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Soft-Where Specifics of Site

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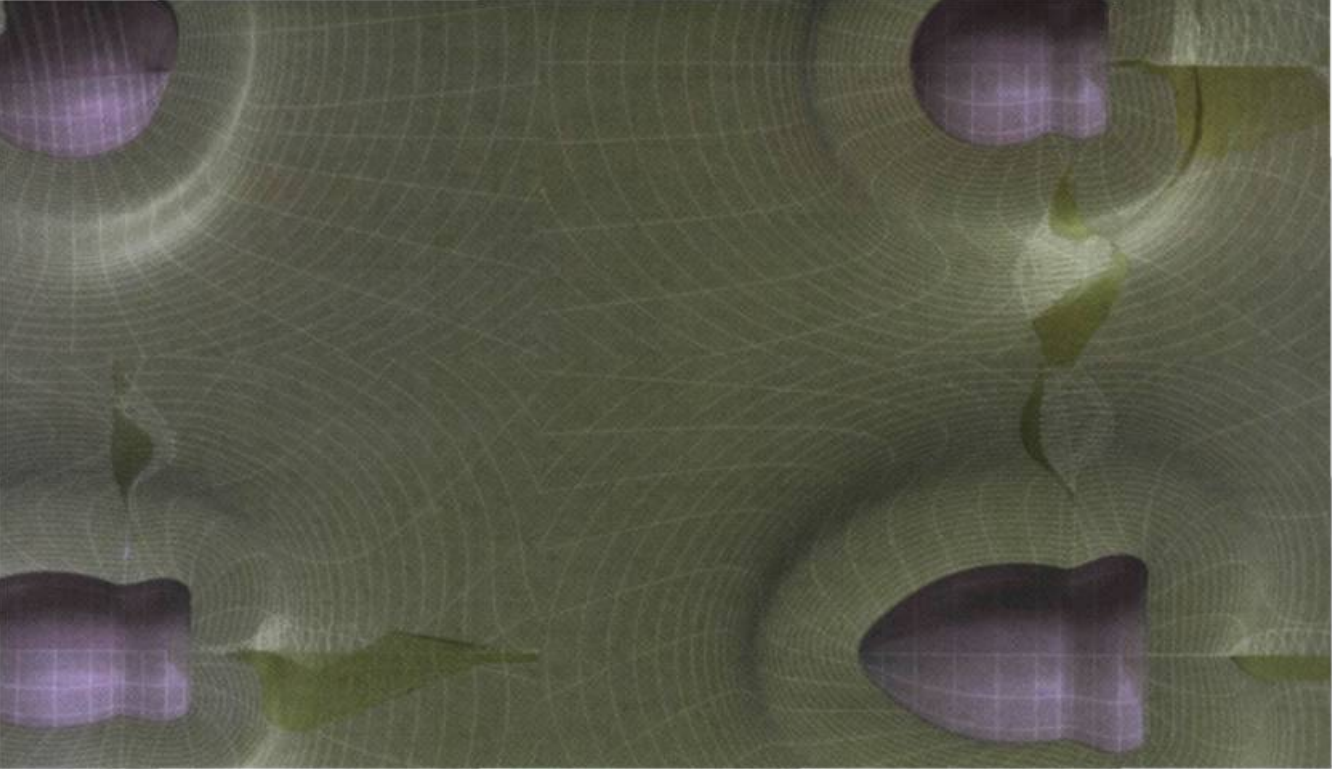
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Greg Lynn, Embryologic housing. Reprinted from *The Art of the Accident* catalogue, published by NAI/V2-Organisatie, Rotterdam, 1998.

ARCHITECTURE

Melbourne SOFT-WHERE SPECIFICS OF SITE

The engine of modern cultural categorisation – architectural theory – suggests once again that we are currently living on the horizon of a new era – that of the super-modernist age. Whilst not spatialisation of politics and cultural theory within global capitalism). The incisive and adroit criticisms of this text's social implications by critics such as Samuel Collins are given latitude to re-locate our current perspectives on the effects of super-modernism on contemporary culture. The criticisms of Augé's book also set up a platform to observe how we might utilise this theory to gain a better understanding of spatial politics within contemporary concrete and digital cultures. The final movement of the text traverses the digital landscape of the World Wide Web to trace projects by artists and self proclaimed "hacktivists" such as @TMARK and Electronic Disturbance Theatre, who engage in a counter-mapping of global economies and politics. Their projects aim to effectively support a re-mapping of the distribution of power over the Internet and subsequently through the concrete city. The conveyor belt of "isms" and movements, sub-movements and splinter groups turns faster and faster due to the law (and demand) of diminishing return which in turn governs identity politics. (By this I mean the increasingly insatiable market for images and products that define social difference and group

