect of a place like Mexico City. In a way, you have to invent your own "Romanticism," otherwise you'd better leave.

**On 8/25/05 11:16 AM, "David Batchelor" <[db@david-batchelor.co.uk](mailto:db@david-batchelor.co.uk)> wrote:**

Sorry, Mel, had to go up to Scotland for a while to see Ann's mother and also to a few meetings. Suddenly I seem to have become a re-adopted son of Dundee: the city wants to commission me – a 'local artist' – to do something for a refurbished museum. I also seem to have picked up projects in Edinburgh and Glasgow at the same time. So



it wasn't that your response reduced me to silence, it was just that August was meant to be the quiet month, and it isn't.

I know what you mean about the artificiality of landscape painting, and most of the time that is about the only thing that holds my attention. As for the 20th century, and now, I find it hard to imagine a plausible picture of the city in terms of painting, at least in terms of figurative painting coming from a landscape tradition. But I have no trouble thinking of certain types of abstract paintings as a vivid response to the built environment, although they are almost never talked about in those ways. I guess that is something we have in common: a kind of after-abstract, post-painting relationship to painting and to the city; reference through sampling as much as through iconography; attention to very specific relationships of material/surface/color. There is often a tendency to talk of these things with a sense of critical remove, but do you think you could make your work without also some relationship of delight in those experiences? And by the way, can you think of any painting that includes a plausible depiction of a motor car?

XxxD



On 9/7/05 3:46 PM, “Melanie Smith” <[melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx)> wrote:

David,

Had to do an interview for the TV yesterday about contemporary art in Mexico, and guess what question came up: What is art? Yes, always the most difficult to answer, and I made a very bad job of answering it, that will look great on television... rather a stupid program anyway. Had me talking about my art practice without any visuals at all, and I will definitely sound crazy to the general public. Really great way of alienating the public even more. Oh well.

Great you got some projects going in Scotland, better start eating more of the fruit cake if you're a local lad.

I'm intrigued by “after-abstraction”: would you say it's a critique of abstraction in your case?

What abstract paintings are you thinking about?

I feel like I'm trying to subvert abstraction, always. It never feels like it's enough on its own somehow. Yes, it's funny how abstract painting is nearly always talked about in



terms of spiritualism or nature. In the orange series of paintings that I did in 1996, I was trying to subvert that “nature” aspect of modernist abstract painting by taking classic examples of 1960s and 70s abstract paintings and making my own versions, painting in fluorescent (synthetic) orange. But even then and still nowadays, it never really feels like I’m a painter as such, although it really is the basis of my work; my interest goes beyond that, especially when I first arrived in Mexico, I was struck by the visual presentation of objects, and this made me get involved hands-on with materials — plastics, etc. So going out and walking around the streets was always fun, i’d always come back with something. Of course that can wear off, but I still get a kick out of the physicality of painting. I guess I’m traditional enough to still have a studio and still like the ‘making of’ instead of the ‘thinking of’ all the time. I remember we once talked about how difficult the nomadic artist thing is if you have a studio practice — things can become more specific.

Still thinking about the car question. Thought of a Vilja Celmins painting with a lorry in it, and some hyperrealist 1970s paintings, but no idea of titles, will keep looking.  
Mel



On 9/13/05 4:05 AM, “David Batchelor” <db@david-batchelor.co.uk> wrote:

Dear Mel,

The only answer to being asked ‘what is art?’ on TV is ‘how long have you got?’ They always want a thirty-second answer to everything and we feel bad when we can’t give it. Oh well.

By ‘after-abstraction’ I think I have in mind a fairly loose bundle of ideas, some of which were brought into focus for me when I was in a show called *Postmark* at Site Santa Fe in 1999. It was curated by Bruce Ferguson who brought together quite a lot of diverse work. His argument was that parallel to the 20th-century idea of abstraction being associated with nature, spirituality and, above all, essentialism, there was a another less defined trajectory in which abstract work was related to contingency, the urban environment and everyday materials and objects. One thing that was interesting was that many of the artists in the show had begun as painters but that the work had somehow left the wall plane and become more object-like and literal. It was where I first showed the dollies with monochromes on top. I think the *Sodio y Asfalto* show had quite a lot in common with that.



I certainly don't think of myself as a painter, and haven't done one for well over fifteen years. But at the same time I do think I am informed by painting more than by, say, the history of sculpture or whatever. I have made works that refer to certain aspects of painting and abstraction – the monochrome in particular – but I seem to be doing less of that now. Even with those works, I didn't think of them as subverting abstraction so much as wilfully misreading it. Maybe that's not so different, but I love lots of abstract painting, from Malevich and Mondrian to Klein and Noland, and I'm not critical of it in any way. Mind you, some of the things that have been said about it, that's a different matter.

As for the studio, that is the one thing I couldn't imagine doing without. Not in the mythical sense of the place where the artist closes him or herself off to the vagaries of the world, but as a place to bring things that are encountered in the world and to fuck around with them a little. It's never the brilliant ideas I have that matter, it's always what happens to them when they get mangled in the studio that counts. Materials are wonderfully resistant things; they rarely do what you want of them, but at the same time, they have all sorts of capabilities that, if you give them some time, they may reveal to you. Plastics are still the most undervalued of materials in my mind. Say more about how you use your studio.



You're right about photorealism and cars; it's a shame they are such rubbish as art. I think a shiny black Rauschenberg painting has more to say about cars than any of those. Then there are the Warhol *Disaster* paintings, except they aren't really paintings, of course.  
D.

**On 9/21/05 3:42 PM, "Melanie Smith" <[melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx)> wrote:**

David,  
Could you send me the rest of our conversation — my computer completely broke down last week and I have lost our timeless prose — hope you have it.  
Thanks,  
Mel



On 9/24/05 8:19 AM, “David Batchelor” <db@david-batchelor.co.uk> wrote:

Jeez, Mel, I live in terror of my computer breaking down. I've resent the last version I have of our conversation. We had begun to talk about the studio. Maybe that's a chance for you to say something about how you made the *Six Steps* variation — how it relates to the studio and how it relates to abstraction...

On 9/26/05 1:48 PM, “Melanie Smith” <melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx> wrote:

David,

I guess you mean *Six Steps to Reality*. There's four projects in *Six Steps*, but anyway I'll talk about this one, because I think that's the one you mean.

*Six steps...* was made as a collaboration with Rafael, and was filmed in fourteen hours in my studio. There were five camera assistants and staff also involved. Rafael was filming the 'supposed' real action in 16mm and I was shooting the process of



filming — the ‘making of’ if you like, on mini-DV. The 16mm images were all taken from six small maquettes made in the studio with polystyrene, a small fish tank, paint blobs etc., and then they were isolated or blurred from reality through the lens of the camera to appear large, faultless and perfect.

Rafael's part ended up as a series of six white projected images, which allude to the precious white cube and the minimalist cool space. I spent the day filming the assistants, equipment and Rafael, and there ended up being about ten hours of material in real time, which got reduced in the edition to twenty-two minutes of seemingly non-related actions of people building things and moving equipment and contemplating who knows what.

I think the impression on entering the exhibition space was quite disconcerting. There was on the one hand these aesthetically beautiful images flowing from one to another, yet in the corner there was this hammering sound coming from a monitor facing the corner. One of the things I was interested in in these pieces was to reveal the work behind the scenes of presentation. Especially in film, the physical making and preparation has nothing to do with the image you see — there's no glamour in producing



the perfection of the cinematic image. Mostly it's the same with studio practice. I guess that's why things look more interesting in the studio. I'm often more interested in non-perfection and the faultiness of real things and situations, rather than the finished aestheticized product. I suppose this goes back to the corruption of minimalism. I've always thought minimalism somehow doesn't fit here. You can't ignore the sweat and toil it takes to actually make things happen.

...And well, white, you know all about white. Pure, untouchable, virginal, bla bla. It's always a kind of cover up-for what's really going on.

**On 11/2/05 9:30 PM, "David Batchelor" <[db@david-batchelor.co.uk](mailto:db@david-batchelor.co.uk)> wrote:**

Mel,

Sorry for the long delay again, but for the next month things are looking quieter so I will be more focussed I promise. I'm away for a while after 17 November, so we should get as much done before then as possible. What's the news on deadlines? I know we are way behind. And by the way I have still heard nothing from the publisher at all.



I was just re-reading our correspondence about abstraction and the city and so on in relation to your description of Six Steps – and it made me think that most of what we have talked about has less to do with abstraction than with collage and montage. I haven't seen the Six Steps you describe – apart I think from a short section you showed during our talk at the Tamayo? – but what I like about that is the way it suggests that behind every 'pure' monochrome lies a very impure collage in the shape of labour, noise, building work, bodging things together, time, money, etc. The piece you showed in Sodio y Asfalto also looked to me like a collage-in-the-expanded-field - it's not often you see the different mediums, film, painting, objects, etc, pulled together into one work. And then it's not a huge step to say that the city itself is a kind of collage and montage, and a palimpsest. What is the Tamayo piece called? Was that the first time you brought together those different mediums? Do you think about collage and montage at all these days? Maybe it's more evident in your earlier work than now.

D.



**On 11/25/05 7:06 AM, "Melanie Smith" <melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx> wrote:**

David

Sorry to bother you again, I know you said you're busy at the end of the month, but did you get my last mails, and did you hear from the editor?. Now the final deadline is for the beginning of January. I think we should be ok still, and I'm also coming to England from the 9th to the 30th of dec, so we can either talk or see each other (that's if you're around). Do you have a show right now?

Mel x

**On 11/30/05 9:54 AM, "David Batchelor" <db@david-batchelor.co.uk> wrote:**

Hi Mel,

Just got back from Brazil - a show in Sao Paulo - and very nice it was too. The last email I got from you I replied to before I went away, about the monochrome and so



forth, but I have not received anything since. Have I missed something? Nor have I heard from your editor, but the deadline sounds fine to me. And yes we will be around, at least until the 18th Dec, after which we will be going off on short trips to various parents. It would be a treat to see you - will you be with the family?  
XxxD

**On 12/01/05 9:32 AM, “Melanie Smith” <[melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx)> wrote:**

Finally finding a space to write, with Mila lying asleep on the floor next to me. Trying to juggle everything right now, which is a bit tricky. As I said my assistant's gone so I'm on my own, which strangely is quite liberating. I got to a point where I was being his assistant (!), I think, and inventing things for him to do, so now I feel I can get back to all those things that were at the back of my mind, which could be the important things, rather than all this constant big production. Time to take risks again. By the way, Rafa and I are thinking of spending some time outside Mexico, either England or Spain.



Tepoztlán is over, for school reasons, but we're not ready to go back to the city yet. Everything sort of points towards England being the obvious choice, but there's something (mainly \$\$\$\$\$) that tells me it's just too cool for me. I'd be interested to hear what you think about London right now... As far as deadlines are concerned, well, we're sort of waiting on Cuauhtémoc, hopefully December. I will see the publisher next Monday and ask her why she hasn't contacted you.

The Tamayo piece is called *Installation of Paintings for Six Steps to Abstraction (Variation)* 2004. *Six Steps to Abstraction* is a video piece I made in 2002, so in this case the video came first, and there was an excerpt from the video (where two men are weaving threads in a room) that became the source for the installation, which grew on a macro/micro basis, whereby *Spiral City* was about seeing from above, and the other videos were about seeing from within. I have done installations as early as 1995 combining paintings and materials, video, etc., and when I first showed the *Installations of Paintings...* in London, I had talked with Cuauhtémoc before the show of somehow bringing together all the aspects of my work in one piece. It seemed like a sort of



recipe for disaster because sometimes those pieces can be very forced, but in another way I'd always been interested in the space between different mediums, and no one medium seemed, or still seems, enough. There's definitely a layering effect in all that; but this sort of fracturing of the urban situation together with the blurring/fusing aspect of montage, in retrospect, makes me think it's also quite a comfortable position (of mine) – I mean that chaos makes for quite a blasé attitude, and I think that in *Paintings for Six Steps...* it gives an impenetrable view of the city, within which I was also protected. Strangely enough, it took me a long time to realize that most of my work is anti-urban. It sounds like a contradiction given that I so much enjoy the artificiality of materials, and yet there's an urban dynamic which really distresses me.

The other thing I was wondering about was also your relationship to the monochrome. It doesn't really seem far off from the way I'm thinking about it... readdressing the purity of it. It seems so a-political, and definitely something that not many artists seem to be interested in these days – it's always so associated with the white wall. Do you think those white monochromes of yours are inserting the monochrome into the public



space or do they reaffirm the void, or perhaps both? Maybe it's a silly question, but in your case, why the monochrome? (I mean beyond the critique.)

On 12/04/05 9:32 AM, "David Batchelor" <[db@david-batchelor.co.uk](mailto:db@david-batchelor.co.uk)> wrote:

Mel,

I know what you mean about the assistant thing. I have become completely dependent on mine; at the moment, there is enough on to keep him there most of the time, but sometimes I come in and have to ask him if I can help.

Makes you feel a little like Rubens, doing the equivalent of adjusting the highlights on the writhing bodies, or rearranging the piles of cable in my case. Sometimes I need more time alone, but for the most part, it's working pretty well.

Ah, the monochrome. I think it is the history of it that interests me, the way it began in the hands of Rodchenko *et al* as a revolutionary event, a challenge to bourgeois picture-making and skills. El Lissitzky said the best thing about this kind of painting is you can



stay in bed and order one on the phone. But from its heroic beginnings, it seems to have ended up as a kind of upmarket boardroom decoration. In between, there have been the absurdist but not revolutionary monochromes of Rauschenberg, Klein, Oiticica, etc.; and then also a not unrelated spiritualist phase, which ends up with Kapoor and Turrell, I suppose; and then the more workaday, pragmatic monochromes of Ryman and Ellsworth Kelly; and then also the co-opting of the monochrome in the early work of conceptual art. For me the monochrome is essentially a comic genre; it's an absurd way to make a painting, but at the same time, it remains a mild threat to painting. I wanted to put the city back into the monochrome and the monochrome back into the city, sometimes literally, sometimes not. My point being, in part, that the monochrome doesn't live in some pure autonomous space, but is already there in the everyday life of the city – we just often tend to overlook it. And I wanted to put some color back into the genre too, after so many white, black and gray monochromes. So much of my work has been a shiny monochrome on a dirty readymade, although that device has loosened somewhat recently. I first stuck a monochrome on wheels by accident – a studio accident – but it summed up my relationship with the subject for a while.



I'm interested that you think of your work as anti-urban; I never thought of it like that. I mean, I'm not 100% in love with the city, that would be impossible, and sometimes London drives me really crazy – the politics, the practicalities, the cost of everything – but I am at the same time deeply dependent on it as a resource and, pardon the expression, an inspiration.

Tell me more.

D.

