

Inhabiting pictures : on Luisa Lambri's artistic practice

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INHABITING PICTURES:
ON LUISA LAMBRI'S
ARTISTIC PRACTICE
Simona Ferrari

«The body of possible experiences creates architecture, and in a similar way, I like to think this is also true for images.»⁽¹⁾

For the Italian artist Luisa Lambri, born in Como in 1969 and trained in the humanities at the Universities of Milan and Bologna, architecture simply exists as the physical setting in which we find ourselves in. As the backdrop of life, architecture enables the artist «to talk about experiences, emotions, desires.»⁽²⁾ It is precisely the experience of certain places that defines the crucial point of departure for Lambri to begin taking pictures. Images of empty interiors—largely of houses—portraying windows, corridors or threshold spaces are the evidence of her time spent at a given location. Lambri's focus is not on the individual that stands in front of the camera but on the one «behind» it, in other words, the artist herself: The interior becomes a metaphor for introspection. This relationship does not fall into a private realm, thus the viewer's gaze finds its place somewhere between the space of the picture and the artist's own gaze.

While Lambri's *modus operandi* could be described as a quite straightforward documentation of carefully selected locations, in the end her images seem to move away from the specificity of these very places. Although we are occasionally able to recognize details of well-known buildings, these seem to have lost spatial and temporal coordinates, as if they had become part of a mental space that oscillates between the familiar and the unknown. Lodging amidst these apparent paradoxes, Luisa Lambri's oeuvre may offer clues for attempting to measure the distance between physical space and the image's space.

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Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman and Agnes Martin are some of the artists that Lambri acknowledges as main sources of inspiration, situating her practice within a lineage of female artists differently preoccupied with questions of identity and self-representation, that explore a certain symbiosis between oneself and the space, and pursue a non-figurative investigation of the inner self.

Understandably, Lambri distances herself from architectural photography and other artistic practices that elect architecture as a subject matter. Yet, by offering an account of spatial experiences—by rendering architectural space as a «place»—her pictures eventually provide a valid counterpoint to typical images of architecture, despite being conceptually apart. Rather than a subject, architecture is a «vehicle» for Lambri, who describes her act of taking pictures as the documentation of a performance, which is the artist herself experiencing a space. Thus, sequences of seemingly identical photos simply record her presence and bodily interaction within a site. Behind the images' character of immobility which conveys a sense of duration, the artist constantly moves at her will between various architectural contexts—from the buildings of Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn in India to those of Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil, to the interiors of Alvar Aalto in Finland or by Kazuyo Sejima in Japan, among others. The sense of abstraction in her pictures overcomes the specificity of each location, allowing Lambri to interconnect the images as if these were part of one ideal, continuous journey—suggesting that buildings

are truly meaningful to us not because they are inscribed into an official history, but as they shape our own personal one.

Indeed, Lambri's biography has a particular account regarding her initiation to architecture, having as a child attended the Asilo Sant'Elia, built by Giuseppe Terragni in Como. The rationalist kindergarten is in fact one of the first signature buildings that Lambri approached with her camera, moving away from the more anonymous interiors and hallways she had previously worked with. Photographed for the first time in 1997, she returned again two years later, when for the Venice Biennale of 1999 Harald Szeemann asked Lambri to look at her own biography. The work *Untitled (Soli-trac Series)* produced for the occasion, comprises a series of pictures and a film. In the latter, views of the kindergarten are combined together with footage of another building by Terragni, the Casa del Fascio, with the two buildings merging with each other suggesting a third, possible reality.⁽³⁾

Lambri's relationship with modernism is another element that juxtaposes her images' narrative: While she rejects its ideology,⁽⁴⁾ she instead focuses on its very spaces, which provide the artist with an ideal spatial setting for her affinity with its aesthetic and simple geometries. Along with it, the close bond between the realm of picture making and modernism—particularly American modernism—is inevitably present: A context in which Lambri has operated, having resided in Los Angeles and photographed numerous modernist houses in the United States, and whose images she is well aware of. Lambri's responses to these environments and their iconic pictures are partial views of interiors whose programmatic transparency is overcome by vegetation, light or condensation. Turning their perimeters into opaque surfaces, Lambri unveils vulnerable spaces, repositories of memories and aspirations: Celebrations of positivism and objectivity leave space for uncertainty and subjectivity.