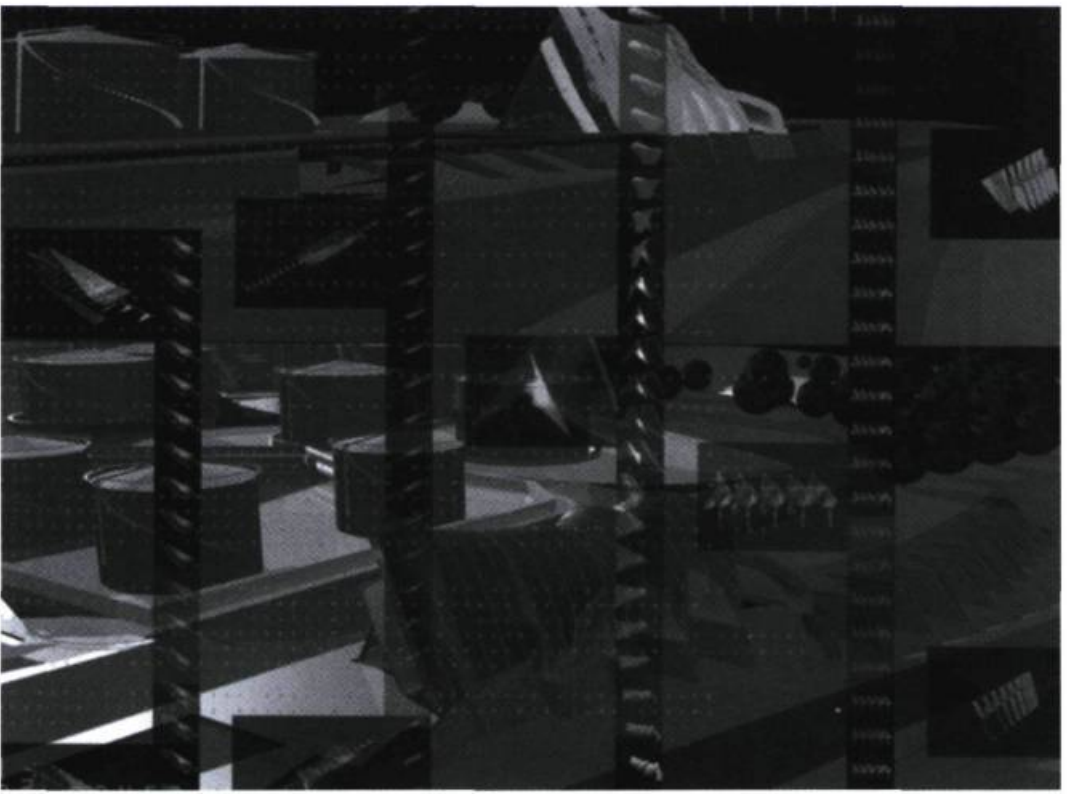
allegiance at the same time : eg. types of sneakers, trainers or running shoes.)

Thus as the street-wise soles of product identity speed up, so does the analysis and naming of perceptive shifts and rifts by cultural commentators. Over the past decade, there has been a palpable sense of desperation in the fields of cultural theory to plant the first seeds of the new "ism". We only need to momentarily reflect on failed attempts to mark out this territory with markers such as "hyper-modernism" and the more ridiculous tautology of "post-post-modernism" to support this notion.

Here it is helpful to look at architectural theory and practice, which has already provided us with the majority of categorical "isms" for the twentieth century. It is within architectural practice and theory that we can see the inception of another movement in the shape of super-modernism.

To support this notion we can look at a range of changes which indicate that architecture of the new millennium has and will shed many more theoretical motifs posited by post-modernism. This is to say that what may be identified as super-modernist architecture has taken flight among a number of new trajectories regarding aesthetics, materials, design processes and ideas about site-specificity.