By the way, mine is a Mac but I don't think I have iDisc – although you could try sending it anyway...

**On 1/04/06 1:07 PM, "Melanie Smith" <[melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx)> wrote:**

David,

Trying to get myself back into action. I don't know why but the jet lag has really hit me this time; can't seem to get my head together, but I'll try...



If I think back to the *Orange* series of works, apart from being a daily relationship to the city, it was also sensorial, particularly the *Orange Lush* series (of plastic objects stuck to boards). I was quite specific about the choosing of these objects —that they all had some kind of bodily organic reference, although in synthetic form. These seemed quite akin, to me, to the works of Lygia Clark (find title later), where she was sticking these bodily appendages to herself, almost extending her own emotional self in object form. The *Orange* works were very much in this vein, reproducing a synthetic appendage of my reaction to the city. I also talked later of this series as forming part of an archeology of the future— objects that for us have some kind of significance today, erasing a past. Plastic will be very much of our time — and rather than seeing that as celebratory, I see it as a registering. This documenting extended into other works; *Spiral City*, for example, was very much about seeing the city from the outside, well, from above, and that always implied a kind of removal from the city, a non-involvement come self-preservation.

M



Actually I've been wondering a lot recently if this dependency we all have on cities is a mythical construction caused by a sort of neurotic impulse to not lose touch with the "core," or if it is practicality that dictates it, and therefore the type of work that arises. These days I find less and less "need" to be in a city.

[That's both your recent comments pasted above.]

**On 1/9/06 1:47 AM, "David Batchelor" <[db@david-batchelor.co.uk](mailto:db@david-batchelor.co.uk)> wrote:**

Mel,

I've been completely wasted since X-mas with some vicious flu bug — not had a drink for ten days or even felt like one. Gradually crawling back to life now, thankfully...

You may well be right about hanging on to some mythical "core" when it comes to the city; except whenever I'm in a city, I always feel the center must be just around the corner; it's never quite at hand, never quite where you are. I wonder whether the mythical



bit is the presumed opposition of nature and the city, or the natural and the artificial, which is clearly a bit meaningless and lazy. And in practical terms we all probably spend most of our time in neither of these idealized spaces, but in some messy area that involves elements of both and the benefits of neither. But I think I do need to be in the city; at least, when I leave London and see anywhere else in this country, I always feel the need to get back as soon as is humanly possible.

Incidentally, why orange in *Orange Lush*? Is it because orange is the most easily manufactured of chemical colors and thus the easiest to produce and collect? Or did you spend time doing “red lushes” and “green” ones before you settled on the orange ones? I had a load of black, blue and yellow monochrome photographs as well as the white ones to begin with, but they didn’t work as well, they didn’t lift themselves out of the picture plane.

When you look back at your work of the last decade or so — as you must when you are putting a volume like this together — do you get any surprises? Are there patterns and recurrences that you hadn’t noticed? They always seem more interesting to me



than “developments” — the things you can’t get away from, consciously or otherwise, the things that keep nagging away whether you like it or not...  
D.

**On 1/12/06 10:23 AM, “Melanie Smith” <[melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx)> wrote:**

David,

I love those messy areas. I think I spend 90% of my time in those blurry irritating things that lead up to be able to actually work, or get something achieved. Those are the moments that have been hiding between the lines in the past years. At first, I think it was a straightforward manifestation of internal and external, and now I could say that there’s a recurrent frontal/reversal, or preference for the “reverse” side that runs through all the work. *Six Steps to a Project*, from 2004, (not sure you’ve seen that piece, but it involves filming the making of a video piece, shot in a cantina in Mexico, that never actually gets filmed: the “making of” becomes the piece) really



deals with all those untied connections that had been floating around for a while. The idea of making a piece of work about a project that never really happened, i.e. all those things involved in the process of creating a fiction, seems very much tied up with abstraction to me.

And one of the really irritating things, when I see my work, is this kind of squareness I can't get rid of. I can't really describe it better than that, but when I look at my work in old photos there's always a restraint imposed by the rectangle; ordinarily that should be a painter's question, but I think it has to do (without hours of psychoanalysis) more with a mental structure, and I always wish I could do work that is without that restraint.

In fact *Farce and Artifice* from 2004 (the piece in Monterrey that was upstairs on the first floor when *Sodium and Asphalt* was on) deals with this question for the first time. The idea of learning to dance salsa with someone calling out the steps in a mechanical way, that says it all really. I think this piece looks like other pieces visually, but once you listen to the dialogue, it doesn't.

I managed to avoid the orange question — well, it was at the time all about the present (1994). Of course there was a chemical element, but more than that, it seemed



to indicate a certain attitude I had towards Mexico at that specific time; orange was always in your face, well, more in the corner of your eye, wherever something was wanting to catch your attention it was in orange — I could never separate the color from the object, and all these orange objects seemed to homogenize everything, there was always a sea of useless plastic acquisitions out there. I did one *Green Lush* afterwards, which was a collection of green plastic leaves and balloons, a kind of anti-ecology piece...

By the way, talking about all the messy bits, I was thinking of including all our conversations with no cuts. Wondering what you thought?

**On 1/19/06 4:32 AM, "David Batchelor" <db@david-batchelor.co.uk> wrote:**

Mel,

Oh, god, the rectangle, I know exactly what you mean, believe me. I guess I've always put it down to the residual painter in me, and I don't mind that in principle, but in practice sometimes it drives me crazy. Always boxing things in. Recently I may have begun to get over this, what with the *Idiot Sticks* and now the chandelier-like hanging



pieces. (That's why I've been off-line for a while again, installing a big one in London — see snapshot.) But when I get anxious about the rectangle, I also think of Alan Kaprow's dig at Robert Morris's "antiform" essay, where he says, sure, that felt looks unstructured, but it sits in the rectangle of the gallery, the rectangle of the photograph, the rectangle of the art magazine, etc, etc. He had a point, even if it is a little obvious nowadays, when everyone goes on about the "frame".

The hanging elements you sometimes use are more formless than other aspects of your work and they make me think of other hanging work — Eva Hesse's post-minimal, soft and flexible works for example. I love that stuff.

By the way, I think it may be a good idea to keep our conversation without any cuts — it would be true to form and to how we actually converse, and anyway, I hate those interviews you get in catalogues where it sounds like Ludwig Wittgenstein chatting with Jean Paul Sartre. But of course, now we will be all self-conscious about the messy bits, and anyway, we should think about looking at how much material we have got and when we might stop.

D.



On 2/2/06 10:27 AM, "David Batchelor" <[db@david-batchelor.co.uk](mailto:db@david-batchelor.co.uk)> wrote:

Mel,

I feel I should have ended the last exchange with a question, mainly so as you could have the last word, which would be appropriate under the circumstances. So: why do you make art? And can this question be answered or even asked? Or is this a rubbish way to tie up the conversation?

D.

On 2/9/06 4:45 PM, "MelanieSmith" <[melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx](mailto:melaniesmith@prodigy.net.mx)> wrote:

David

Well, it's been asked, and I think there's so many unconscious reasons why I or anyone make art. I've been mulling it over in the past few days, and one word that keeps coming back is melancholy, the other is despair. Probably that's despair for some kind of transparency or order, but not truth or any kind of justification. I think I've known



more about why I make art from the times when I haven't made any, that meaning that I've always come back to it out of a sense of anxiety of the void. Smithson said once that artists 'seek the fiction that reality will sooner or later imitate'. I don't really want to be a do-gooder, but I do think I want to make 'pictures' of myself and places that expose more than just a mundane sense of reality. I can't stand that, I have inertia all the time, and I think I'm living with that on top of me all the time.

But thankfully opinions don't have to have conclusions, so I'm sure if you ask me in 10 years hopefully I'd say something different.



**Aerobics Class** cat 33

**On 2/19/06 4:32 AM, "David Batchelor" <bd@david-batchelor.co.uk> wrote:**

Mel,

That is a good ending, I think. But on looking through it I realise my comment before last is missing. Perhaps you didn't get it, it was about rectangularity and Kaprow? I'm sure I can find it or reconstruct it, but I guess the next move is to reformat the stuff as a word document and see what it looks like...

Saw Mr Medina the other evening and had a very pleasant time. Now he has to do his work, yes?

# SPIRAL CITY

■ In early 2002, Melanie Smith decided to go beyond recording flashes of everyday urban life in order to embark on the task of coping with the mass of the megalopolis. Defying the fact that aerial views have lost their appeal, at a time when passengers on commercial flights no longer look out to see the territory they are flying over,<sup>1</sup> the artist rented a helicopter and chose to video as well as photograph the almost endless accumulation of buildings, streets, squares, factories, parking lots and irregular settlements which, in a cruelly systematic grid, comprise the largest urban concentration in the hemisphere. The image itself is extremely simple: a slow, low-level succession of spaces bounded by the avenues, seen from a point of view that completely eliminates the decorative and personalized features of the city and that removes us from its human and concrete bustle in search of a harsh, distant, systematic appreciation. In fact, there is a certain amount of inhumanity in Smith's film: the artist strove to remove any sign of subjective activity from the sequence and the shots, in order to concentrate on a simple progression surrounding the ascent of our point of view, and in the shading from whites to grays at the beginning and end. It is not just that the camera's movement avoids any sign of a focus of attention, any hierarchy of importance or sentimental value. By replacing the sound of the helicopter in which the video was taken with the gray noise of the wind, the film suggests we are spectators to a sort of visual erosion. This traveling over the city's flat roofs, shot under oblique morning light, testifies to a city that is subject to a sort of abrasion, perpetually subjected to the erosion caused by poverty, growth and underdevelopment. From Smith's perspective, Mexico is an eminently entropic city, incubating its structures in the way crystals grow in salts and blurring and becoming diluted as it expands. Mexico City is like a gigantic site-specific intervention, a crystallization that is both alive and dead; the megalopolis (to paraphrase Robert Smithson) like "a layer of a crystalline structure, magnified a trillion times."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to filming in black and white to accentuate the squared structure of the urban grid and the homogeneity of spreading cement and asphalt, Smith inserted a historical reference into her video. Given its title and the way it sweeps the territory under our eyes, the film reminds us of the movie in which Smithson documented his *Spiral Jetty* (1970) in the Great Salt Lake of Utah, in the United States. Although the reference is reduced to the title and the way in which Smith achieved displacement by panning the camera and tracing a spiral over the city, Melanie Smith managed to transfer Smithson's fascination with what he called "modern pre-history" onto it: the interaction

<sup>1</sup> Tom Vanderbilt, "Diary: The View from Above," *London Review of Books*, vol. 27, no.7, March 31, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Smithson, "Spiral Jetty" (1972) in: Lynne Cooke and Karen Kelly, eds., *Robert Smithson Spiral Jetty. True Fictions, False Realities*. New York, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, Dia Art Foundation, University of California Press, 2004, p. 9.

between the disparate elements of a place where buildings are degraded, mixed and dissolve “the history of earth.”<sup>3</sup> Once a city goes beyond grafting itself onto a territory in order to completely redefine it, by drying the lake that held it, overflowing the basin of the valley and erasing the mountains in its way, it will inevitably be perceived more as a geological phenomenon than as a moment of culture. For Melanie Smith, the megalopolis is in a perpetual process of improvisation and decadence, a colossal landscape of disintegration. Mexico City will be the most complete accumulation of the “architecture of entropy” that attracted Robert Smithson’s attention in 1966 when he examined the aesthetics of minimalism. Made entirely from artificial elements –“plastic, chrome and electric light”– it is an example of the way social energy is dissolved into a homogeneous mass lacking any “distinction.” The megalopolis would not be one of those “new monuments” that, as Smithson argued, are “not built for the ages but rather against the ages” since instead of making us “remember the past (...), they seem to cause us forget the future.”<sup>4</sup>

It is this contemplation of a mass that was never really new and will never be able to claim it was old that *Spiral City* proposes immersion in one of the crucial modalities of contemporary experience.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12. It is interesting to see how Smithson expressed the search for an art beyond the human scale of time: “I think the strongest art really projects you over millennia now; it really encompasses a lot of time and not just somebody’s specious idea of history that you’re living up to. It’s getting away from a kind of humanist idea of history too (...)” Kenneth Baker, “Taing with Robert Smithson,” *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Smithson, “Entropy and the New Monuments” (1966) in: Maggie Gilchrist *et. al.*, *Robert Smithson. Une rétrospective. Le paysage entropique 1960/1973*, Brussels, musée de Marseille/Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993, pp. 292-296.





## MESSING UP ABSTRACTION | Dawn Ades

Since the late 1980s Mexico City has been the base for an active and independent artistic community, a mixture of Mexican and foreign artists, critics and curators. It is not a group, though there are groups among it, nor can it be identified with any one particular viewpoint or practice. Several of the artists have well established reputations on the international circuit. Paradoxically, while the city itself, its vast and varied urbanism, is predominantly the source and theme of these artists' work, they have fully shaken off the cultural nationalism and the weight of tradition that dominated art in post-revolutionary Mexico. Their immediate reaction was against the neo-Mexican revival of the 1970s and 80s, which even if often ironic in tone still seemed to reinforce the old stereotypes and was easily institutionalized. If, for the foreign artists, the encounter with Mexico produced a powerful response, it was not to the ancient or picturesque but to an urban situation outside their European experience. The conditions of life in Mexico City were a constant challenge but also a kind of explosive liberation. For Melanie Smith, this has been a fundamental motor to her work: mixing up abstraction, as she put it, in response to new surroundings where "aesthetic ornamentation seems irrelevant when compared to the question of daily survival."

In 1989 Smith went to Mexico for six months and is still there. Recently out of art school in England, she had no particular reason for choosing Mexico — the intention was just to work outside Europe for a while. Shortly after she arrived, she was included in the first exhibition in Mexico to feature installations: *A propósito*, curated by Guillermo Santamarina with Gabriel Orozco and Flavia González, at the Museum of



the ex-Convento de los Leones, a former Carmelite monastery in a forest on the outskirts of Mexico City. The exhibition, a kind of homage to Joseph Beuys, was an open-ended group of projects which interacted with the architectural and natural environment. Smith at the time was making small wooden boxes by hand, using found materials, and her installation consisted of wood and wax objects. “The piece was in a room that had no roof, and so the wax parts were exposed to the sun and melted into a pool of wax that hardened at night”: very Beuys, as she says.

Informality and experiment, questing and critical practices aware of minimal and conceptual art but not dependent on them, and a great diversity of materials and mediums characterise the work of this loose community of artists. Smith’s work has engaged directly with the city and especially those aspects of the life of the giant but oddly intimate megalopolis that differentiate it from European cities. Her responses to the street, the markets and the day-to-day working environment are in dialogue with that of other members of the artistic community but have a distinctive character. One unusual feature of her working practice in this context is that she paints, and painting is a constant reference in unexpected and original ways. Another is the focus on labor and the intensive effort of producing any work which, as in *Six Steps towards Reality*, she makes apparent in the final video installation. Her videos/films, made in collaboration with her partner Rafael Ortega, who shot them, realize completely and effectively the possibilities of the medium, in that they are not records of an action or performance but are in themselves that action.