In a way, her photographs like those of Philip Johnson's Menil House, resonate with the empty interiors that the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi depicted of his apartment, in which the atmosphere of desaturated, secondary views seem to transcend the reality of the spaces portrayed, suggesting a state of being. As if there was an elusive significance suspended somewhere beyond the places themselves that we strive to grasp.

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While locations are disclosed between parentheses in the titles, the temporal dimensions of Lambri's visions dwell in more ambiguous territory. Her pictures do not seem to be either just a record of the sites' immediate past or simply a visual account of Lambri's own memories of them. Escaping the notion for which a photograph is naturally confined within a past realm, her pictures rather seem to belong to a realm of <possibilities>: Something that remains inscribed within an ideal sphere, until it is actually fulfilled.

Instead of bringing the artist back to the places she had been photographing, the images seem to take her elsewhere. Rather than being a partial account of a bigger reality, the photographs appear to be the necessary element for Lambri to fulfil an experience of space, that in itself was incomplete. As Agnes Martin suggests «experiences recalled are generally more satisfying



Untitled (Menil House, #04), 2002



Untitled (Menil House, #10), 2002

and enlightening than the original experience. It is in fact the only way to know one's whole response». ⁽⁵⁾

It is also a sense of absence that triggers the whole process and a feeling of loss finally remains in the pictures—besides the more apparent absence of any image's subject. «When I take photographs, I realize that there is not really a precise idea to follow apart from some emotion. On the contrary, the starting point is absolutely a basic insecurity, like walking, looking for something you cannot find and trying to find it, knowing that you will not find it.» ⁽⁶⁾ Eventually, the pictures attempt to make visible «something» that we would not be able to see otherwise, and that might as well still not appear so obvious in the photographs themselves, as it is something we can feel rather than see.

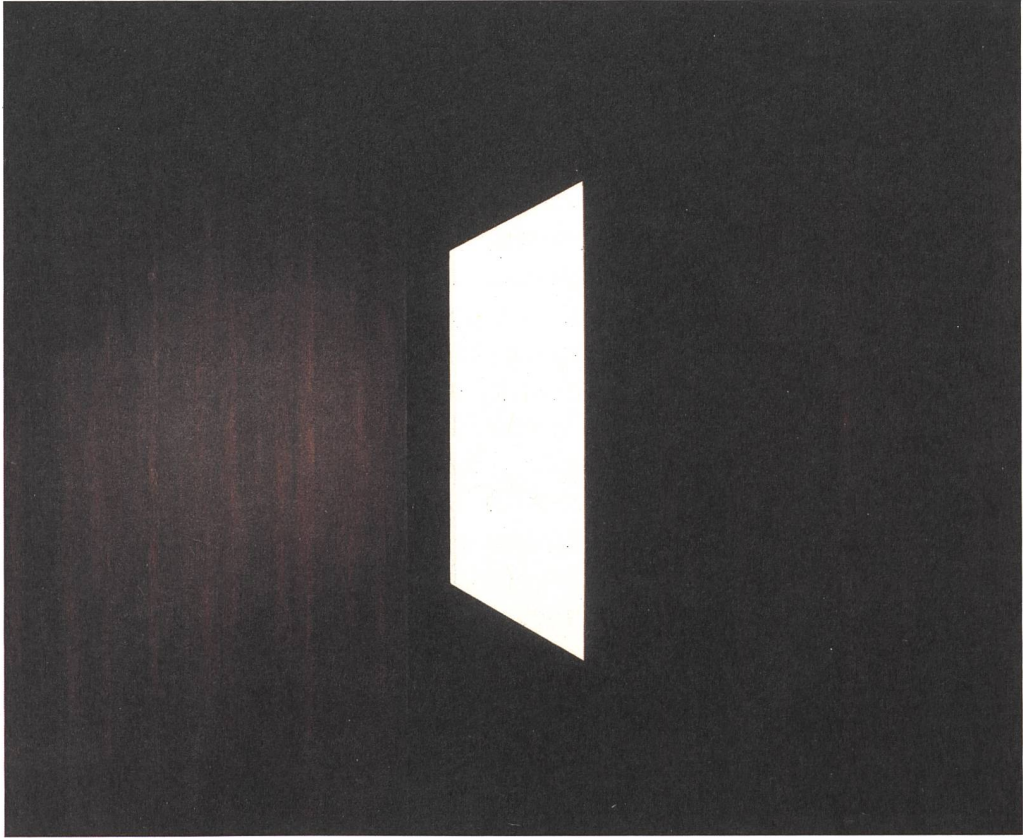
While Giovanni Battista Piranesi crafted his *Carceri d'Invenzione* with his imagination, Lambri uses the photographic image to «appropriate» physical reality and to bring it back to the realm of ideas, suggesting a possible dimension: «In a certain sense my position is close to that of Le Corbusier's use of photos in his magazine, *L'Esprit Nouveau*: he used to elaborate the photographs of his buildings to a point where they would not reflect the actual buildings anymore, but rather his idea of architecture. Through his retouched photographs, Le Corbusier was proposing «another» kind of architecture, in which projected space coincided with photographic space. I take the photographic space as a starting point to register a virtual, a potential space.» ⁽⁷⁾

