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> Decay extorts softness from the hard, making the hard an infested factory for breeding a softness which is anonymous even to the formlessness of nature. The softness of decay is precisely a production of its irony. — Reza Negarestani

> When bodies melt, they finally come to their senses.
> — Johann Wilhelm Ritter

Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, an intellectually rich set of poetic essays, *détourned* manifestos, and prose poems, has deservedly garnered a good deal of critical attention since its release.[1] A fathomless dive through architectural theory, urban studies, philosophy, and poetry, the book successfully surfaces out of a *fin de siècle* postmodern exhaustion, creating what Marjorie Perloff calls a "new exploratory poetry" that eludes simple categorization into genre (*Poetry* 166). This inability to pin the text down onto a single literary paradigm indexes Robertson's desire to avoid classification and instead to "go phantom" into a spectral blur (*XEclogue* n. pag.). This transcendence of taxonomy dovetails with the book's content: *Occasional Work* examines the ability of urban architecture to extend beyond its spatial localization, as well as the boundaries that traditionally separate subjects from their surrounding environments. This ghostly brushing against limitations, and the way the text exhibits this transcendence, is the topic of this essay.

Though Robertson's rhetorical devices are varied, there are some common tropes through which she expresses this transgression of limits. Three in particular — fabric, translucency, and delirium — are her main vehicles for describing the tenor of urbanity. Each has a particular literary tradition, and together they converge to give an expansive and

historical depth to *Occasional Work*, analogous to its describing the layers of memory that cityscapes deconstruct, excavate, and build upon ad infinitum. Accordingly, these three tropes structure this essay. Fabric and textile production, as will be examined later, was an important symbol in the early work of Charlotte Smith, Margaret Cavendish, and others, and one that recurs up to the early twentieth century avant-garde and beyond. And whereas *Occasional Work*'s bibliography weaves a rich intellectual tapestry, so too will this essay attempt to keep up with the text by invariably shifting in and out of these different intellectual cross-sections. Translucency, here connoting permeability, divisibility, and diffusion, will be examined at the level of both content and form: the former in the book's intentional fraying of boundaries, the latter in its palimpsestic blend of genres and literary conventions. At both levels, Robertson calls to mind aesthetic traditions that reach back to the early twentieth century, where art experiences a "climactic moment of rupture" such that "the integrity of the medium, of genre [and] of categories" ultimately breaks down (Perloff, *Futurist* 38). Finally, we will consider how the plications, enfoldings, and ephemeral weaves of urbanity relate to, and induce, delirium and altered states of perception. Enveloped as we are by architecture's cross-stitching, so too are we prey to the irrationality and pathological surreality that invariably lurk within our cities. Robertson's investigation of this phenomenon extends a Romantic tradition, and inflects it with a decidedly modern edge.

Though disparate, these tropes collectively fashion a distinct political edge to *Occasional Work*. Historically, textile production — both for female writers in the early modern period and their later counterparts in the avant-garde — acted as a sort of Trojan horse that surreptitiously proliferated a female presence within literary circles. This association anticipated the *écriture féminine* of the 1960s, where fabric, through its translucent and diffusive properties, is frequently employed as a conceptual metaphor for the rejection of phallic certainty. "A feminine difference," writes Bracha Ettinger, "makes sense inside a weaving" (191). Similarly, the possibility of a feminine speech, for Luce Irigaray, is a "sort of puncture in the tissue of the world, between the tissue of the world and that of the subject, between the tissue of language and the thread of the subject, as both are transposed and exchanged with each other, like a machine that puts or sews things together by making a forward stitch backward, a backward stitch forward, and so on, indefin-

itely" (148). Such facets are similarly woven into Jacques Derrida's work, where the "hymen is a sort of textile," a "veil which, in front of the hystera, stands *between* the inside and the outside of a woman" (213). These characteristics further underlie the delirious subjectivity that is prominent in *Occasional Work*, a subjectivity that is more a multiple enfolding of different layers rather than isolated and contained as a distinct, autonomous monad. This delirium is also not without its political edge, as will be discussed later in its relation to the work of the Frankfurt School and the Situationist International; as Adorno writes, the monadic identity of authoritarianism is at odds with the multiplicity of delirious non-identity, where "what is true in the subject unfolds in relation to that which it is not" (*Negative* 127).

