Claire Hooper

HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

Claire Hooper's *Nach Spandau* (To Spandau), 2008, is a video to watch alone. It follows the nearly empty U7 subway line in Berlin, station after station, in a fifty-three-minute series of short sequences on HDV. Each shot sooner or later lingers for a few seconds on some brief, motionless image, usually concentrating on the architectural details of each station; the overall result is an alternating pattern of wall-size moving images followed by often beautiful moments of stillness. *Nach Spandau* becomes a claustrophobic road movie that provokes a hypnotic curiosity about each next frame in its sequence of strange architectural details—the "Aztec"-style tiling; the Egyptianesque columns; the rows of rounded bulbs along empty train tracks reminiscent of an oversize Hollywood vanity mirror—whose pretensions toward high design would normally go unnoticed amid the general squalor of the station.

The U7 stations were designed by architectural engineer Rainer G. Rümmler starting in 1971—a moment that probably did not, in retrospect, boast the most defensible of design tastes. Rümmler was evidently given terrifying amounts of freedom in concocting his windowless urban landscapes, which combine the functionalist confidence of late modernism (banks of plastic molded seating shining under fluorescent tubing) with some misguided forays into po-mo extravagance: decorative brickwork contrasting with bold stripes of black-and-white tiling, or a newspaper kiosk masquerading as a miniature country cottage. Rümmler, a man who clearly loved his job, became masterfully conversant in this unchecked language of urban pastiche. He continued for some thirteen years on his ongoing project, station after newly built station, taking up where he left off "like a jigsaw puzzle at Christmas," as Hooper describes it in a statement accompanying the show. Yet Rümmler's grandiose and relentless civic imagination fades into an unnoticeable background today—it cannot visually compete, for example, with the eye-catching H&M ads plastered everywhere that combine magnificent young models with some of the cheapest clothing in retail. For all its Art Deco–like lighting fixtures and mint green tiles, this is an oddly invisible architecture. Hooper's technique of panning briefly before resting on a single design feature suggests a searching gaze that finds and then relishes the pervasive decoration that, as we discover via the video, lies hidden everywhere.

Tunneling around beneath Berlin brings up the city's ghosts; the relative freedom as well as the isolation of West Berlin during the decades in which Rümmler was working are somehow conjured by this architectural havoc. Watching *Nach Spandau*, alone in the gallery, one's own solitude links with that of the two unseen protagonists of the film: the artist, in her lonesome wandering among stations whose emptiness is disturbed only by the occasional screech of braking trains; and the architect, with his solipsistic compulsion to create eccentric yet forgotten urban decor.

—*Gilda Williams*

Claire Hooper, *Nach Spandau* (To Spandau), 2008, still from a color video, 53 minutes.

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