Ultimately, a «possibility» is also what the earlier mentioned film *Untitled (Soli-trac Series)* advances as an homage to *Solitrac*, a work by Gina Pane of 1968: «Gina Pane's film is an autobiographical story—we see the protagonist, who is in fact the artist's alter ego, struggling to leave a room by opening doors and windows in the vain attempt to get outside. In *Solitrac* the architecture slowly becomes a trap from which she can only escape by her own death. [...] In my film different views are associated and mixed, transforming architecture into a personal stream of consciousness [...] So, whereas in the original film death becomes the only escape, in my «remake» I've been trying to bring life to those old spaces. Gina Pane's movie was about death, mine should be about escaping death through potentiality.» ⁽⁸⁾

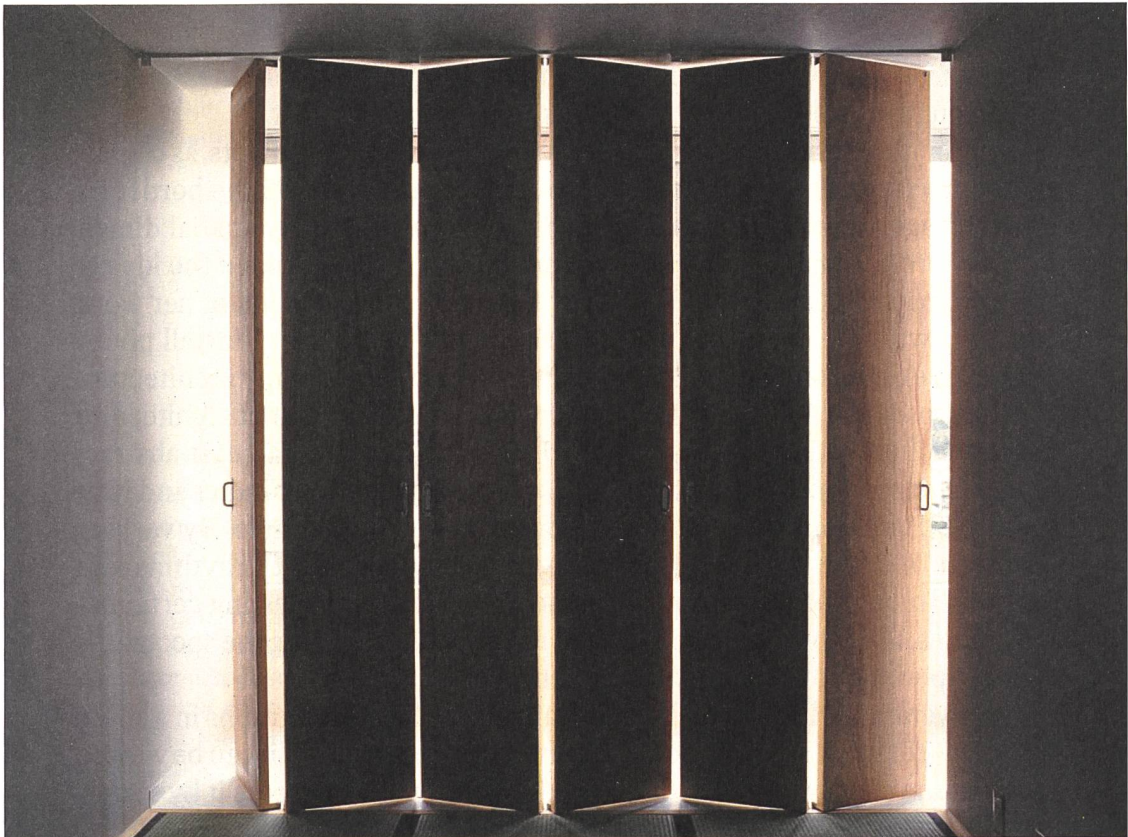
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Lambri's oeuvre is informed by a vast array of artistic references encompassing installations, paintings and sculptures. Her photographs themselves often trace both visual and conceptual connections to artworks, so that, for example, some of her images of Sejima's buildings intersect with her memories of Josef Albers' paintings or Sol LeWitt's wall drawings. Artworks themselves have eventually also become the very subject of her recent images. While photography is not necessarily at the core of Lambri's artistic interests, the photographic image has instead remained an essential component of her practice—we could advance—not so much for its ability to document reality, but rather for the way it allows to move away from it, enabling Lambri to craft her own vision.