Robertson's tropes, in addition, achieve a purpose beyond the political. Where her focus is on the spatial, her rhetorical devices are used to describe intentional deformations of space. The book reveals the enfolding, morphing, and twisting of not only objects but also affectations, emotions, and states of mind. Fabric is emblematic of this process, as rippling sheets endlessly billow and breathe in the nocturnal breeze of the city. Through these and other textual strategies, tropology is contorted into topology. The experience of delirium she depicts is no less t(r)opological: in the psychogeographic convulsions of the Soft Office, poetry becomes an "urgent . . . delusional space" ("PhillyTalks" 38). Texts and architects become allied through their respective media, the textures of which knot, wrinkle, and writhe with the undulation of the irrational.

Poetics of Fabric

Occasional Work aesthetically plays off the material of fabric; numerous sections of the book emphasise the meanings and connotations of the word *fabric* with synonymic variations. No less than the jacket copy announces the Soft Office's need for a "vocabulary of . . . fabric," and hence provides, a priori, a counterpoint to architecture's usual mode of expression through "the language of concrete and steel." The book, then, "recompiles the metaphysics of surface" (17)[2] to transform architectural materials and subvert hardness into elasticity. No longer rigid or inflexibly permanent, the cityscape is rendered softer and more malleable as Robertson's text invests solid architecture with the pliability of thread. In doing so, architecture becomes recognizably suppler, more distinctly

woven: "the buildings or structures like tents" (15). Canvas thus replaces concrete in the hypothetical constructions of the Soft Office; "the textile worker" has now "entered architectural metaphor" (148).

As the architectural "vocabulary of fabric" suggests (217), *Occasional Work* describes architecture and language taking on the characteristics of each other, all the while becoming mediated through the tertiary form of fabric. These three facets — fabric, architecture, writing — together have a notable history, as Robertson discovers through the mobile investigations of the Soft Office. Garments are in fact "lyric structures" whose existence "lends us a rhetoric" (217), effectively synthesizing fabric and language. The city, composed of these "mass rhetorics of structural permanence" (14), is "largely fabricated" (37). Robertson's walks through it, undertaken "as the lyric class" (233), implicitly direct us to the history of the lyric, highlighting a certain complicity between the lyre and its strings — a lyric, as it were, that requires the underlying thread of string for its own operations. As language exhibits a high degree of connotational elasticity, so too are cities tensile like strings, no less capable than lyrics of reflecting and expressing the memories and desires of their dwellers.

Occasional Work's "vocabulary of fabric" is, therefore, reminiscent of the theoretical intersections of fabric and language found in the work of Roland Barthes, who frequently reminds us that, "etymologically, the text is a fabric" (*Rustle* 60):

> *Text* means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative ideas that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving: lost in this tissue — this texture — the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. (*Pleasure* 64)

Language is no longer considered a reified semantic product hidden behind a veil of signifiers. Language itself is veil; the text is fabricated, like "a tissue" or "a woven fabric" (Barthes *Image*, 171). Textuality, in Barthes's work, is always tightly interwoven into a vast matrix: "*text, fabric, braid:* the same thing" (*S/Z* 160). These three entities constellate on the plane of language. Further, text, fabric, and braid all are singular nouns composed of collective pluralities (threads, words, striations, etc.). This provides a key structuralist insight: language, though

seemingly coherent and unified on the level of *la langue*, is, on closer examination, composed of an infinitesimal weave of every possible *parole*. Barthes's observation that the word "text" is etymologically derived from "that which is woven, web, texture" (*Oxford*) is a fact implicit in *Occasional Work*: "The rippling of fibres converted themselves again to foliage, as all speech converts itself to foliage in the night" (263). Fabric here is paratactically aligned with speech, and both are converted into the fractal multiplicity of leaves. A word, much like a swatch of fabric, must always engender the multiple. Both, as Robertson proposes, are ideal ways to think through architecture: "to think of grammar as an extra large architecture that shelters and enables morphing and deviating and engendering varieties of subjectification and becoming" ("PhillyTalks" 33). In the bed of our subjectivity, language becomes the blanket through which we dream.

Barthes's work, then, provides a vantage point from which to understand the deep philosophical relationship between *poesis* and "fabrication."[3] Beyond this tradition, fabrication further implies the creation of phantasms or distortions of the imagination. The fabric and fabrications of *Occasional Work* are seen no more prominently than in the first paragraph of the manifesto:

> The worn cotton sheets of our little beds had the blurred texture of silk crepe and when we lay against them in the evening we'd rub rhythmically, one foot against the soothing folds of fabric, waiting for sleep. That way we slowly wore through the thinning cloth. Our feet would get tangled in the fretted gap. (13)

For the Soft Architect, being in bed, about to slide into sleep, is the ideal starting point, a launch pad composed in the medium of fabric where the subject literally becomes irretrievably entangled in its own surroundings and condenses into reverie.