The links between an early group of works, *Orange Lush*, and the video *Tianguis II* are very interesting and pertinent to her relationship to abstract and minimal art. They concern not just the take on color as a form of structuring a confusingly abundant and multifarious environment — one might mention as precedents, though not as influences, works like Boris Mikhailov's *The Red Scene* (1968-75), a series of snapshots of urban scenes in which red objects predominate, or Richard Hamilton's beach photographs — but the diverse ways in which, in both, the body is referenced. Neither *Orange Lush* nor *Tianguis II* claim the phenomenological concerns of minimalism, or at least not in the sense of the “bodily encounter of the spectator and the work.” Bruce Nauman dubbed paintings “lush” and Smith might be countering this denunciation of drunken overabundance of surface in the *Orange Lush* series. The name wonderfully conveys the feeling of fleshy excess in the draped and puffy orange plastic objects filched from the street and fixed to wooden boards or accumulated in boxes. In *Orange Lush I* the plastic tubes, fabrics, wires, pouches, bags, brush and balls have an ambivalent relation to the body: potential coverings, or constraints, or sexual symbols. In *Tianguis II*, the camera slowly perambulates one of the many street markets, its colored plastic sheetings surrounding the empty stalls — orange, yellow, pink, blue — breathing slightly against the sound track of a heart beat.

The first impression in *Tianguis II* is of an entropic emptiness, the stalls void of the colorful mass of merchandise or visible human presence. At the same time this allows the split screen of the video to bring out the geometry of the structures, the sheets of colored plastic, circular cans, rectangular tables and wire



grids. But the sounds are crucial — the indistinct hubbub of the market traders, a siren, and the register of a heart beat, that slows to a deathly pip at the end of the video. The insistent sound of the invisible body, which seems both part of the camera movement and inherent in its object, invades the slightly pulsing plastic cubicles. These are so abstracted that they begin to evoke blood-colored cells, alternately drained of color as the split-screen switches from color to black and white, the city as a living creature which is simultaneously contradicted by the vacant scene. The fragile, temporary market shelters perch among the streets of solid two-story modernist houses, ephemeral as people.

Perhaps it is just one of those instances of objective chance that proliferate in a place like Mexico City, but it seems wholly in spirit that the only legible sign is that on a white building in the street behind the market stalls: “Clínica médica-quirúrgica,” which becomes a fleeting but uncanny accomplice to the heart beat, a reminder of actual bodies monitored and suffering. (Perhaps the orange of *Orange Lush* recalls the orange marigolds that adorn graves on the Day of the Dead.) In terms of messing up or mixing up abstraction, this is a kind of post-phenomenological, “corrupted minimalism.”

Abstract art, the ready-made, the moving image and installation are combined in *Six Steps to Abstraction* whose collage-like incongruity is buried under the bland term “multi-media assemblage.” A series of paintings are stacked against (rather than neatly hung on) the wall, much as I had seen them in her studio in Mexico, partially obscuring one another; the vertical stripes of beautifully modulated color across their



surfaces having no particular beginning or ending or scale. Television monitors are casually floored or parked on their own cardboard containers. Suspended from the ceiling is a tangled mass of pink plastic threads which visually resembled a pot of pink paint flung at the ceiling and physically, a muddled skein. The ends trailing loosely above the paintings seemed an affront to their clean bands of color, in upright stripes. The (lack of) correspondence went both ways: the pink threads might be originary to the canvases, like a jumbled skein drawn into order, or alternatively contaminating the paintings so that what at first appeared carefully regimented surfaces began to disintegrate like a television screen suffering interference. One of the television monitors showed men apparently setting up just such a three-dimensional arrangement of colored threads in a room-space; another monitor showed a typical workshop of the kind characteristic of Mexico City, crowded with tools, open to the street: a small-scale industrial immediacy long-lost to London. Smith described the SLG project as a “melting pot of other works that had been trying to reinterpret and mix up abstraction.”

The formless pink plastic tangle recalled a short text by Georges Bataille, one of the “critical dictionary” entries from his magazine *Documents*, on the word “informe,” or formlessness. This term, Bataille suggests, affronts philosophers who need to be able to categorize, to name and thus give form to things in the world. It is a term that serves to declassify, and what it designates has no rights and “gets crushed like a spider or a worm.” “Informe” is part of Bataille’s attack on the philosophical certainties and linguistic hierarchies



that assert order, but it was also written at a moment when abstraction, or non-objective art, was no longer being seen in absolute opposition to figuration, but was opening up to a world of ambiguities, of potencies, fantasies and metamorphoses. This latter aspect of “informe” touches Smith’s work in that the formlessness of the pink thread is like a collapse of the geometrical and other orders that once governed abstraction.

In 2003 Smith and her partner Rafael Ortega made the video *Spiral City*, a highly personal response to a city they were about to leave and, at the same time, to Robert Smithson’s earthwork and related film, *Spiral Jetty*. Whereas the film of *Spiral Jetty* follows the movement of the artist along the in-turning spiral, Smith’s film plays off the counterpoint of the city grid against the upward movement of the helicopter flying in widening spirals. It was shot all in one take, and the camera produces movement as it turns, a cartwheel effect on the urban grid, with perpendicular streets becoming diagonal on the screen, but the initial perspectival effect evaporates as the camera draws away from the endless and undifferentiated grid formations. If the grid as a form is potentially open, always exceeding its own boundaries, the spiral curve has basically two formations: the equable spiral and the equiangular or logarithmic spiral. In both cases the curve starts from a point of origin and its curvature diminishes as it recedes from that point into infinity. However, it is possible to imagine moving in the opposite direction: into rather than outwards from the spiral. This is the entropic movement in *Spiral Jetty*, in which the artist is filmed running inwards to



the starting point of the spiral, as the camera rises a way from him (and parodied in Damián Ortega's *Hágalo usted mismo: Spiral Jetty* 1993, a miniature version of the earthwork with a toy car at the end of the jetty). Smith's *Spiral Jetty* resembles the spiral target/shield Alfred Jarry drew on the belly of his monstrous anti-hero Ubu, and on the entropic spiral Smithson quotes Samuel Beckett: "I must have got embroiled in a kind of inverted spiral, I mean one the coils of which, instead of widening more and more, grew narrower and narrower and finally, given the kind of space in which I was supposed to evolve, would come to an end for lack of room." In Melanie Smith's film the movement is in the opposite direction, with the camera in flight upwards in a widening spiral movement. Although the film ends in a dazzle of light like *Spiral Jetty*, this has none of the grandiose cosmic references of Smithson's film. There is rather a continuous contradiction between the metaphysical invitation of the ever-widening logarithmic spiral and the paradoxical, insistent enclosure of the grid.

Even from a great height and even as its configurations dissolve in the light, there is no end to this city; this is saturated urbanism, drained of color, no monuments, no green spaces, no river. The starting point was Ixtapalapa, a very poor, satellite city of endless identical streets of low-rise houses. Smith called it "apocalyptic city," but it does not at all resemble those "cities on the move" of the Far East, whose gigantic skyscrapers with rift valleys of streets virtually realize what used to be called the "futuristic" 1960s fantasies of Archigram. It is the megalopolis in the abstract, and the video functions like the dramatic close-ups so



dear to photographers of the 1920s, in bringing to the surface of the image patterns and abstractions normally invisible to the naked eye.

*Spiral City* is not based on construction-heavy interventions in the landscape or the studio, nor does it feature the artist herself – her personal/impersonal trace is the spiral flight recorded in the film, and the material, the urban landscape of a totally non-European city. It is as unlike the European capitals from the air as it is on the ground. Mexico City is an awe-inspiring gigantic urban sprawl filling its volcano-fringed valley, on a scale far surpassing any European city. It is for the European visitor a mass of vivid but half-legible signs, compounded by a deep history (for example, the vast *zócalo*, not this size from modernist aspirations but left over from the mightier central plaza of the Aztecs) and serial rushes of modernization, an ongoing confrontation between capitalist expansion and socio-cultural conditions of huge complexity.

There is nothing sentimental about Smith's pursuit of the modern spectacle in Mexico, the massed aerobics classes, the curiously staged photographs of sado-masochistic scenes in *Farce and Artifice*, dances, the crowded workshops on the streets. No reference to history and the weight of the past. This is modernity of a shattered, intimate, kind, already old, past its expiry date, but always still to happen. While it would not be true to say that the UK has entirely lost its local traditions, handcraft production, inventive popular forms of culture outside the mass media, they are rare and need the eye of a Jeremy Deller to bring them into focus. In Mexico, the markets and small workshops teeming in the streets immediately behind the



gigantic highways produce a quite different relationship between the globalized economy and the make-do and mend world, practical or fantastic, of the ordinary citizen.

In thinking of Smith's responses to modern Mexico largely in terms of the disruptions to aesthetic purities of one kind or another, I found that among the numerous initiatives in abstract art that could be brought in, it was the Russian constructivist and productivist artists with their utopian projects who insistently came to mind. Not simply as polar opposites to a dystopian modernity but because their attempt to re-fashion life in terms of an ideal abstract language, which conflated the object and pure forms, is seen, as it were, through strange mirrors which reverse the movement. This is not to suggest that Smith is in search of pure forms, but that there is a dialectic between form and the stuff of the street that is subtly embedded in the diversity of her mediums.

This somewhat farfetched comparison with the rigorously impersonal constructivists does not, however, allow for the question of the person of the artist herself. In the movement between intimacy and objectivity in much of her work, there is rarely a reference to her identity. *Parres II* came as a complete surprise because it is, apparently, a self-portrait. Like *Parres I*, it is shot in the semi-urban *terrain vague* of Parres, a sub-industrial settlement visible from the highway between Mexico City and Cuernavaca. At the top of the high volcanic ridge that separates the polluted city from the flowering and temperate valley to the south, the road divides, one route leading to Cuernavaca, the other to Tepoztlán, a community with strong indigenous



**Spiral City** cat 33

roots. Tepoztlán is now home to many artists, including Smith and her partner Rafael Ortega, and was successful in a famous battle to retain its autonomy and prevent, among other things, its water being diverted to nourish a Cuernavaca golf course. In these dramas, Parres is forgotten, a non-place of no interest to the thousands who make the mountain crossing every day.

In the film/video, Smith stands alone in a rough yard, facing the camera, which gradually draws back from a close-up of her face, away from her immobile figure while dogs and passers by run to shelter from the tropical downpour, eventually so intense that it almost obliterates her, the intensity of the water operating like the spray-paint in *Parres I* which finally whites out the camera lens. Whether her face is wet with tears or just the rain is impossible to say. The film lasts 3'42", just the length of the song on the soundtrack, which startlingly evokes quite a different world. It is a rural complaint, performed, it seems, by a female English country singer though the protagonist is a young Irish servant clapped in jail for daring to aspire to the hand of his employer's daughter. "When I was young and in my prime..." : the poignancy of this displaced song, with a displaced protagonist of the wrong gender in a distant setting, is virtually indistinguishable from the irony of its context. What I took at first for a self-portrait (literally as the subject of the film, then culturally referenced with an Anglo-Irish song) became a moving, ambiguous and even hilarious play with cultural and political identities.

## URBAN VIEWS



■ Among the words of Nahuatl origin that have been incorporated into everyday speech in central Mexico, *tianguis* is used to designate the street markets, which are often mobile, following a regular cyclical route. Indeed, one of the peculiarities of the informal economy is that the expansion of outdoor markets follows the pattern of ancient commercial structures: street markets are the distant heirs of pre-Colombian and indigenous markets, and continue to be highly significant agents in the distribution of products and foodstuffs in the megalopolis. Their emergence also constitutes the re-functionalization of the street space and a change in its appearance. Generally speaking, markets are set up under pink or red tarpaulins. Seen from the air, the arrangement of these tarpaulins looked to Smith like seams of brilliant color tattooed on the gray fabric of the megalopolis: red veins flowering amid cement and asphalt.

The series of photographs in Smith's *tianguis* depict the plastic of these market ceilings as artificial flowerings in the midst of an unnatural desert: indications of the everyday activity of a city that look like flashes of activity from a distance. The artist has emphasized this vibration by creating mirror images: photographs that create a second composition over the drawing of the street grid. In the end, she has chosen to offer us a completely different interpretation of these temporary structures from ground level, where markets assume the nature of a sculpture with elementary shapes. In all these cases, one is progressively shown the way contemporary urban experience combines the reductionist simplicity of the city fabric as such with the search for the commercial excitement of merchandise. In the video *Tianguis II* (2002), Smith uses two projections, one in color, the other in black and white, to depict the way color (or the sound of electronic toys and electronic alarms) envelops market stalls in a rigidly geometric structure. In this case, the traditional opposition between color and design translates into the distinction between a weak social structure and the artificial means of economic excitement.

In any case, it is surprising that in a city where over half the neighborhoods and constructions were originally unplanned and the result of squatting, the urban sprawl still follows a mostly orthogonal pattern. Unlike other peripheries in Latin America, Mexico City has grown like a series of colossal grids, linked by the axes of old roads transformed into thoroughfares. Likewise, the dwellings that are the result of self-construction display a sort of vernacular functionalism. There is a tendency in informal architecture to strive for both regularity and simplification, partly to economize on building materials and techniques and also to avoid further stylistic contamination.

An austere, basic geometry, born of improvisation and crisis, defines the context of modernization. This means that the visual experience of a modernized setting is defined by a curious balance between rationalization and chaos. This is one of the most significant axes in Smith's art, as she has scoured the social territory in search of the way the city, regardless of prevailing standards in industrial production and mercantile designs, is permeated by a sort of savage minimalism: an aesthetics of masses, repetition, seriality and bodily activation derived from a conception of social space made from blocks and plans. As we have already

seen, this view of the city as a series of expanded sculptures is expressed both in terms of the view and the foreground. The same thing happens at the level of the individual consumer as of the exponential growth of the city.

