

## THE TALLEST, THE MOST SUPERLATIVE

THE TALLEST, the title given by Rebecca Ann Tess to her video work, conveys the central paradox that unites the objects she portrays: the towers vying to be the world's tallest. The superlative is the grammatical form of that which cannot be increased, of the end or vanishing point of comparison. It is in the superlative that the super-, mega-, hypertall towers that THE TALLEST presents have their *raison d'être*. The sacral, as well as the functional, recede into the background. It is the wish that is decisive and justifying: to have the longest, the highest, the tallest. Because this goal unites all – all those who can afford and like to play this game – then the superlative can only be valid temporarily, and the paradox unfolds over time: the tallest, the highest – with time, this can always be increased. The pride of the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, for example, which held the title from 1998 to 2004, was then stripped away by Taipei 101, the first tower to be taller than 500m. Today's superstar amongst the super tall, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai (828m), expects to lose this title in 2019 to the Kingdom Tower (at over 1000m) in Jeddah (Saudi Arabia).

Meanwhile, the dimensions that come into play in this competition – as measured by conventional

ideas of what a building is – long ago became absurd, unreal. Research into authority-free societies has shown that in egalitarian buildings »the man is the measure of the thing«, as Thomas Wagner wrote in his essay *An^architektur*: »In this architecture, form and scope is largely determined by the bodily dimensions of the adults. [...] This is a difference relative to all other architectures that diminish their people, as is typical of representative rulers' buildings«. This principle of the diminishment of people relative to the building, which they have constructed, which they enter and walk through, which they inhabit, and in which they must work, has reached a new stage in the young supertall towers. It is no wonder that the countries currently leading supertall development (Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, China) are not known as strongholds of democracy and equality.

In her work, Tess has found a convincing form for the unrealness of supertall towers. Although it is based on detailed research and footage recorded on-site (exceptions: the Mecca Royal Clock Tower, which Tess could not visit, and the Kingdom Tower, which has only just begun construction), she has abstained from showing the towers' surroundings. High-resolution photographs provide the basis for an animation of each tower, in which they appear ethereal. The towers move across the screen, the artificial gaze gliding slowly up them. One seldom sees the base or tip of the towers. In the case of the Burj Khalifa, the animated

shot begins in the lower third and, after almost two minutes, it still hasn't reached the top. For the entire show, panoramic long shots are resolutely denied. The images also abstract from any movement; neither humans nor other mobile elements are shown. Even the skies are cloudless, monochrome greyish blue to white. Movement comes from the image alone: the only thing that appears mobile is that which is static, the tower.

The visual abstraction and the reversal of movement infiltrate the impression of reality, the phenomenal realism of the cinematic images. Instead it is the aesthetic aspects that are highlighted, shimmering between the poles of sculptural and ornamental. Sometimes the beauty of volume is emphasised; sometimes the image is tipped over flat. But rather than setting both against one another, they merge. The symmetry (many shots, details excepted, could be mirrored along the horizontal or vertical axis) strengthens the impression of artificiality – and of elegance. Because, in fact, the politics of the images of THE TALLEST are not purely critical. They speak not just of a desire to escape from alienation and displacement, but also of a fascination with the tower as a sculptural object and with its gleaming, patterned surfaces. The elegance has a cooling but not sterilising affect. Despite all of the formal austerity, Tess also takes liberties in variation and modulation: tipping the towers over to the horizontal, slanting to the diagonal, adapting the scanning speed to match the form of the tower, alternately accelerating and slowing.

Both aspects – mimicry of the architectural absurdity through the visualisation of its irrealisation and emphasis of the structural elegance and grandeur – are matched, even

strengthened, by the soundtrack. The voice audibly originates from a computer and is as inhuman as the buildings, imitating their technoid character. (One perhaps thinks of old science fiction films; the towers too sometimes look reminiscent of the spaceships from STAR WARS.) The text mixes general information, which could in part originate from advertising brochures (who has the tallest observation deck, the biggest shopping mall, the fastest lift?), with personal impressions. Every tower is introduced with a catchy refrain that gets stuck in your head: »tall, super-tall, taller than talk«.

The information gives meaning to what is seen; whereas concentrating just on the image could tip the work into the abstract (ornamental or sculptural). In this way the voiceover ensures that, even with the perfection of form, the work retains a documentary character. Doing so, it also recalls the indexical dimensions of the recordings, all of which were collected on-site in the last year and a half. And it opens space for reflection on the geopolitical shifts that the economy of supertall buildings speaks to (broadly speaking: a shift from West to East).

The specific tension of Tess's work can therefore be described as a double balancing act between two respective poles: regarding the referential dimension (what does the film show us?), it balances between documentary and abstraction; with regard to the normative dimension (what stance does the film take towards what is shown?), between ironic-critical distance and affirmative-aesthetic contemplation. What is appealing about this double tension is that the apparent contradiction doesn't remain as such: in the era of turbo-capitalistic superlatives the aestheticized, the absurd, and the abstract do not form an opposite pole to reality and its authentic reconstruction, rather they become their integral characteristics.

GUIDO KIRSTEN