For examples of super-modernist architecture we can examine the works of architectural companies



Greg Lynn, Reprinted from *The Art of the Accident* catalogue, published by NAI/V2-Organisatie, Rotterdam, 1998.

such as OMA, and of individuals such as Jean Nouvel, Toyo Ito and Greg Lynn. All can be seen to have interests in recent theories and practices that support the surfacing of super-modernism. The building tropes of super-modernism signal a return to the overarching style and control of the meta-narrative and a sure-fire refutation of all that post-modernism stood for. This narrative is the most effective, technologically complicit and dependent that has ever existed, not only theoretically but also economically, culturally and legally. The “end of the rainbow” story or ultimate teleological tale delivered to us comes in the form of “globalisation”.

Globalisation is widely accepted to be occurring across all fields of business, economics, science, law and culture. Ostensibly, this means that post-modernism and its associated economic systems are currently being supplanted as theoretical styles or doctrines as well as practical mandates – for producing products, reflected in the development of international law and divested in the construction of works of art, music, theatre, film and architecture.

Architecture and urban planning are two of the most revealing disciplines that allow us to witness the new building trends of a global economy and the re-processing of style through super-modernism. It is within architecture that we can see the semantic erosion of one of the central tenets of post-modernism and deconstructivism – the erosion of the importance of the site.

Super-modernist or “globalist” architects such as Greg Lynn, choose to lay the theoretical foundations of their buildings, not in the socio-political, racial or gendered grounding of the urban context. Rather

than researching the neighbouring structures with which the future structure will share reflections, Lynn chooses to research how digital technologies can produce limitless refractions of an original vision. You might say that instead of site-specificity, Lynn looks toward software-specificity when producing a design overlay and intellectual support system. He goes as far as to practically negate humanist site-specificity in its affirmative sense of presence when he sites the animation industry as holding the keys for the future of architecture: “For researching the possibilities for computer aided processes and biological models of growth and transformation, architects should therefore rather discover the use of animation software.”

By this type of rhetoric, we can observe the architect negating the importance of cultural context and instead treating class, race, sex, gender and what might be called the “reality ergonomics” as statistical and digital nodes within his programmed quasi-biological building process.

Architectural form as dictated by movement has its routes in a historical lineage from the Enlightenment through to the more recent movements of Futurism (The recognised chief architect of Futurism was Sant ‘Elia’s, whose statement that “dynamic sensation is the new architecture” is important to note here) and recent developments of architects such as Greg Lynn. The movement of people through and around buildings, whether fed into a computer as statistics or fed up waiting in a cue at the airport check in, has become a priority for urban planners and architects in super-modernist times. When the repetitive buildings of McDonalds and 7/11 appear in cities

and towns all over the world, it's virtually a virus made concrete. These types of structures are blunt allegorical symbols of a movement within global culture, to negate contextualisation or other axioms of post-modernism such as semiotic expressivity.

The schizophrenic nature of place, as rendered through architectural mandates with its associated economic, temporal and historical concepts, changes –regularly and according to its inevitable symbiotic social make-up. The challenge is to find ways in which the “citizen” can invest his/her identity and movements within the city, to redirect the augmented flows of action that are designed and regulated by urban planners and architects and watched by social control mechanisms such as surveillance camera's and security guards. In this way, a door is held ajar through which public space can be inverted into semi-personal place, challenging the concrete binary (public vs private) of the city's spatial politics. Marc Augé has argued that the concept of place in super-modernity differs from notion of place in modernity. He goes on to acknowledge Baudelaire when stating that the modernist “place” integrated the new and the old so that both become familiar in the same space.

Super-modernity, however, differs in that it is characterised by its excesses. Augé goes on to expand upon how such excesses in super-modernity proliferate and produce new social arenas in which we direct our daily lives. In contrast to accounts of post-modernity in which there is a general “collapse of an idea of progress”, in super-modernity there is an “acceleration of history” that results, not in meaninglessness, but in the excess of meaningful events. Augé informs us that this excess of historical significance, rather than leaving us complacent, “makes us even more avid for meaning”. Moreover, he states that super-modernity accelerates the transformation of space.

Grant Boswell observes Augé arguing that, by making remote distances and places accessible to us by travel or by electronic media, super-modernity compresses space, changing the scale of things such that the world can fit into one's vacation or living room. Thus super-modernity works on the principle of “spatial overabundance”, in which the unfamiliarity and expanse of space is compressed into the familiarity and knowability of place. This compression results in excessive possibilities for assimilating spatial overabundance as knowledge within one's home, one's rhetorical territory, because the home becomes the focal point into which knowledge from all over the world is funnelled.