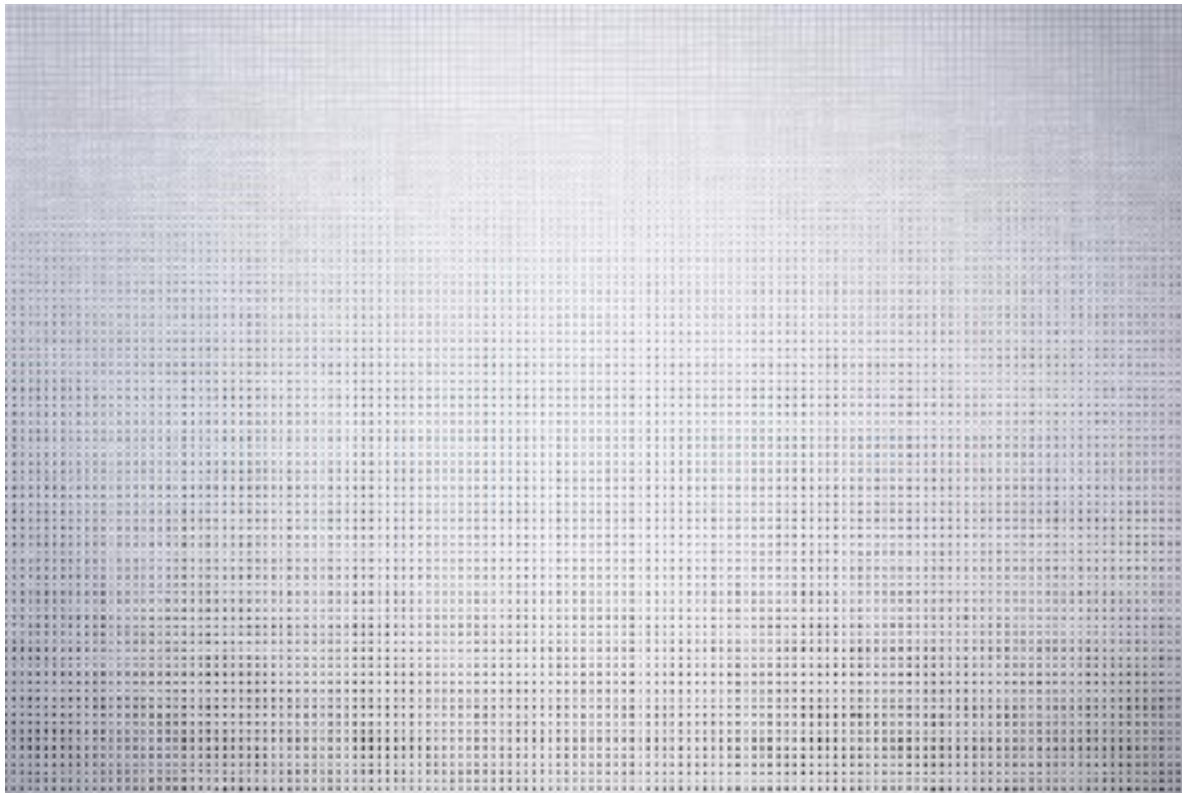
This oscillation between structure and detail also translates into a constant coming and going between the realism of representation and abstraction, which in Smith's work also constitutes a vocabulary that enables one to distinguish various degrees in the relations between image and memory. In Smith, the conceptual variations produced by the distance from the point of view are linked to displacements based on the emotional distance from the representation. The urban is interrogated in these images as much in relation to the visual as it is to its internal duration.

Melanie Smith has used painting to introduce a subjective interpretation into the overall view formulated in *Spiral City*. Rather than seeing it as an independent language, the aim of painting here is to allow the comparison between the visual document and a certain gesture. The urban views Smith has produced on acrylic enamel, which are often painted on panels that are also plastic, intend to compete with photographic printing by removing any manual traces. The brushstrokes have been virtually dissolved on the surface, almost as if to prevent them from distracting us from the emotional temperature of the overview. At the same time, they propose a gradation of detail, by moving either closer to the photographic source or closer to abstraction and even invisibility.

If Smith's paintings of aerial views shift from hyperrealism to the reduction of streets and blocks to an abstract grid, it is because the changes in resolution suggest a transition in the feeling of the landscape. If we agree that all memories are ultimately shadowy, then the notion of a "photographic memory" is partly an abolition of the memory itself. When a souvenir makes the subject feel he or she is once again present in a place or scene, when the sensation of a landscape can be freely evoked without a blemish or a filter, when illusion predominates over memory, the image fails to acquire either depth or texture.

In any case, the function of Smith's painting is to introduce a certain inner timelessness into one's interpretation of the landscape of the megalopolis. In this dialogue between photography and painting, memory is also entropic.















Painting for Spiral City 20 cat 39





**Tianguis Aerial Reflex 1** cat 40













**Vanishing Landscape 2** cat 47

[previous page](#)

**Vanishing Landscape 1** cat 45

**Vanishing Landscape 3** cat 46



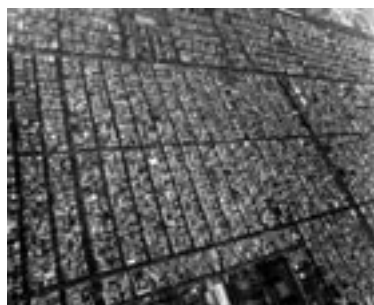




Installation view of floor paintings Marco Noire Contemporary Art, Turin cat 50



Installation view, Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich cat 51





**Photographs for Spiral City** cat 52

following pages

**Woman Folding Clothes** cat 53



APROVECHE

10%

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top left: **Bodyguards** cat 57    top right: **Super Soya** cat 58    bottom: **Oaxtepec** cat 59









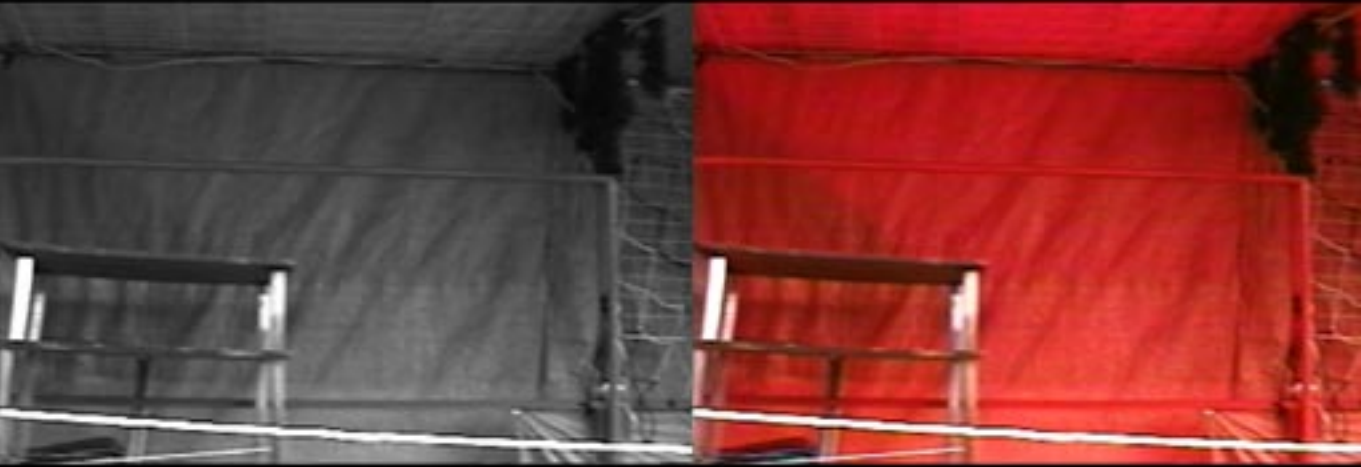
Pink Tianguis cat 61



## MEGAMORPHOSIS

THE WORK OF MELANIE SMITH IN THE URBAN CONTEXT | **Eduardo Abaroa**

In 1988, when Melanie Smith came to Mexico, the country was entering an ambivalent phase. On the one hand, the allure of a free market was beginning to attract certain sectors that felt an extraordinary surge of optimism. But despite the propaganda, people had not forgotten the incumbent president's spurious victory, and regardless of the government's social programs bracketed under the motto of "solidarity," the scaffolding of promises and expectations would soon come tumbling down with the 1994 Zapatista uprising. Together with other immigrant artists like Francis Alÿs and Thomas Glassford, Smith participated in an almost underground art scene in Mexico City, where exhibition spaces were nearly all state-owned and local artists' favorite medium appeared to be painting. Improvised or sporadic exhibition ventures such as Bar 9, la Quiñonera or El Salón des Aztecas, among others, were the site of a lively art milieu, but one that was a long way from the success and professionalization that some of their exponents would achieve ten years later. By then it was common to interpret Mexico City as a dystopian territory. Various postmodern particles were inhaled in the environment along with the smog,



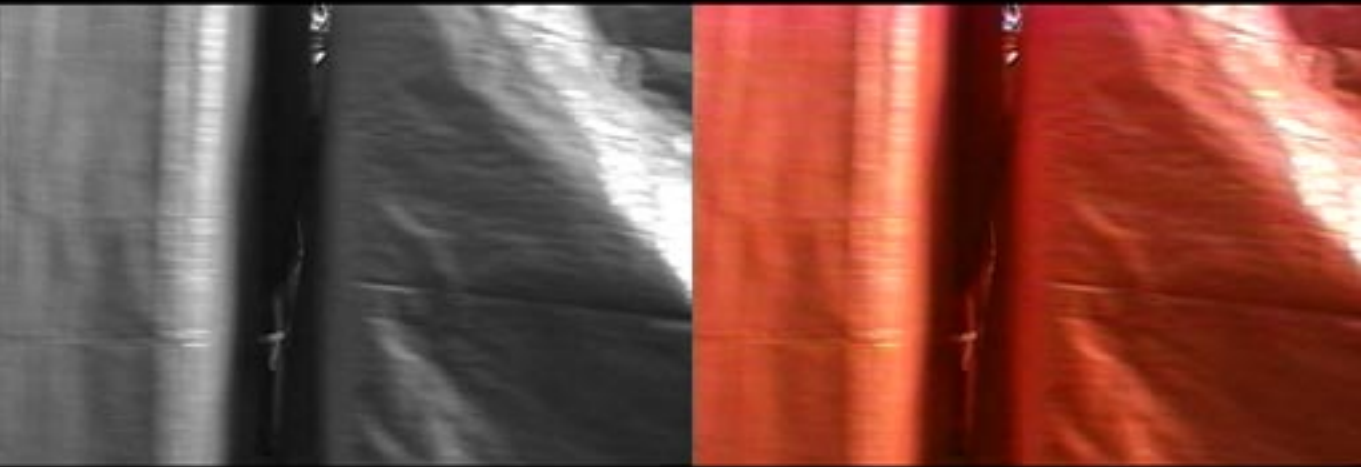
creating a delightful contrast with the modernization proclaimed by politicians. Although Smith was undoubtedly deeply affected by the city and its crowds, its enormous rivers of junk, its signposts with unorthodox spelling, its banality, clandestine aspects, searing injustice...none of this was depicted in any way in her work, which instead provided a material record of these processes of decomposition. Despite what people might think in the future, Melanie Smith's work provides telling evidence of a specific time and place.

The short circuit of "neo-Mexicanist" figuration was not actually a reaction against it; instead, it turned to tone of its blind spots. The questioning of modernity in the painting of Nahum B. Zenil, Julio Galán, Eloy Tarcisio and other artists euphorically attached itself to myths and the more picturesque forms of Mexican imagery as a not-always-lucid alternative to modern sensitivity. Following certain German and Italian colleagues, "neo-Mexican" artists rejected attitudes that smacked even vaguely of avant-garde movements and turned, quite sensibly, to a reflection on nationality. All this might seem too specific, yet it is quite clear



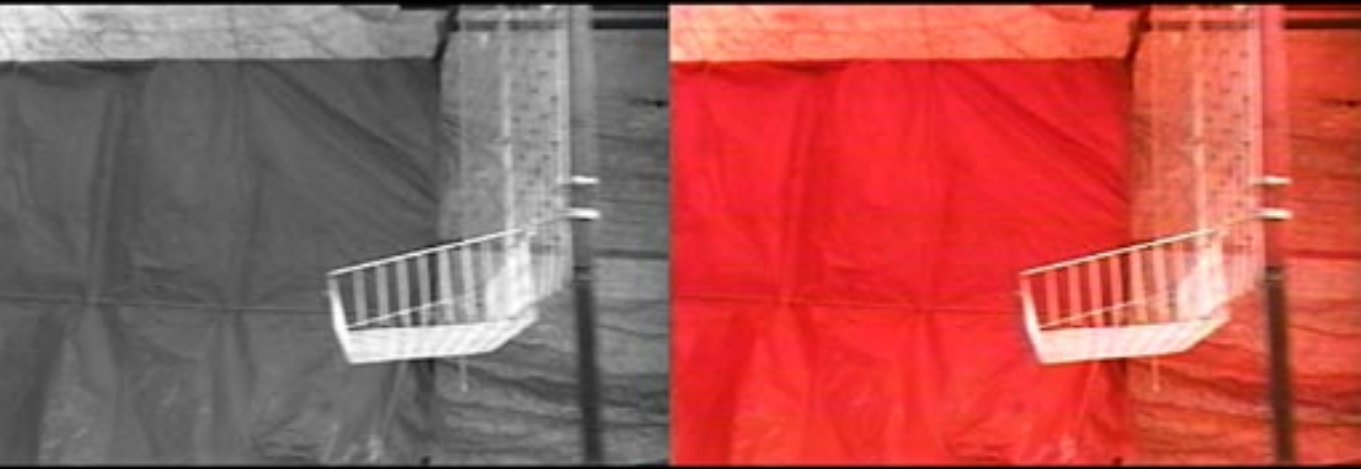
to the close observer that immigrant artists in 1990s Mexico shared some of this sensitivity. In most cases, however, they modified it by understanding the difference between the often sterile nationalism they found and an effective immersion in the rhythms, experiences and processes of the city they had adopted: localism vs. nationalism.

It would have been easy for Smith to adopt an attitude of denunciation or an anthropological approach by devoting herself to documentary photography, for example. The postmodern climate was cautious, to say the least, about this type of approach. Conversely, Smith decided to devote herself to collecting several types of objects she then organized into small sculptures. Polystyrene dolls, pieces of rubber, empty bird cages and so on were rearranged into small metonymies of a city rife with contradictions that had neither the time nor the resources to hide under decoration. Smith gradually began to produce what curator María Guerra called an archaeology of the present, focusing her attention not so much on the folkloric objects so beloved to tourists but rather on those that appeared to be the mute remains of a catastrophe. In time, Smith used the color orange as a lateral selection criterion to explore the urban



setting's variety of materials. The *Orange Lush* series is a vast accumulation of objects, ranging from toys to clothes and sign. She employed this color partly because it was striking, but also took into account the use given to consumer articles in these pieces. A simple arrangement of brightly-colored cones is all that is required to divert traffic or people, and all over the world, hordes of orange-clad workers clean the streets while citizens sleep. Sometimes the use of the objects in *Orange Lush* is festive or whimsical, in other words, it is more fanciful than strictly functional, but it is precisely this space that interests the artist. In her own words, "Most of my work is a sort of festive rebellion in the way it bounces from the overly familiar to the unknown."

