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Places of passage described as existential scenarios: the elevator

A small theater of contemporary distress. Where we never look each other in the eye.

by Germano D'Acquisto

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Never look each other in the elevator. It's an unwritten rule. Like the one that requires you to obsessively stare at the floor display, even when you know exactly where you're going and how many stops remain until your destination. The elevator is a small theater of contemporary discomfort: an emotional decompression chamber, a silent confessional, a pressurized capsule where time is measured in held breaths and in ten seconds that always seem too

long or too short. Too intimate for social distancing, too narrow for those suffering from cultural claustrophobia.

Umberto Eco, in his *"Kant and the Platypus,"* knew this well. In a paragraph entitled "Some Misunderstandings About Prototypes," he focuses precisely on the elevator, a banal and at the same time alienating object, which transforms routine into philosophical experience.

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ELEVATOR WITH HOPPER 2023 BY PETER D. HARRIS. COURTESY OF MIRA GODARD GALLERY

Let's think about it: what is an elevator, after all? An object that lifts us up (or down) like a perpetual motion machine, with no apparent effort. But it's also one of the most powerful metaphors of modernity.

There's something profoundly Freudian about the idea of stepping into a box, pressing a button, and being whisked up or down. A mechanical leap of faith. And if, as you ascend, Otis Redding springs to mind, don't worry: it happens to me, too. Every time I step into an OTIS elevator, my mind automatically goes: *Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay*. I know, it's silly. But tell me it's never happened to you.



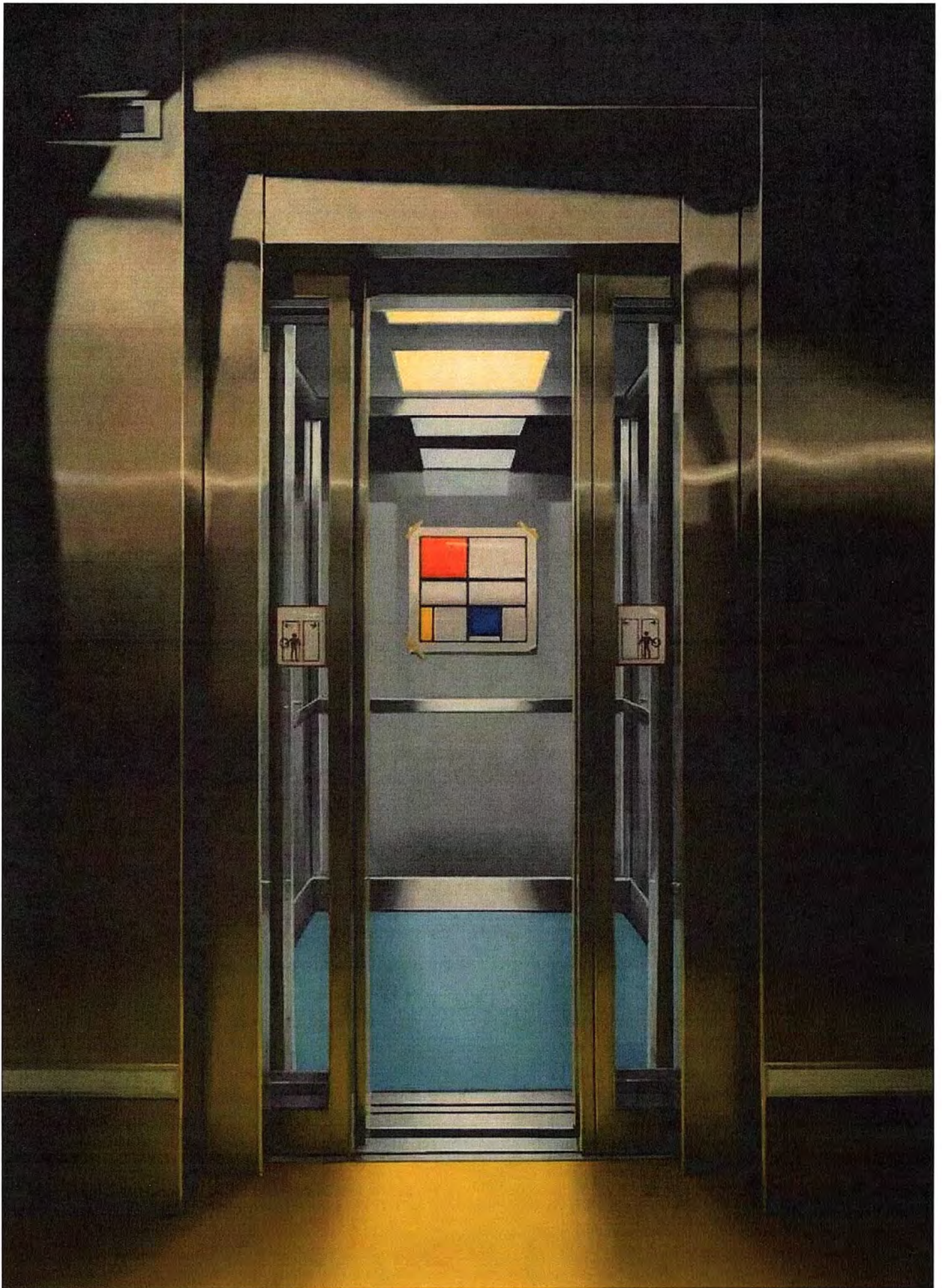
TO THE TRAINS (ROTHKO + MORANDI) 2018 BY PETER D. HARRIS. COURTESY OF MIRA GODARD GALLERY