Boswell goes on to quote Augé stating that, in



Neil Denari, Images from National Library of Japan Competition 1996.

super-modernity, “the traveller's space may thus be the archetype of non-place”. Thus the traveller moves through other's notions and understandings of a location as place, but they do not necessarily interact or understand the site specificity of the locations traversed. In this sense, the traveller becomes the antithesis of DeLillo's *flâneur* which he described as “a traveller, the purer form, someone who collects impressions, dense anatomies of feeling but does not care to record them.”

In contrast, Augé's motorway/airport traveller is a receptacle of text surrogated from experience. In the airport or on the motorway, signs and brochures, billboards and radio adverts provide the information, history and statistics of a location. Therefore, it could be said that in transit routes we find another paradigm of super-modernism where place becomes a space to traverse or to get through. These morphing locations become analogous to the hyper-text screens of the World Wide Web that we watch whilst inside another bounded space which has a social and physical momentum of its own.

There have been a number of writers who disagree with Augé's notion of the effects of non-place on the individual, none more salient than Samuel Collins. He asserts in his essay *Head Out on the Highway* that what is most interesting about Augé's work is not so much that “non-place” exists, but that we would, on some level, “like” it to exist. Thus it is in the realm of the unrealised that according to Collins, the non-place falls and subsequently fails our expectations of non-identity and atomised relations. He goes on to say that : “Once we've paid our ticket, according to Augé, we surrender our ‘self’ at the gate, so to speak, becoming, for the duration of our travel, a non-person in the strict, Maussian sense of the word.” Or at least that is how Augé would have it : “One becomes no more than what they do or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. But this is not really true, as the many Rodney Kings of this world will tell you.”

This socio-political reading of *Non Places : Introduction to an Anthropology Of Super-Modernity* is



Neil Denari, Detail images from Design Studio/New York, 1993.

welcomed and brings up a major criticism of Augé's type of analysis – that it is not grounded in socio-political observations or outcomes and thus it negates the gendered, racial or political make-up of spatiality. Collins goes on to describe the “level playing field” which he feels Augé proposes as the neutrality of “non-place” is a naive ideal which reverts in some ways to the problematic dreaming of utopian writing. Thus the economic realities of class, the frictions of racial inequalities and the non-acceptance of sexual difference do not miraculously disappear or even dissipate. The individual keeps “their cultural baggage as they check their physical baggage”, Collins tellingly writes. This is an adroit criticism from Collins who delivers his final verdict damning Augé's lack of insight into social relations when he quips that “the idea that a bigot becomes less so on an airplane seems ludicrous.”

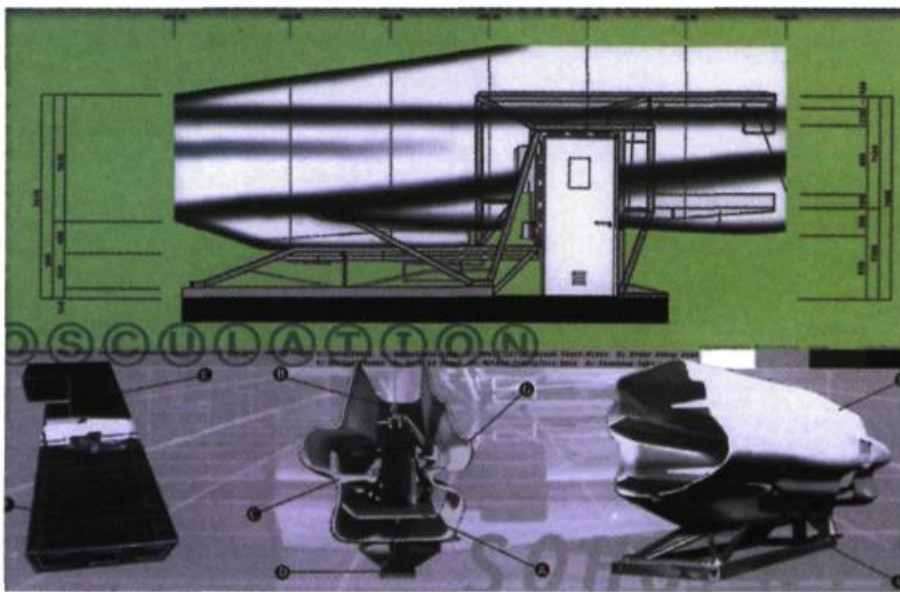
Such telling textual analysis and stinging rebukes apart, Augé's book does, however, issue an initial search into the nodal ontologies of space and place. He locates semantic and concrete shifts of spatial differentiation constructed by the meta-narrative of globalisation. What the book does not do and does not claim in any way to do (being the antithesis of anthropology as a vocation of “neutral” study and thus not involving itself with those it studies and describes) is to suggest ways in which this system may be questioned, dissonantly traversed or actively refuted. For active and practical suggestions as to how contemporary urban space and its increasingly surveilled areas of cultural contract can be disrupted, there is a long history of provoking texts. Here I'm thinking about the Cobra and Situationist groups, including the most renowned text from this movement – Debord's *Society Of The Spectacle*.