The objects chosen are nearly always cheaply made and sometimes even disposable. They would seem to have no value if they are subjected to the ideal criteria of a product in a highly developed society. But the hidden face of the Mexican utopia includes its excessive or banal parties, traffic jams, illnesses and the game of misunderstandings that takes place mindlessly everywhere. As one can see from the *My World* slide show (1995), the personal universe, the direct allusion to the female body and the city's process of



development combine in a flood of stimuli and assemblies. What is left is nothing more than these remains. The resulting effect is sublime, since what one is aiming at cannot be shown.

Smith's work constitutes a suggestion or a question but rarely an argument. The simple "being there" of minimalist art influences her style, although one can still find a virtually imperceptible referentiality that leaves objects in a sort of limbo between saying, presenting and acting. As in the case of the post-minimalist art of Nauman or Serra, we also find greater consideration for the spectator. In Smith's installations, this post-minimalist aspect is already clear, from *Jam Side Up Jam Side Down* (1993), a work made in collaboration with Francis Alÿs, to the recent *Three-Part Yellow Division 2* (2000–2006). These installations also reflect a more emphatic use of design and color that link her work to that of other major British artists such as David Batchelor and Jim Lambie.

Smith began to use photography and video to create resonances and counterpoints with sculptural work, yet her experiments with these media gradually overtook the bluntness of the installations and objects until they became her best-known works. An example of this transition is the *Aerobics Class* video (1996), in which



the energy squandered in this exercise— today's societies' strange investment in body work—is documented with particular attention to its vernacular details and the apparently futile expenditure involved.

Smith's photography focuses mainly on documenting physical spaces with dystopian qualities. Some of the shots take the city's commercial pulse, noting the astonishing accumulations of products by street vendors, supermarkets or various types of shops. As in the aerobics class, the enormous amount of energy spent for questionable purposes is almost dizzying. But her photographs also record empty spaces, nearly abandoned restaurants or, as in *Roma Gym*, the decorative whims of small businessmen. In no case, however, does she record people and their stories, but rather relatively banal places that produce interesting relations in terms of colors and shapes, while referring to the conditions that make them possible, in other words, the battered consumer society whose daily existence eludes classification.

Can Smith's work be understood as a record of functional proto-architectural forms? Functionality is a protagonist in these works, but in any case, it is the showy, ambiguous functionality of the mechanisms of consumer society. To use a simile, in Smith's work, color and shape are like the brilliant coloring of the bee



that indicates its dangerousness or rather like the coloring of certain flies disguised as bees as a form of defense. It is hardly surprising that Smith should have emphasized her interest in this artifice.

If Smith's early work was interpreted locally as part of a movement at variance with painting, her adoption of this medium around 1996 would seem to be a puzzling about-face. It would obviously be a mistake to describe the 1990s in Mexico as a period when artists abandoned painting, but in Smith's case (as with Aljys and Miguel Calderón), the approach to the medium was a tangential one. Smith's paintings do not have exactly the same effect say, as one by Francisco Toledo.

During the first stage, when her palette still referenced the *Orange Lush* series, each painting is named after a famous artist with his or her name Hispanicized, so that Andy Warhol is "Andrés" and Claude Monet is "Claudio". The point here is not to mechanically repeat works as in the appropriations of Sherrie Levine and other artists of the 1980s. These paintings are a sort of shadow, as though someone with no technical skill were trying to reproduce them from memory. This series is far more about forgetting than reproducing an original, although perhaps, in this way, it recovers some of the transgressive force of the works in question. A simulacrum is not defined by exact reproduction but rather by its effectiveness in making the



original irrelevant. Smith may have been thinking about the inevitable influence of contemporary art in a certain context and this was a way of ironically deactivating it. Abstract expressionism and minimalism appeared in orange and since then, the predominant composition feature in Smith's paintings has been an "over all effect." As in Mark Tobey or Jackson Pollock, but without their heroic touches, painting is the idealization of particles and patterns that transcend the framework that evokes them.

Smith's paintings soon went beyond direct references to art history and orange monomania. Her second phase is much more about examining different techniques and the use of geometry and color. The compositions vary stylistically and recall certain trends in abstract or concrete painting, from Frank Stella and Brice Marden to Bridget Riley, but Smith's compositions cover a different register. Smith's paintings do not appear self-sufficient and finished, but rather very strongly feel like fragments that verge on the banal. It is no coincidence that they have been exhibited as *Paintings with No Sense*.

This play places the paintings squarely within the context of the artist's photographs and video research. The resulting effect is more like inebriation than reverie. However hard one tries to find a *leitmotiv* when Smith combines photos with objects, or paintings with sound works, for example, the exercise is one in



which the works dissolve into a *non sequitur* of patterns and materials paralleling mercantile strategies. Abstract painting is merely an attempt to gain access to the essence of things from a position of authority or from a spiritual or scientific point of view. It is an immersion in the visual chaos of the environment and a productive way of repeating it. It is in this sense that Smith's painting maintains a link with the notion of entropy. This is a calculated exercise in dispersion rather than reductionism.

The most telling case of the link between Smith's recent painting and her video work is the piece *Six Steps towards Reality* (2003), made in collaboration with filmmaker Rafael Ortega—it is an attempt to partially reveal the artifice of the making of an abstract film featuring a very classical use of white on white. In another collaborative work, *Six Steps towards a Project* (2003), she recreates the life of a popular Mexican cantina with actors. What the spectator can see is merely the process of filming; the final product is presented in a can. Here personal interactions come to the fore, yet Smith and Ortega have cunningly avoided a documentary presentation, suggesting to the actors that they improvise a previously-stipulated dramatic situation. The spectator is forced to deal with a certain amount of anguish while looking at stories that are repeated or interrupted. The editing continuously blocks the possibility of a linear narration, and



thus, of empathizing with the characters. Oddly enough, it is possible to glimpse something “authentic” in the actors’ frustration and the freshness of their improvisations that sometimes seem totally credible. The point of the exercise is to appraise and clearly depict the problematic nature of the documentary approach.

Mexico City’s grey-market economy is the most obvious example of the social processes that Smith has dealt with in her work. Nowadays, this outlawed activity has become a phenomenon that appears to elude any form of control. This lawless way of life may seem somewhat charming to someone with an anarchic sensibility. Smith, like other artists in the 1990s, was attracted by street vendors as evidence of the non-viability of the Mexican economy and an explicit form of rebellion against the state. She was also seduced by the intensity of the provisional transformation of the urban setting when these vendors gradually invade streets, blocking the traffic and attracting crowds eager for cheap (and possibly stolen) goods. The video *Tianguis II*, made in collaboration with Rafael Ortega, is a constant play on perspective and duplicity. Here we see a double image of a tour of a street market’s empty stalls. Despite the lack of information on the type of business conducted in these portable structures, there is an obvious attempt at comparing these means of illegal distribution with the omnipresence of TV transmission antennae in the city’s life.



The aim is precisely to juxtapose one means of distribution with another. Smith has also documented the emergence of these markets from the air, perhaps resorting to a biological metaphor of the infection of the state's body.

Another collaboration between Smith and Ortega is the video *Spiral City* (2002), an outward-spiralling aerial tour of Mexico City referring to Robert Smithson's famous spiral. The city's irregular outlines are rendered in black and white, emphasizing the sculptural features of the houses and buildings. It is difficult to see what is going on here, since the image is presented practically like an oneiric obstacle. Emphasis is obviously placed on the almost hypnotic effect of these patterns, not so much on what could be a statistical or critical study of the city. *Spiral City* appears to be a macroscopic view of the setting of Smith's chaotic forays over several years of work.



## Tianguis II cat 62

During this time, Melanie Smith has had a major influence on local artists, not only through her work but also through teaching and her participation in exhibition spaces such as Mel's Café and Temístocles 44. This desire to encompass everything has exerted a valuable influence over her contemporaries. On the one hand, Smith deals with Mexico City's unbearable psycho-social chaos by using the pragmatic approach of commonplace attitudes and narratives. At the same time, she is one of the leading figures in the break with traditional schools that focused on specific media and their craft in favor of a wide range of previously unthinkable processes. Her immersion in the transmillennial, globalized transformation of the human colony can be seen as an adventure in criticism and erosion, but also as an aesthetic statement about the intangible future of contemporary societies.





# ANATOMY OF ABSTRACTION

■ It is no longer self-evident what we mean when we say “abstraction” or in what sense “the abstract” operates in relation to other forms of art practice. Firstly, to merely oppose the figurative and recognizable with the abstract or visually pure no longer seems to apply, given our growing refinement about the referential capacity of works of art. Unlike modernist artists and theorists, we do not conceive of abstraction today as the depiction of non-representative experience. On the contrary, we have become extremely adept at finding several ways of denoting, alluding to, mentioning or signifying the complexity of reality in precisely the works that have least to do with the production of an illusion of experience. In the words of Alex Potts:

(...) if abstraction goes against the usual way we interpret visual images as naturalistic signs of objects seen in the real world, it also entails a new self-awareness of the processes of visual signification (...) By trying to determine “what” it is we see so straightforwardly, this “what” inevitably turns into something more than the inert physical datum in front of us. Painting therefore acts as an intriguing sign.”<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the notion of the “abstract” continues to be decisive in discussing a work such as Smith’s once we strip it of the idea of an uncontaminated gaze. The abstract, as something that is minimal or conceptual, is increasingly an aesthetic range of artificiality, a means of production. Instead of promising a primary language that is alien, prior or lodged in the interstices of culture, the abstract has become a perfectly controllable form of illusion, in other words, a technique.

In recent years, Smith has collaborated with filmmaker Rafael Ortega on a series of projects that attempt to derive an aesthetic interest from exposing the mechanisms of production. The title of the series suggests concern over the loss of the aura of artistic creation: *Six Steps towards...* is certainly a cliché title associated with dozens of business, language, handicrafts, dance or therapy manuals that promise readers they will be able to master a technique with the least possible effort, in this case by teaching them the “tricks of the trade.”

Despite the fact that the *Six Steps* series usually includes variations on the “behind the scenes” documentary genre, these collaborations do not only try to reveal the fabricated nature of contemporary art making. Instead, Smith and Ortega attempt to induce a comparative pleasure, in which the way one makes something is aesthetically more important than what is actually made. Indeed, in *Six Steps towards Reality* (2002), Smith and Ortega compare a film in which we are faced with a series of visual events in white: the changes of light on a sphere, the transformation of a relief of vertical lines, the progression in space of a series of ring-shaped perforations and the behavior of a corner in an empty, undetermined room. The film

<sup>1</sup> Alex Potts, “Sign” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff eds., Chicago/London, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp. 23–24.

creates a play of references regarding the tradition of the monochrome in modern art: from Malevich's white square on white to Robert Ryman's painterly accumulations to the sculptural experiments of neo-Concrete artists and minimalists. This purity is called into doubt in an adjacent video on a monitor, where Smith reveals the teamwork through which Ortega records these effects on camera. This dissection, however, reveals a certain pleasure, by transforming the tricks of the trade into an object of contemplation.

This point of view becomes even more pronounced in the multi-channel presentation of *Six Steps towards a Project* (2005). Smith has produced a detailed video of the film crew responsible for staging a real event for a movie camera: a dramatization with various voices and scenes at the Covadonga cantina in Mexico City. The documentary depicts every step of the interaction between the directors, actors and crew and the careful construction of a sequence. The final product, however, is omitted entirely. Smith and Ortega filmed the scene but decided to leave it in a latent state, enclosed in its canister without being developed. In both cases, what we are offered is a subsidiary experience to "the work": the dissection of the experience instead of a straightforward aesthetic.

This can of undeveloped film is a sort of allegory of the experience of Smith's work as a whole. A key element in Melanie Smith's art is that the experience she offers lacks an obvious focal point. Her work has an aesthetic of oblique, expansive effects that describe an elusive moment in everyday life and question the meaning of the idea of "art making." Characteristically, the elements and structures Smith has abstracted, concentrated and reformulated in her works, are reverted onto experience, drawing our attention to features of consumer goods, elements of the city's structure and the surface and color of everyday objects.

On the one hand, Smith's work constantly questions the artificiality and informality of art making as such. Just as Smith has avoided stating the identity of the specific media she uses, her work also continuously questions the processes involved in its creation. On the other hand, Smith tends to expect viewers to perceive a more general sort of aesthetic reverberation in her work, rather than a definitive construction.

In a work so interested in vicarious experiences, it should not surprise us that the work regards itself as an accessory experience: an attempt to reveal the fluctuating, transitory and deceptive experience of modernized things. The fact that Smith uses various strategies to thwart our habit of placing "the work" in the center of visibility is linked to anticipating a peripheral aesthetic relationship. It not only involves having interacted with the phenomenology that clarified a city on the periphery, but also entails placing the work of art at a blind spot in our visual field, as an object whose presence should not be underestimated simply because it is offered to us obliquely.



## SIX STEPS TOWARDS ABSTRACTION (2002)

A two-channel video projection divided into six parts of paired sequences. It is shown with six paintings (in a separate room) which are taken directly from the sequences. All the material is filmed in mini-DV and transferred to video.

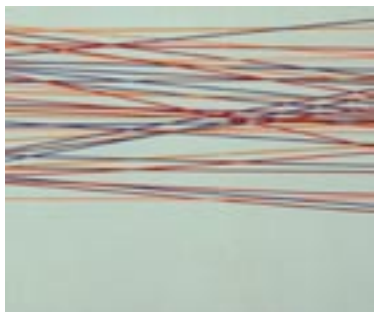
### VIDEO

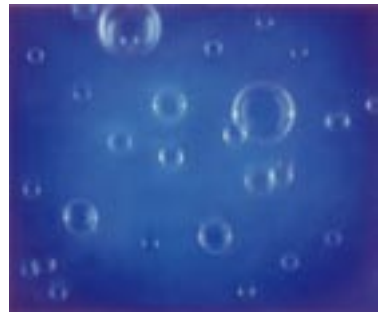
1. Abstract painting and waiting room. In this scene the abstract painting reproduces the same sensation of emptiness that the waiting room has. The absence of message becomes the signifier.
2. Blurred colors and unpiling clutter. The image on the left is formed by all the objects that the woman is taking out of the corridor (right image) spinning round and round by the effect of the camera. The sensation of unwanted obstacles in a neverending cycle.
3. Threading string and conversation. A conversation between two men about how to cover a small pink stool with new material. They discuss which colours would be appropriate and why, how etc. The conversation reaches unnecessary complication whilst, at the same time, on the left screen, two men weave colored threads on a horizontal plane, referring to the painted surface and its complexity.