The production of fabric and textiles, though often associated with a stereotypical female pastime,[4] in fact belies a more radical depth. Margaret Cavendish uses a metaphor of spinning to justify her own writing, calling poetry a "Spinning with the braine" that ultimately fashions a "Garment of Memory," in addition to providing an ostensibly domestic cover cloaking a radical politic (n. pag.). According to Kathryn King, the "conjunction of spindle and pen collapses the distinction between authorship and domestic activity and, by attaching

writing to established conceptions of women's work, implicitly argues for authorship as a suitable job for a woman" (81). The surface may be knit, but beneath dwell the early instances of *écriture féminine*. Nor is this association between fabric and text foreign to the more recent avant-garde; some of the earliest Constructivist art was accomplished by women in the medium of textile, forming a network of relations between radical literature and fabric. Russian Constructivists Lyubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova, for instance, eschewed the use of overly decorative elements in their designs, a trait that eventually influenced their own writing and that of their early avant-garde peers. Robertson similarly synthesizes these two forms, adding to them the tertiary form of architecture. Beyond *écriture féminine*, this mediation speaks generally to modern literature. In *One Way Street* (itself an avant-garde intersection of urbanity and textuality), Walter Benjamin professes that writing has three stages: "a musical stage when it is composed, an architectonic one when it is built, and a textile one when it is woven" (*Selected* 1: 455). These three stages simultaneously alight upon the desk of the Soft Architect.

Robertson's work is aligned with other philosophical "fabrications." In the writing of Martin Heidegger, another thinker whose work makes inroads with architectural theory (and an admitted influence on Robertson; she mentions *Poetry, Dwelling, Thinking* as formative in her interest in architecture), the fabrication of reality is emblematized in the "veil," the cognitive netting that occludes ontological identity, and that must be removed in order for *alētheia* to appear out of its previous hiddenness. "To the Dasein as unveiling there belongs essentially something *unveiled* in its *unveiledness*, some entity to which the unveiling relates in conformity with its intentional structure" (Heidegger 217). Though Robertson's interest in Heidegger indicates a shared concern for examining certain features hidden in the blind spots of modern life (specifically beneath the rubric of language and dwelling), she avoids reproducing a similar ontological operation with her work. Notably, she seems more theoretically linked to Benjamin's and Adorno's criticisms of Heidegger, which are more sceptical of the possibility of any Heideggerian unveiling of objects, seeing this as mere ontological sleight of hand. Benjamin, for instance, believes that objects do not acquire truth proportional to the subject's cutting away of its veil. In fact, something like the opposite is more accurate: "The beautiful is neither the

veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in the veil. Unveiled, however, it would prove to be infinitely inconspicuous" (*Selected* 1: 351). The textile/texture/text itself is here dependent on a degree of occlusion rather than being a mere nuisance that the subject brushes aside to acquire a better view of its object. What cannot be brought into the clearing, for Benjamin, is the most alluringly sublime. This is why he depicts the urban crowd as "an agitated veil" though which the *flâneur* is able to experience the city (*Selected* 4: 323). The *flâneur*, a kind of self-reflexive urban node through which the city is able to examine itself, determines its relation to urbanity through the moving veil of the masses, never quite becoming a part of it and yet never being quite separate from it either. This appreciation for the cloaked and ephemeral is at the heart of *Occasional Work*, further speaking to a fidelity between Robertson and the work of the Frankfurt School: "Beauty appears as such only in what is veiled" (Benjamin, *Selected* 1: 350). Elsewhere, speaking to a departure from ontological modalities, Adorno warns against the prevalence of Heideggerian systems of thought, writing that the "thought movement that congealed in them must be reliquified, its validity traced, so to speak in repetition" (*Negative* 97). Philosophy here is called upon to become softer. As Adorno writes, "We are not to philosophize about concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, out of these things" (*Negative* 33), so as to "awaken congealed life in petrified objects" (*Prisms* 233). Philosophy discovers the malleable heart of concrete, that is, the flexible soft net that ultimately determines the form of the stone while imperceptibly dwelling within it.