Roland Barthes – again – said that "vertical movement is the most charged with symbolism": it's no coincidence that elevators appear everywhere, from literature to cinema. In music, there's Aerosmith's "*Love in an Elevator*," *eroticism and industrial steel*. *There's the Stars'*

"*Elevator Love Letter*," slow-moving Canadian melancholy. And there's even Ambra Angiolini with "*L'ascensore*" – don't make that face, we've all heard it at least once.

In cinema, then, there's plenty. Louis Malle's *Elevator to the Gallows* (1958): a perfect noir stuck inside a freight elevator. Miles Davis's jazz in the background, claustrophobic tension, immobility as a narrative fuse. Nicolas Winding Refn's *Drive*: Ryan Gosling, a poorly lit suspended cabin, a kiss that fades into violence. More than a means of transportation, an emotional elevator. And then there's Willy Wonka's visionary one, which moves in all directions, even diagonally.

In art, the elevator is a portal. In 2016, Carsten Höller installed a slide as an alternative to the Hayward Gallery's usual elevator system: a poetic gesture, a joyful regression to curvilinear movement. Do Ho Suh, with his fabric architectures, has also reconstructed elevators: ethereal, translucent, charged with domestic memory.



ELEVATOR WITH MONDRIAN 2023 BY PETER D. HARRIS. COURTESY OF MIRA GODARD GALLERY

And in literature? Think of the elevator at the Ministry of Truth in 1984: cold, impersonal, disciplined. Or the one Kafka never let arrive: always late, always postponed. You wait in front of the steel door, adjusting your hair and praying no one comes in. Because you're not ready to share those twenty seconds with a stranger. Or with yourself.

Yet elevator design is among the most meticulously crafted and least celebrated. Each is a micro-architecture of passage. Without it, there's no skyline. Rem Koolhaas says so in *Delirious New York*: "The invention of the elevator liberated the vertical section of architecture." It's the key that makes skyscrapers, the stacked city, possible. A sort of haiku in steel and mirror. With Otis Redding in the background...

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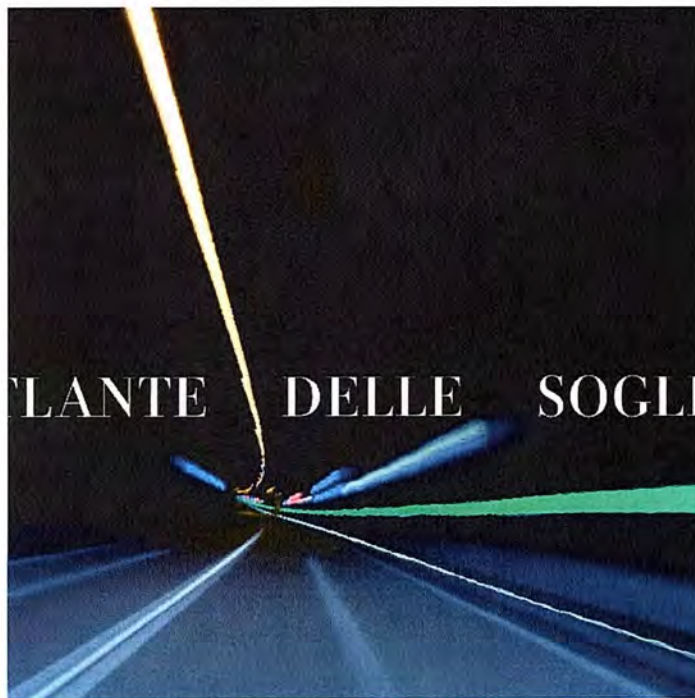
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