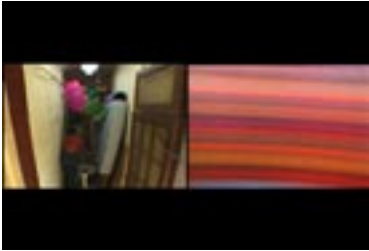
4. Headlights and gas tanks. The tail lights and headlights of cars in night traffic are interrupted on the left-hand screen by a red bubble-like object moving. The bubble eventually bursts to reveal a depressingly common reality.
5. Lights and gym. Walking on a treadmill, the footsteps of a young woman in a gym start to coincide with the repetitive sounds of music and disco lights, symptomatic of an inescapable cycle.
6. Bubbles and man talking. The man on the left screen is talking about a series of events that have absolutely no sense or consequence. This alludes to the absurd sense of conversation and language itself, as a stream of silent bubbles pass on the right screen.

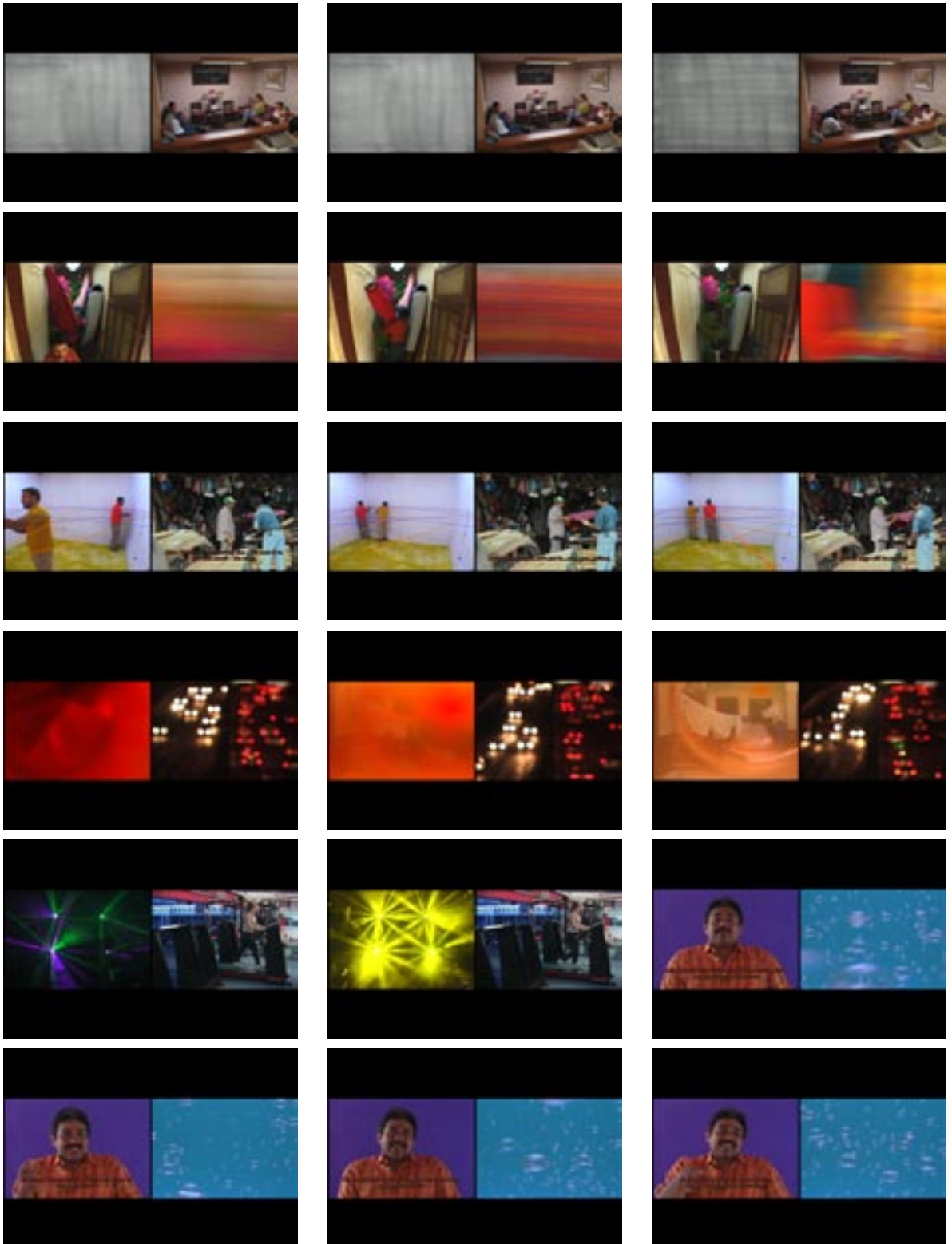
In this piece, the abstract language is informed by a banal act, or vice-versa, which in turn comes back to the question of painting, itself a banal and monotonous act. For every pair of actions/scenes there is a corresponding painting, which in themselves become hyperreal transcriptions of an abstract image (the paintings are all taken from video stills — see images). However the filming of the act, translated to video, becomes a witness or document, whereas painting represents a live act or imprint.

M.S. (2002)









Video stills from **Six Steps to Abstraction** cat 65

## **SIX STEPS TOWARDS REALITY (2002)**

Melanie Smith and Rafael Ortega

This project was originally shown at the Laboratorio Arte Alameda in Mexico City. The process was filmed entirely in fifteen hours in the artists' studio in Tepoztlán, Morelos.

On entering the video installation the viewer is confronted with a series of six white, silently-projected images made from maquettes that, appear to be computer animations on the screen. The fact that they are only small hand-made objects widens the gap between their supposed perfection and the act of crafting that appearance, by filming on high-quality stock and eliminating any sense of imperfection through the camera. These images filmed in Super-16mm are projected at base of approximately five meters.

At the same time as he or she sees the white images, the viewer is aware of sounds of talking, banging, and laughing coming from a small monitor facing the corner of the exhibition space. The sequences on the monitor come from the process of making the white images, i.e. the day of filming, with the equipment, photographer, team of workers etc., although in the documentation we only catch glimpses of the camera and what they are actually doing, and the connection between the two opposed images is not obvious to the spectator at first sight.

In this dichotomy, the act of "making" becomes as important as the final product usually shown in the pristine art space. As in so many cases in the

context of contemporary art, seemingly effortless reductionist surfaces are achieved through skill and hours of intense labor. The slog and grind of making something so pure for aesthetic purposes, and the absurd act of art practice and work itself come into play here. The reference to a modernist notion of reductionism and purism is especially pertinent in Mexico, where aesthetic ornamentation seems irrelevant when compared to the question of daily routine and struggle.

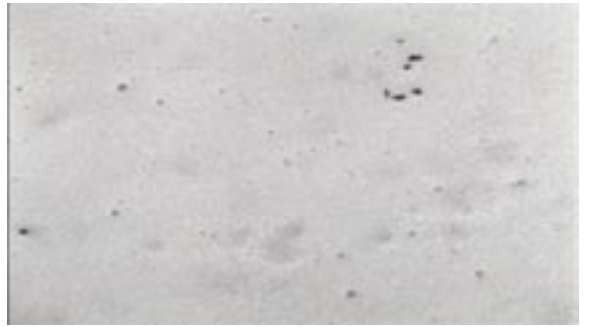
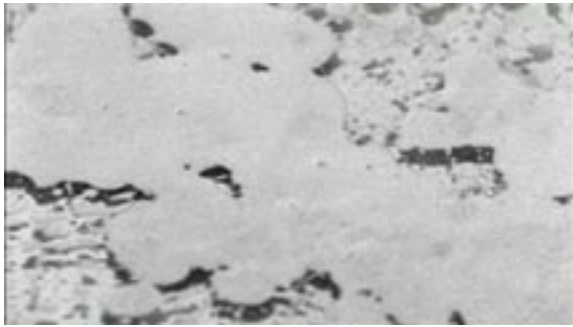
As part of the project, six large-format photographs of the white images were taken. In addition, there is a series of digital photo prints taken from the process of filming. These eventually are to be shown in a different space, as documentation.

**Projection** Super-16mm film transferred to video. Exhibition copy, DVD. DVD player with component output. Projector 4,000 ansi/lumen, with component input. NO sound.

**Monitor** Mini-DV transferred to VHS. Exhibition copy VHS. VHS with auto-rewind and stereo output. 25-inch monitor. Stereo amplifier and 2 large speakers (90 cm high).

M.S. & R.O. 2002

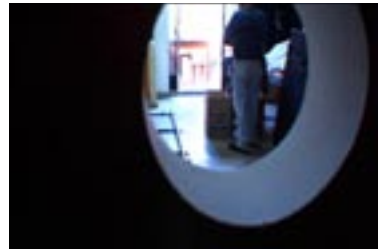


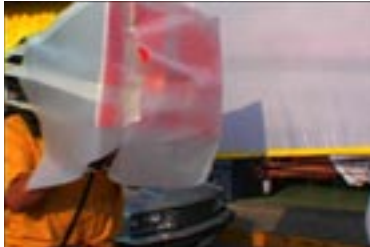


**Six Steps to Reality** cat 66









Six Steps to Reality cat 68

## SIX STEPS TO A PROJECT (2003)

A collaboration between Melanie Smith and Rafael Ortega  
Duration 35 min. (in demo only 5 min. appears)  
Three synchronized DVD projections  
35mm transferred to video  
mini-DV transferred to video  
35mm film leader ends transferred to video

This project is the third in a series of six projects relating the undercurrents of abstraction to a concrete situation. It reveals the mechanics of process rather than the product, and at the same time exposes the absurdity of art practice itself, by cutting the content before it appears. *Six Steps to a Project* is a project about a project, which in effect doesn't materialize.

A group of people (extras from a casting agency) are called to participate in a film scene in a bar. They are told that the rehearsal will last five hours, at the end of which the scene will reproduce a one-minute slice of "real life" from the bar.

### **Action** (as told to the extras)

1 minute of action in real time.

Several tables of men in a bar – playing dominos, drinking and talking. Two waiters start the action crossing in front of the bar, with trays. They pass by various tables attending the customers. One man gets up from the table, walking towards the bathroom, visibly in need of the toilet. Another two men enter the bar and sit down at the far end. A man in his thirties gets up from a conversation, seemingly bothered. In a corner, a group of young men are intensely talking, whilst a group of older men are waiting to eat at a set table.

The result of that day of filming is to be shown as three projections in the same room, with accompanying documentation, photos, and an unprocessed roll of film, etc., nearby.

### **Projection 1 – 35mm**

Empty bar, no action – just the sound of the overhead fans and the flickering television.

### **Projection 2 – mini-DV**

A series of one-minute sequences of the extras rehearsing the scene at their various tables, incorporating movement of the waiters and bar conversation. These sequences involve the director, artists and photographer and assistants used in making the project. The scenes finish when the clapperboard indicates “ACTION” to roll camera (i. e. the 35mm camera).

### **Projection 3 – film tail ends**

A mixture of film leader heads and tails (used normally at the beginning and end of a roll of film) were joined together.

As a result, a series of scratches, numbers, blobs, roll markings and lines, together with the sound of a projector suggest a pending beginning, or countdown to a film that never materializes.

The undeveloped exposed film might be shown in a vitrine along the videos, protected inside its can, as evidence of its existence.

**Exhibition copies**      All DVD

**Exhibition equipment**    1 DVD synchronizer  
3 DVD players with component output and sync capability  
3 video projectors 4,000 ansi/lumen each; component input  
3 audio amplifiers  
6 speakers

M.S. & R. O. (2003)



## SIX STEPS TO A PROJECT DIALOGUE

### 1.

—Are we all here? Hello, good morning. I'm Salvador, this is Rafael, Melanie and Miguel.

—We're doing an experimental short film.

—We're doing one minute of action in the bar.

—We're all going to be actors.

—Part of the experiment is that we're all going to invent, each one of us — their (the characters) stories, and why they got here, what they're thinking.

—That's the idea — we're all going to be actors. It's like an event, the idea is that we invent the stories of the characters that we're going to play, for that time in the bar. There won't be any outstanding action. Most of the time you'll be sitting down. Let's say what we're inventing are the conversations at

the tables. At this table they're talking about tits, at this one football. We'll just see as we go. But the truth is nothing happens.

### 2.

—Well for the time being, you can...

—Black trousers okay.

—Why don't you change, uuh.. the white shirt — the black trousers.

—Is it too light?

—That's fine, yes. Grey is fine. We'll have to make changes.

—For the time being — that shirt.

—Did you bring another jacket? All black. All the tables are going to be different, so maybe I won't



**Six Steps to a Project** cat 69

put you all together because of the colors, we'll see in a minute.

### 3.

—We'll start with you on this side and you on the other. We're going to do a cross-over. The idea is that we're going to do the whole action and then, at the end of exactly one minute, we're going to have to do the crossover again with the same elements. You see? You start with three beers, you leave them on the bar, you take your order, you come back, and take them over there, and we'll have three bottles of beer for you over there, so that at the end of the minute you do the crossover again with the same three. You too, At the end of the minute we'll cross

over again, with the beers on the tray, in the same position. Now we've got to have the same position for you.

### 4.

—Ready waiters? ACTION! You come round the back of the bar. The dirty things are here. You put it here, grab the beers and go over there. You come out over here.

### 5.

—320. 85. You're in the frame. There's a table over there that we should sort out quickly.

—It's going to be the table...think in terms of what we've got now. We need something white.



—That could be here or there. Now we're overlapping. Maybe it's better over here. Which tables had those? Let's put those first. Let's put...it's better over there. Ready, and ACTION!

—I need you to pay me. Understand it's not my fault, it's the country's fault I'm in trouble.

—I was happy to lend you the money.

—This meeting is to figure something out.

—Well, I've got the solution. I'm going to absorb the debt. I'll pay him and I'll take charge of the business.

—Yes, but under what conditions?

—Under the condition that I'll absorb the debt. We'll replan the business,

—40

—I'm trying to, hmm...you won't be left out, on the contrary. You'll be involved...In the best of cases.

—50

—I'll help you.

—But I'm losing everything.

—You managed the building badly.

—CUT!

## 6.

—Let's do something. While we set the tables up, let's go back to the moment when we came in with our things. Imagine we're a group, over here, with the suits and everything, waiting to take our position. We'll be taking photos, or let's say, the characters we're playing in the story will be, and you're all waiting to enter into, let's say, the world of fiction.

—Okay, cheers to the girls!

—What happened then?

—Do you remember that girl from yesterday?

—No, but the hot one, the one that went to your house that day.



—Yeah, that one, the blonde with the red skirt.

—Yeah, with that damn bra...

—Yeah, the one at the party, who had tits like...

—Yeah, I really liked her. She's got great legs.

—I'll tell you something. Well, yeah, we did it yesterday. Do you remember when you went with Pepe? Yeah, I got to it, and to make a long story short...

—That can't be. She was mine.

—I snogged her and wham! Yeah... cheers!

—Yeah... cheers to the girls

—She's got tits like... and you've got the cheek to tell me to my face!

—I didn't know.

—Is that it?

7.