Diaphanous Cities

The urban landscape in *Occasional Work* absorbs the attributes of fabric, flowing, foldable, and softly translucent: "Our city is persistently soft . . . the buildings or shelters like tents — tents of steel" (15). The cladding of a building is referred to as an "archaic textile" (147), the architect as a "clothier emitting moths" (1). Architecture here tends toward the porous, the diaphanous. Robertson may be taking a cue from the work of Georges Spyridaki, whose work is featured immanently in Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (frequently cited in *Occasional Works*): "My house is diaphanous, but it is not of glass. It is more of the nature of vapour. Its walls contract and expand as I desire. . . . I let the walls of my house blossom out in their own space, which is infinitely extensible" (50). This translucent house,

not of glass, effloresces with the diastoles of the heart. The Soft Office is a similar witness to "the flesh of the building," absorbing the subjects around it and vice versa, so that "the porousness of spatio-subjective nodes in transit becomes a way to think the subject" ("PhillyTalks" 34), rather than a static, hermetic, and dislocated model of subjectivity, as in a more Cartesian mould. Elsewhere in Robertson, the mould shatters as the "surface leans into dissolution" (143). This disintegration is symptomatic of porous surfaces absorbing alien elements into their matrix, leading to hybridizations that are not rejected but instead privileged by Robertson. Accordingly, the effects of the urban landscape "hovered above the surfaces, disguised as clouds or mists, awaiting the porousness of a passing ego" (236). "As porous as this stone is the architecture," Benjamin writes similarly of Naples (*Selected* 1: 416); this openness, he continues, leads to an "interpenetration of day and night, noise and peace, outer light and inner darkness, street and home" (*Selected* 1: 420). Instead of clear demarcations between objects, Robertson's Soft Office, similar to Benjamin's Naples, prefers an "impure image that contradicts fixity" (213). We bleed into things while the diastole of our cities fills us back up with blood.

This impurity ensures that surfaces never quite determine boundaries, but instead irrevocably blur them; there is, then, a "chaos of surfaces" (128) sparking up against one another, a "florescence of surface" (15): "The surface of us overlaps with other phyla. . . . Mixture is our calling" (141). Robertson's work here shows a fidelity to Julia Kristeva's in that the border is understood as the critical point of undecidability; a border both releases "a hold" on an object all the while refusing to "radically cut off" from it (*Powers* 9). Closer to the architectural domain, a similar resonance can be found in Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins's architectural concept of the cleave, a "simultaneously dividing and rejoining" where an "instantaneous non-sticking adherence, all in discrete parts, continually separable and separating out, serves as source and substratum for all action" (qtd. in Taylor 112). The surface mixes both what lies above and below it: "It is at the surface where lively variability takes place" (127). Beyond the city itself, this overlapping pertains also to the dweller; "similarly dispersed, porous, and commingled is private life," writes Benjamin (*Selected* 1: 419), applying his analysis of Naples's bleeding surfaces to the subject, so that its singularity is compounded by the multiplicity that surrounds it. "To exist" in such

cities is no less than a "collective matter" (*Selected* 1: 419); the ego, the surface of the mind, becomes flooded by a torrent of different identities, people, and eras.

This blending and interplay of surfaces gives the Office its characteristic multiplicity; accordingly, "all doctrine is foreign" to it (4). Against the unravelling forces of capitalist reification — which, György Lukács describes as entailing "the fragmentation of the subject" into "isolated abstract atoms" (89) — Robertson's Office attempts to collate and collage fragments into overlapping and intersecting structures. This, in part, explains the Soft Architect's preference for shacks, scaffolding, colours, and fountains, usually ancillary or ornamental phenomena that have no meaning in themselves and that rely on other buildings to help determine their own identities. Here they are stripped of this reliance by Robertson's treatment and stand on their own — like transitive verbs suddenly divested of their objects, but which remain present nonetheless.