This was and is an elemental book that has fed what are still the most polemical and influential texts written about the possible strategies for political and spatial agitation. Within the electronic sphere of the Internet, The Critical Ensembles – *The Electronic Disturbance* and within concrete territories of practice, Hakim Bey's – *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* still chart as pivotal texts for any self-declared *agent provocateur*.

For ample support of the proposition that their strategies are being practiced today, look at @TMARK's on-line corporation that has been formed to help sponsor anti-corporate actions, Electronic Disturbance Theatres (Richard Dominguez who helped form EDT was also a member of The Critical Art Ensemble) agit-prop supporting groups such as the CyberZapatistas and Floodnet. All of the above have recently and successfully supported Etoy in their legal and illegal battle against the Etoy on-line childrens toy corporation.

The Etoy vs etoy spectacle is a good example of the way in which notions of space and place within the digital arena of super-modernism converge, delineate and become legally confused due to a lack of attention and legal statutes to account for conflicts such as the aforementioned.

In the instance of Etoy vs etoy, a URL or web address became the digital space fought over by a group of multi media artists and the third highest grossing company generating income from the World Wide Web. Here, space (as point of location) was legally challenged in the name of place, place being the point of expectation and destination. Etoy Toy Company claimed that their customers were being misled and disappointed by arriving at the homepage of the arts group rather than the



Neil Denari, Detail images from Design Studio/New York, 1993.

homepage of the Toy Company. Etoy Company thus took legal action to negate etoy artists having a URL including the etoy name, even though the multi-media group existed long before the Toy Company in both concrete and digital landscapes.

Notions of non-place, space and place are forever in an epistemological flux depending on which theory, geography, legal system, digital or concrete landscape they are defined through. And so, theories of how place and space construct, become fluid and destruct, are of relative and practical pertinence. Through Augé's book, amongst other media works which hold similar observations about contemporary spatial anthropologies, it can be hoped that telling practical texts, actions and networks might formulate. Movements, that actively seek to promote socially and politically-oriented actions within digital and concrete non-place, space and place.

Converting the spectacle into practical action whilst retaining the playful element of the SI's writings such as in the case of Etoy vs etoy is one of many strategies available to us. Developing strategies that allow us to out-manoeuvre or at least understand the game playing aspects of political and legal zoning within super-modern digital and concrete spatiality are essential. To recognize the digital shadows cast by and upon the digital architectures of the screen by hands that appear at first glance to be unconnected to any body is a start to the lay lines of resistance. The failure of Etoy Toy Company to re-locate the media art group to another URL proved that in the new public square of WWW litigation, territory is unstable and traffic difficult to direct even if you employ lawyers for a kings ransom. Surely, "My kingdom for a horse" must invert its premise on the WWW to "My URL for a server", if the momentum of spatial resistance over corporate interests is to carry beyond this initial surprise legal victory however. This would involve a refusal to

flow with the constant "becoming" advocated by the transitory nature of the non-place to actually "being" in space and time. In turn the understanding of how and where non-place, space and place construct can help challenge the governments and corporations control of public and private space and their relative vectors within super-modernism. These replace Michel de Certeau's "passengers", who move in accordance to directions and signs with bodies who invest in potential collision, disruption and cross communication. These are pursuits undertaken in order to re-establish agency within the banal utopias of a globalised economy.

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Webgraphy

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