—We'll put the empties and mark them. We'll set all the tables, and before the take we'll put them...

8.

—Here, suppose it's a weekday. You escaped from the office. In the morning you didn't want to work: you just wanted to come and drink and play dominos. You don't care about the job.

—You don't have to rehearse that!

—So the theme is work.

—You're co-workers — things aren't good.

—Women.

—We'll stick to the work theme. You've got a job that, even if you go, there's not much work to do. Things are quiet. You're not owners of a business. You work in an office. You can get off easily. What you wanted to do is come here to drink.



8.

—ACTION!

—Pancho those drinks please. We'll bring you a snack, sir. Okay, let's remember where we were. We've got to create the tension that you break because you go to the toilet. Then we've got a moment with you two. You arrive. Let's try it then.

—Dad, I want to know why we're getting together.

—Ready and... rolling.

9.

—ACTION!

—Pancho, those drinks please. We'll bring you a snack, sir. Good afternoon, what would you like? The same as usual?

—Okay, if you got us together here to sort something out... this is the only chance you've got...

—Precisely, that's why I brought you here, to talk

about this problem. Mother's sick because of you fighting.

—Yeah, but mum can go to see a psychologist, okay? The point is to try to figure this out. A psychologist does help. Wait a minute, okay? We're old enough to have to deal with it: you're over thirty... and we'll both have to do something. We're the problem.

—CUT!

—Easy man! You're with me.

—They're going to throw me out.

—They can't throw you out, they know me.

—I always, come here... here comes the waiter

—Good afternoon, the usual?

—Of course, what do you want to drink?

—Don't ask for *rompope*, or one of those girly drinks. Bring two, and make them stiff.

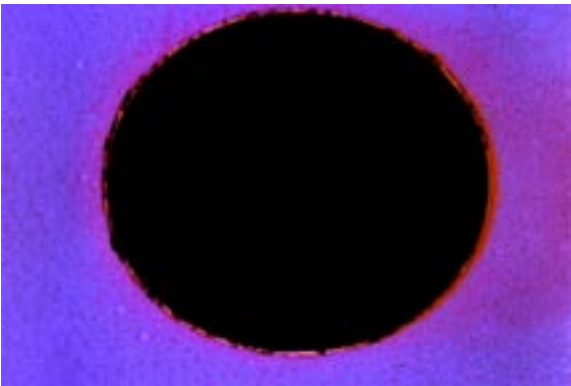
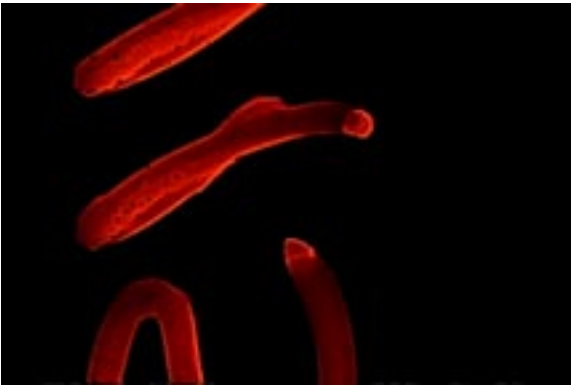
—You're older even than that guy sitting by himself. Shit, man! Get yourself together, shit man, shit!



**Six Steps to a Project** cat 70

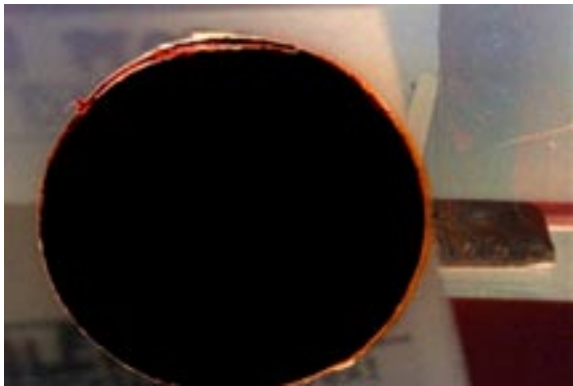
—No, no, no  
 —Chill out, chill out man. You just do what I do. Or what I would do.  
 —The story here is that you're under-age. This is your first time here. You're like a kid on unfamiliar ground. You're nervous about getting thrown out. You'll speak to the waiters.  
 —WAITER! Oh, he didn't even notice me.  
 —We're going to do the whole scene.  
 —Ready and ACTION!  
 —Damn those people aren't coming. Waiters... Damn it!  
 —Those drinks please, Pancho.  
 —Good afternoon, we'll bring you your drinks. Good afternoon. A snack? One second.  
 —30  
 —Everything Okay?  
 —ACTION!

—I need you to pay me.  
 —I want you to understand... the situation... Look at me. You're doing the same thing to me.  
 —The meeting is to solve things figure something out.  
 —I've got the solution. I'm going to absorb your debt, and I'll stay with the business while we cover...  
 —Go sit with her. You'll be eating. Someone here, and one there, and one over there. What happened is that you lent him money. You can't pay him, and you're worried about it, you want to pay him, but you don't have it. You're very close friends, but you're really angry with him. You want to wring his neck. Now, since they're both friends, you're in the middle of it. You've come to the bar to eat and drink because you're nervous, and you're trying to smooth things over. Think about that while we set the tables, and then we'll do individual rehearsals.



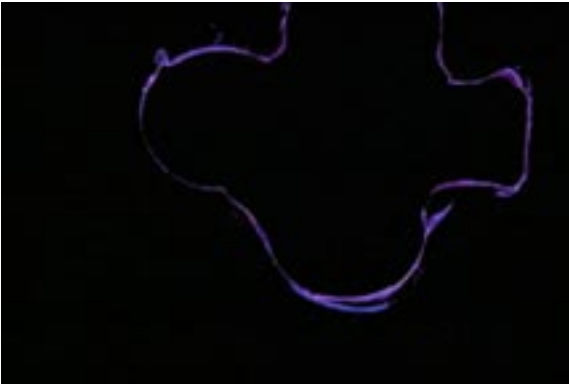
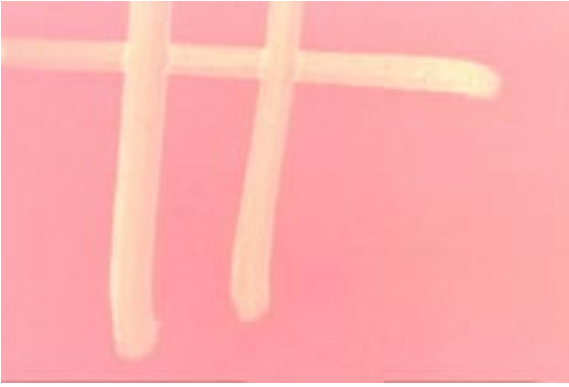
—Get me those drinks  
 —Yes, okay.  
 —Tom Collins and a screwdriver, table three.  
 —Okay table three?  
 —Yes, just a moment I'll be with you in a minute  
 —You've got it.  
 —Pancho, tonics for table two and five beers for table four.  
 —I'll be with you in a second.  
 —ACTION!  
 —Hold it, I've got to take a leak.  
 —Don't be long. The situation's the same. What ever...the situation's difficult.  
 —We'll see where you stop. When you tell them you're going to the bathroom...  
 —You already told them. Now, without explanation.

—You'd told them before.  
 —You get up and go.  
 —Hold it, I've got to take a leak.  
 —WAITER!  
 —He doesn't live here. He doesn't know what's going on here.  
 —Where were we?  
 —When are you two brothers going to get along?  
 —A shrink won't help my mother. Shrinks are dangerous. What would help is if we deal with it; we're not five years-old anymore. He has to understand as much as I do. We're not children we have to come to some sort of agreement.  
 —Testing, testing, two, four, six, twenty, twenty. Ready and ACTION!  
 —A Tom Collins and a screwdriver for table three.



—Okay? Everything Okay? Anything else?  
—Could I have some cigarettes?  
—Sure, just a moment. Just a moment.  
—CUT!  
—Here well... put it over there. The story here is that you're a bunch of horny guys.  
—Oh! You don't have to pretend.  
—You wake up and the first thing you think of is where you're going to get it, and if you don't — jerking off. That's the only thing on your mind. It's the only thing that exists in the world.  
—And if it doesn't happen?  
—We could invent a competition between the two of you. You're virgins, you've never had sex. But you pretend you have.  
—We'll put empties and mark them. We'll set all the

tables... and before the take, we'll put them...  
—ACTION!  
—Your turn, your turn.  
—Move it mate!  
—This is for today!  
—The secretary told me, yes.  
—Yes. Come on.  
—Since you're not working today and you're not going on Friday, it's going to be tough!  
—He'll get you. I bet he'll fire you.  
—Come on, hurry up.  
—You'll see  
—Alright, alright.  
—Less talk, more play.  
—Your turn. I told you, so what?  
—You're very slow.



—Are we going on Friday?  
 —I told you.  
 —Will there be girls?  
 —Alright I won..  
 —No, that's cheating.  
 —WAITER!  
 —A tequila. A tequila and a snack, please. Say something.  
 —What did you think of those women then? What about the blonde?  
 —Very tit-tit-titillating, isn't she? She looks like the TIT-anic.  
 —Ready.  
 —Concentrate, please.  
 —ACTION!

—We'll do this one as if we were ready, running sound, running... yes.  
 —Ready and... ready, camera, and ACTION!  
 —It's going to be called *Six Steps to a Project*.  
 —Is it in the frame? I need to put it here, underneath. To level it.  
 —I've got to level this. Let's lower this foot. Lower, lower — more over there.  
 —Up a bit... there it is. Okay, Chavo, the set's all yours.  
 —Should we do one last test?  
 —We're going to do a rehearsal with the clapperboard, running sound and camera, and it'll be...  
 —We're going to do it with the clapperboard as if it were...



**Six Steps to a Project** cat 71

—As if it were...  
 —Here too.  
 —Only with the clapperboard, no, better not.  
 —Yes, okay, don't put it in now. So it only goes in once.  
 —Ready gentlemen.  
 —We're in the bar.  
 —Ready and ACTION!  
 —There it is, thank you.  
 —Red?  
 —That doesn't bother me.  
 —When I say "rolling sound," you say, "rolling."  
 —Closer, closer, more, more,... lower... there.  
 —Ready.  
 —Silence, please. Concentrate for a second.

—Silence, please. Is sound ready?  
 —Rolling.  
 —No — ready, ready.  
 —Ready sound... rolling.  
 —*Six Steps to a Project.*  
 —Scene one, take one, roll one.  
 —Camera!

## **FARCE AND ARTIFICE. NOTE OF INTENT**

(For Pip)

*Farce and Artifice* is a performance and slide show that resulted from a slowly developing idea, which started with the appearance of some 5 x 7 color photographs in a junk market in Mexico City. The photos attracted me, but for a long time I could not think of anything to do with them. They seemed too much like a unit in themselves, and to simply reproduce them seemed too lazy. Every now and then I would drag them out and show them to people, to see their comments or if we could work out where they came from. It seemed that they were photos taken from performances of experimental theater groups that existed in Mexico City in the 1970s or 80s, which probably had a certain sexual or gender intention. The photos are undeniably theatrical; they are inexplicably sexually charged, at the same time comical and underlyingly truly violent.

At one point, friend and curator Pip Day saw the photographs and felt them similarly intriguing. We had several attempts at trying to pinpoint some kind of narrative that could (or could not) have related to the images. All the small details of the photos seemed to be more interesting than the subject itself, and thus the “punctum” of these images became a point of departure for making a narrative that revealed a personal reaction towards the photos as document or testament of an unknown event, that I did not witness.

In 2005, these images were the point of departure for a work involving a platform, the images and a salsa class, which was presented in a group show

at the MARCO (Contemporary art Museum in Monterrey). I was trying to expand and translate the feeling of awkwardness and estrangement that the images provoked in me. The dance class as a performance becomes the physical manifestation of the uneasiness provoked by the slide projection and narrative. It was important to have somebody who was obviously a foreigner (an outsider) and also uncomfortable with latin rhythm (yet not myself), so that the student would always appear out of sync and rigid. I volunteered Pip ( now I think she had no choice) to be the student who would be taught salsa steps by Noe, a Cuban musician and salsa teacher who also had a natural sense of rhythm and timing.

Latino music demands an intuitive response – something I was denying when scrutinizing the photographs. I wanted to exploit the use of performance as a mechanic to force a “predetermined” catharsis, which seemed like a contradiction, given the impossibility of trying to learn to dance through imagined written instructions. In effect, I was setting a task that was doomed to failure.

Pip's role in the performance became a window through which I became a voyeur onto my “own mediated self.” She took on all my uneasiness, and over-exercized mental deliberation. She was forced to be caught off-guard in an hour of labored steps and clumsiness, in which the performance served as a kind of theatrical backdrop and a means by which to expose the artifice of reason.

M.S. (2005–2006)



## **NARRATIVE FOR *FARCE AND ARTIFICE*** (heard through headphones)

I couldn't even say that I loved them. I wasn't sitting down to contemplate them. I wasn't engulfing myself in them. I was sorting them out, but none seemed to be really right, neither as a photographic performance nor as a narrative compendium. If I were ever to show them to friends, I could doubt that these photographs would mean anything. What I know of these photographs is that they have no link to my existence.

### **Enter Salsa music**

I want to turn the photograph over, to enter into the paper's depth. I have been living in the illusion that if I scratch the surface of the image long enough to accede to what is behind, I will finally reach the other side and make true what is visible. But this has not happened.



### Concept 10 / Cross-body lead

STEPS	LEADER
1, 2, 3	Forward on left foot, then quarter turn to left and step to left on left foot.
4, 5, 6	Step slightly back on right foot, then turn quarter turn to left, and step forward on left foot, then bring right foot forward to close position.

Yet among these photographs that I collected, selected, evaluated, approved and exhibited, and which have thereby passed through the filter of culture, I realize that some provoked tiny jabs (however harmless the subject may have appeared), as if they referred to a stilled center in myself, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself. On the other hand, I was so indifferent to others that, by dint of seeing them multiplied, like some weed, I felt a strong aversion to them.



## Concept 2 / Holds

Standard etiquette says that the follower decides how close to get to the leader when dancing in close hold. She indicates her preferred distance in a subtle but unmistakable way, like pushing against the leader when she feels he is coming too close. The leader then maintains the distance set by the follower. (Some women I've spoken to say they prefer it when the man forces them close, presumably because this indicates that the man finds them attractive. However, a leader who forces a woman close when she doesn't want to be forced is likely to cause offense.)

I don't fall for the sensuous. I fall for the spectacle, the shock; the theater. I can't read the plot. The plot exists but it doesn't make sense—it goes round on itself.