By focusing on partial scenes of interiors and avoiding exterior views capturing images of buildings, the frames of her images perform like windows opening up onto a parallel dimension. In Lambri's photographs—shot with



Untitled
(House in a Plum Grove, #02), 2004



Untitled
(Gifu Apartments), 2000

a slight wide-angle lens—the frame is not necessarily the element manifesting the artist's gaze, as her presence is suggested in a subtler manner through almost endless sequences of pictures recording her slight movements or actions like opening of windows, doors or closets. The frame is not even the margin that defines an area of interest—a so-called subject. Rather, the frame—as the limit of the photographic space—functions above all like a «liberating gesture», cutting the ties between image and physical reality. Occasionally, locations are framed in such a way that architectural spaces are translated by the artist into nearly abstract compositions.

Indeed, Lambri is not interested in the illusionistic quality of a photograph, but rather in its «surface» which allows her to craft the pictures in layers. Thus, upon the image of a space Lambri casts her own memories and emotional responses to it, overlapping with the place's own history and the architect's vision. The characteristic «invisibility»⁽⁹⁾ of the photographic surface—contrary to the one of paintings—allows these strata to merge upon each other on the picture plane, without any aspect of technicality or materiality interposing between them. Such invisibility is also what allows the viewer, in the end, to project themselves in the photographs in a very intuitive way, rather than in an intellectual one.

Even though diagonal views are often preferred to frontal ones, a sense of flatness characterizes Lambri's images and in the end our gaze is never allowed to cross the opaque surfaces of the pictures. The artist's ultimate intention is not to create spaces within the pictures that could become a counterpart to the three-dimensional reality she had been photographing. Rather, the space of the picture should remain within the realm of images and it should be read as such. In fact, for Lambri it has always been first and foremost about a dialogue among images:⁽¹⁰⁾ Images have informed her practice and shaped her cultural background, images have introduced her to the places she would eventually visit, influencing her perception of them. Hence, it is through images that her synthesis should manifest itself.

For the artist the photographs—viewed as tangible artifacts, as objects with a precise scale within a space—have a potential to cross the border between imagery and reality, thereby generating an alternative spatial dimension. Over the course of her career, Lambri has come to «expand the idea of photography to the notion of an environment»⁽¹¹⁾ when installing her work, engaging with the exhibition space as a specific site. «When I install photographs in exhibition spaces I try to do it in such a way that my architecture superimposes itself on the existing one, in order to create another architecture and a new perception of the space.»⁽¹²⁾ Her arrangement of a quasi-abstract body of images depicting skylights of houses by Lautner, Schindler and Neutra at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles offers an example. By varying distances and heights among the images, Lambri generates rhythms and tensions among the photos and with the gallery itself, suggesting certain atmospheres, thus shaping the exhibition rooms and expanding the spectator's visual experience to a more complex sensory one.

Eventually, it is through the installation of her photographs in a space that Lambri's work seems to come full circle, in the sense that it can be viewed much in the same way as it is conceived: The viewer can access it by simply inhabiting, not only the space of a picture, but a «space of pictures».