Fade to:



### Concept 17 / Hook turn and double free spin

STEPS	LEADER
4	Step slightly to right on right foot.
5	Rock on left foot and twist to left, with arms thrown back to left.
6	Twist quickly to right transferring weight to right foot, swinging arms around, and then bring them close to body to add to turning momentum. Perform a full spin on this step.
1	Transfer weight to left foot momentarily for balance. Twist right foot so it points diagonally to right and back.
2	Transfer weight to right foot and perform another full turn.
3	Lift arms and transfer weight to left foot to stop spin. Left foot may be extended slightly to left to aid in balancing and stopping.
4, 5, 6	Basic (break back on right, etc.).

To avoid dizziness while spinning, look at partner for as long as possible, then snap head around and look at him or her again from the other direction.



### **Leader's double free spin to right**

The erotic overtone within the plot is laughable, and yet within this farce it permits me to recognize the desire of the unspeakable that wants to be spoken. I know that these photographs are not real, but they are alive and because of that, delusion makes me attribute to reality an eternal value, and by shifting this reality to the past they print an unerasable history.

It is through the filter of history that I am interested in these photographs. They are stuck in a time-warp that I have no reference to: also the sourcelessness of the acquisition of the images. I cannot grasp the context, only guess, for it is my lack of grounding that prevents me from being able to participate in these scenes.

Fade to:



## Salsa music

I feel like an outsider, not privy to the spectacle.

I can think of these photographs as if I had taken them. In that case, what would be the motive? There's something makeshift and non-permanent about them, like a document or witness of an ephemeral performance. Something non-professional, which is appealing, it's not tight, the scenography is very haphazard, the stage is very impermanent, the characters seem to have dragged out their own wardrobe selection: amateur theater at its best. The look is always potentially crazy; it is at once the effect of madness. These people are genuinely faking it, genuinely having fun, but then again, I hate having fun. Not that the image is immoral, irreligious, or diabolic, because when generalized this theater completely de-realizes the human world of conflict and desires, under cover of illustrating it. But of course that's wrong, of course I think of them as immoral, irreligious and diabolic, that's why I like them, that's what irks me. They take me out of my nauseated boredom of trying to be myself. If only I could get rid of these images, and try to save immediate desire as desire without mediation.

Fade to:



#### Pattern 4

STEPS	LEADER
1, 2, 3	Cross body, with firm right hand to right-hand single hold.
4, 5, 6	Cross body, spinning follower into cuddle, leader to left of follower, her right hand on her right shoulder and holding her right hand. Check follower's turn with left hand.
1, 2, 3	Basic. Gently push follower forward on step 3 with left arm, to initiate outside turn.
4, 5, 6	Sidestep to right, turning follower with right hand and performing 1/4 left turn of your own.



**Farce and Artifice** cat 72

These photographs cannot say what they let us see, but it's also true I can say nothing about these photos.









## MONOCHROME AND BEYOND

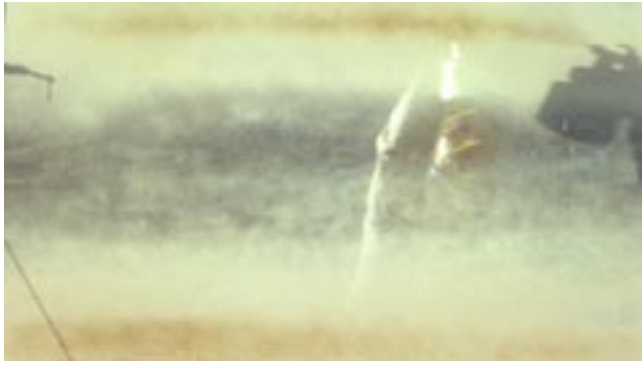












# CATALOGUE

**cat 1**

**Jam Side Up Jam Side Down** 1992  
[in collaboration with Francis Alijs]  
Mixed media, vinyl, plywood  
240 x 600 x 250 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

**cat 2**

**Orange Lush I** 1994  
Plastic objects on foam and plywood  
244 x 124 x 25.5cm  
courtesy of OMR Gallery

**cat 3**

**Orange Lush III** 1994  
Plastic objects, galvanized metal,  
fluorescent lights  
222 x 141 x 164cm  
UNAM Collection, Mexico City

**cat 4**

**Brice** 1994  
Oil on canvas  
180 x 180 cm  
Damián and Paloma Fraser

**cat 5**

**Claudio** 1994  
Oil and wax on canvas  
180 x180 cm  
Patricia Ortiz Monasterio and Jaime  
Riestra

**cat 6**

**Green Lush** 1998  
Plastic leaves, balloons and objects,  
fluorescent lights  
244 x 300 x 25cm  
UNAM Collection, Mexico City

**cat 7, 8****above**

**Footballer** 1999  
Collage on MDF  
70 x 50cm  
Courtesy of the artist and OMR

**below**

**Flash** 1999  
Collage on MDF  
70 x 50 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and OMR

**cat 9, 10, 11, 12****top left**

**599** 1999  
Collage on MDF  
70 x 50cm  
Courtesy of the artist and OMR

**top right**

**Winter Collection** 1999  
Collage on MDF  
70 x 50cm  
Courtesy of the artist and OMR

**bottom left**

**This Sporty Little Compact  
is Loaded** 1999  
Collage on MDF  
70 x 50 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and OMR

**bottom right**

**Nike** 1999  
Collage on MDF  
70 x 50 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and OMR

**cat 13, 14****above and below**

**Hiperconsumismo Tropicana  
Mix 2** 1996 – installation view  
Video games, video projection and  
monitor, plastic objects, carpet,  
acrylic, balloons  
Courtesy of the artist

**cat 15**

**My World** 1995  
Slide projection of sixty, 35mm slides  
Projection size variable  
Courtesy of the artist

**cat 16**

**Painting for Six Steps to  
Abstraction 2** 2004  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
240 x 180 cm

**cat 17**

**Miopia (Painting for Six Steps to  
Abstraction)**  
Acrylic enamel on MDF  
80 x 70 cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery

**cat 18**

**Concrete Jungle** 2000  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
120 x 140 cm  
Courtesy of Peter Kilchmann Gallery

**cat 19**

**Sunset in Acapulco**  
Acrylic enamel on MDF  
120 x 140cm  
Courtesy of Peter Kilchmann Gallery

**cat 20**

**Painting for Six Steps to Abstraction 1**  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
240 x 180 cm

**cat 21**

**Painting for Six Steps to Abstraction 3**  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
240 x180 cm

**cat 22**

Installation view, Peter Kilchmann  
Gallery, Zurich 2001

**cat 23**

Installation view, Peter Kilchmann  
Gallery, Zurich 2001

**cat 24**

Installation view, Tamayo Museum  
Mexico City 2004  
Tate Modern Collection

**cat 25, 26****above**

**Tupperware** 2002  
C-print  
28 x 41 cm  
Courtesy OMR Gallery and Peter  
Kilchmann

**bottom**

**Globos** 2002  
C-print  
28 x 41 cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery and Peter  
Kilchmann

**cat 27**

**Conjunto** 2002  
C-print  
28 x 41 cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery and Peter  
Kilchmann

**cat 28, 29****above**

**Florero** 2002  
C-print  
28 x 41 cm  
Courtesy OMR Gallery and Peter  
Kilchmann

**below**

**Frutas de plástico** 2002  
C-print  
28 x 41 cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery and Peter  
Kilchmann

**cat 30, 31****above**

**Muñeco con cesto** 2002  
C-print  
28 x 41 cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery and Peter  
Kilchmann

**below**

**Tres ollas** 2002  
C- Print  
28 x 41 cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery and Peter  
Kilchmann

**cat 32**

**Aerobics Class** 1995  
Hi-8 transferred to mini-DV  
55 min.  
Courtesy of the artist and OMR Gallery

**cat 33**

**Spiral City** 2002  
Betacam S.P.  
5:50 min.  
Daros Latin America, Jumex and Vergel collections

**cat 34**

**Painting for Spiral City 1** 2002  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
200 x 300cm  
Jumex Collection

**cat 35**

**Painting for Spiral City 2** 2002  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
200 x 300 cm  
Michael and Carmen Krichman Collection

**cat 36**

**Painting for Spiral City 6** 2003  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
160 x 140 cm

**cat 37**

**Painting for Spiral City 5** 2003  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
160 x 140 cm  
Harold & Jamie Stream Collection

**cat 38**

**Painting for Spiral City 19** 2004  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
240 x180 cm  
Fran Levy Collection

**cat 39**

**Painting for Spiral City 20** 2004  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
240 x180 cm  
Jill Greenwald Collection

**cat 40**

**Tianguis Aerial Reflex 1** 2003  
Digital print  
107 x 224.8cm

**cat 41**

**Painting for Spiral City 15** 2004  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
140 x 160 cm  
Alejandro & Martha Gomez Collection

**cat 42**

**Painting for Spiral City 17** 2004  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
140 x 160 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

**cat 43**

**Painting for Spiral City 16** 2004  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
140 x 160 cm  
Edward Tyler Naham Collection

**cat 44**

**Painting for Spiral City 18** 2004  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
140 x 160 cm  
Vergel Foundation

**cat 45, 46**

**above**

**Vanishing Landscape 1** 2005  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
150 x 180 cm  
Wendy and Steven Langman Collection

**below**

**Vanishing Landscape 3** 2005  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
150 x 180 cm  
Jim Pallotta Collection

**cat 47**

**Vanishing Landscape 2** 2005  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
150 x 180cm  
Tiqui Atencio Collection

**cat 48**

**Vanishing Landscape 3 [color]** 2006  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
150 x 180 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

**cat 49**

**Vanishing Landscape 2 [color]** 2006  
Acrylic enamel on Perspex  
150 x 180 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Peter Kilchmann Gallery

**cat 50**

Installation view of floor paintings, Marco Noire Contemporary Art, Turin 2003

**cat 51**

Installation view, Peter Kilchmann Gallery, Zurich 2005

**cat 52**

**Photographs for Spiral City** 2002  
Black and white gelatin prints from series 1, 2 and 3  
Jumex, Vergel, Daros Latin America collections among others

**cat 53**

**Woman folding clothes** 1996  
C-print  
127 x 127 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and OMR

**cat 54, 55, 56**

**above**

**Comercial Mexicana** 2000  
C-print  
127 x 145cm  
Gabriela Lopez Rocha Collection

**bottom left**

**Tianguis** 1996  
C-print  
127 x 127 cm  
Private collection

**bottom right**

**Tasqueña** 1996  
C-print  
127 x127cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery

**cat 57, 58, 59**

**top left**

**Bodyguards** 1995  
C-print  
127 x 127cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery

**top right**

**Super Soya** 1995  
C-print  
127 x 127 cm  
Chuck Ramirez Collection

**bottom**

**Oaxtepec** 1996  
C-print  
127 x 127 cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery

**cat 60**

**Tianguis Aerial 1-4** 2003  
4 C-prints  
127 x 152 cm  
MOMA Collection, among others

**cat 61**

**Pink Tianguis** 2003  
Digital print  
51 x 61 cm  
Courtesy of OMR Gallery

**cat 62**

**Tianguis 2 DVD** 2003  
Mini DV  
5:15 min.  
Cisneros Foundation, Vergel Foundation

**cat 63**

**Glorieta Insurgentes DVD** 1998  
Hi-8  
15:40 min.  
Courtesy of the artist

**cat 64**

**Six Steps to Abstraction** 2001  
Video projection, six paintings and collage  
Paintings 100 x 120 cm each  
Collage 65 x 81 cm each  
Video 17 min.  
Courtesy of Peter Kilchmann

**cat 65**

Video stills from **Six Steps to Abstraction** 2001  
Projection size 240 cm base line

**cat 66**

**Six Steps to Reality DVD** 2002  
[in collaboration with Rafael Ortega]  
Super-16 mm and mini-DV  
Projection 4:25 min.  
Monitor 20 min.  
San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art,  
and Jumex Collections

**cat 67**

Installation view of **Six Steps to Reality** 2002  
[in collaboration with Rafael Ortega]

**cat 68**

**Six Steps to Reality** 2002  
[in collaboration with Rafael Ortega]  
Photographs of filming process

**cat 69**

**Six Steps to a Project** 2003  
[in collaboration with Rafael Ortega]  
3 DVD projections  
36 min.  
This cat 35mm transferred to video  
Courtesy of the artist

**cat 70**

**Six Steps to a Project** 2003  
[in collaboration with Rafael Ortega]  
3 DVD projections  
This cat mini-DV transferred to video

**cat 71**

**Six Steps to a Project** 2003  
[in collaboration with Rafael Ortega]  
3 DVD projections  
This cat tail ends of film transferred to video

**cat 72**

**Farce and Artifice** 2004  
Performance and documentation  
with two performers, slide projection,  
record player, headphones  
Courtesy of the artist

**cat 73**

**Farce and Artifice** 2004  
40 slides used in performance

**cat 74**

**Parres 1** 2004  
[in collaboration with Rafael Ortega]  
35mm transferred to video  
4:20 min.  
Diane and Bruce Halle Collection

**SPIRAL CITY AND OTHER VICARIOUS PLEASURES**









Installation and detail of **Farce and Artifice** (version 2006)

















**Jumex Foundation/Collection** is proud to be part of Melanie Smith's exhibition *Spiral City and Other Vicarious Pleasures*, as her work has now been in our collection for several years.

The works by Smith that form part of the Jumex Collection exemplify her detailed observation of her objects of study. Pieces like *Photographs for Spiral City 1, 3 & 4*, the video of *Spiral City, Concrete Jungle 5, Concrete Jungle* and *Vanishing Landscape 6* (this last piece is included in the present exhibition) are representative of this artist's political language, in the sense of the greek meaning of *polis*.

Since her arrival in Mexico City in 1989, we have kept abreast of Melanie Smith's art practice, which incorporates iconic elements that reveal the complex social, political, economic and cultural layers of our city. The visual elements of her paintings, photographs and videos allude to the psychology of a city whose identity has been affected by new economic models homogenizing individualities. It has been Smith's concern to examine urban territories in a game that mingles the artificial with the natural, surface with essence.

Through a political gesture and also an aesthetic one, Melanie Smith manipulates variables to point out to what often lurks behind the scene, what remains concealed, what is other.

We at the Jumex Foundation/Collection feel that we need to get involved in our artists' working process; we always want to be able to collaborate with them in order to spark new experiences that may allow us to enjoy art.

Eugenio López Alonso  
President  
Jumex Foundation/Collection

Special thanks to Francisco Rivera, as a friend and dedicated painter, and without whom I would not have been able to work.

Thanks to: Rafael, Oliver, Mila, Philip and Ann for their support and patience.

Cuauhtémoc for years of blurb and chat.

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To Thomas, Francis, Pip, Jay, Olivier, Claudia, Silvia for being there and to María Guerra — still in my memory.

**SPIRALCITY**  
& OTHER VICARIOUS  
PLEASURES