Identity, then, is devalued by the Office, since it is too often constructed by a negative determination that repulses difference instead of properly integrating it. It can "identify with nothing other than instability" (142); here is a particular kind of identification where an instability of differences is integrated within, rather than expunged from it. "Suppose we no longer call it identity" (79), the Office posits in an attempt to "to release identity and dissolve into materials" (165). Rejecting the harsh solidity of identification, the Soft Architect prefers something more tensile, with an ability to drink in its surroundings, something "lingerie-esque" that "disproves the rubric of the monad" (164). Kristeva provides further illumination: "desire consists of drawing loved ones toward yourself, dissolving them in your own perceptions until they become contaminated, unattainable, confused with objects, external, woven in the same fabric, neither inside nor outside, but a continuous chain" (*Time* 187). Desire in *Occasional Work*, metonymically connoted in the adjective "lingerie-esque," surrenders to the topology of fabric, where multiple enfoldings enable a multiplication of subjectivity (a process further inflected with a particular *jouissance*, as connoted by the use of the adjective form "lingerie"). Jacques Lacan provides a link:

> Primordially, desire and reality are a texture without incision [*coupure*]. Therefore they do not need stitching [*coupure*], they do not need to be stitched back together. There is no 'reality of desire,'

> any more than it is accurate to say 'the underside of the right-side-up' [*l'envers de l'endroit*]: what there is, is a single fabric [*étoffe*] with two sides. Yet this fabric is woven in such a way that we pass through it without being aware of it, because there is no incision and no stitching. . . . That we pass from one side to the other without awareness means that there really is only . . . one side. (qtd. in Ettinger 127)

It is not enough to say that desire and reality are closely stitched together; rather, they are topologically morphed together, such that it is impossible to delineate their spatial orientation. Differences are not sewn into patchwork, but rather achieve an imperceptible gradation where identity drops its stitch. Robertson's text, to again borrow from Barthes, is "not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination. The plural of the Text depends, that is, not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the *stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers" (*Image* 159). Beneath this weave lies the textual *jouissance* where one can revel in the erotic bliss brought about by a proliferation of signification ("in the text of pleasure" writes Barthes, "everything is plural" [*Pleasure* 31]), and dismiss univocal meaning, interpretation, and identity as mere fabrications. This vast and flowing linguistic matrix of language and desire, like the city, forms a smooth topology rather than the staid binary clash between identity and otherness.

Civil Delirium

Her distrust of identity partially informs Robertson's appreciation of the suburbs. Where the suburbs are traditionally the bane of architects, Robertson approaches them from a different perspective. Though her initial attitude toward the suburbs appears elitist — the suburbs are, after all, a "quoted stupidity, a commonplace cliché, a spatial impostor, a couple of curios, an idle machine" (26) — she soon reveals more to their surface. While her critique connotes something easily contained (within quotes, common, small like a curio), she then refers to the depth of suburbia's mnemonic expansiveness: "These are memories, so the scale of things is vast, the horizon unattainable" (26). What once appeared artless and quotidian soon seems more complex: "Like one's own childhood, the suburb is both inescapable and inescapably difficult to believe

in" (28). In the catalogue of modern life, the suburbs, though often appearing small and inconsequential, can easily expand to the vanishing point. This sprawl, however, is not limited to the spatial:

> Suburbs are recurrent dreams. Each house repeats the singular wilderness. In the suburbs we learned to understand what is virtual and now we invent the beginning, again and again. This is not nostalgia. Or, it is nostalgia turned inside out. We distribute origin across the virtual. We don't guard it. What we crave is not Rousseau's solitude but the excellent series of origin dwindling on ahead into the future. (175–76)

But in what sense is "nostalgia turned inside out"? Nostalgia here is not a process where a subject reaches into the past, but instead is the repetition of an origin into the future, such that the present becomes a site knotted with temporalities. The suburbs actualize Lacan's passage through a seamless fabric; in the suburbs, past and present converge into "the singular wilderness."

We can also follow the workings of repetition as described by Deleuze, a thinker for whom designations such as inside and outside are treated topologically. We might say, in a paraphrase of Deleuze, that suburbia is not the repetition of the house, but rather it is the original house that repeats in advance all the others, distributing its origin "across the virtual." Since origin is multiplied and distributed into the future, nostalgia cannot be reduced to a simple desire for a linear moment in time: it is also a desire for continued repetition into the future. Nostalgia is something more Janus-faced than its usual conception; as such, the suburbs don't attest to a longing for the past. Rather, for Robertson, it is a past that creates suburbia, and with it, a longing for a future ahead of itself. To invoke Deleuze once more, in this moment repetition "interiorizes and thereby reverses itself," a play that weaves a "universality of the singular" into the realm of the virtual, "like a fabric stretched upon a framework" (1, 21). While suburbia is often dismissed by writers as regressive — we need think only of Ezra Pound's lament of his own suburban prejudices — the Soft Office discovers a deeper layer to its recursive distribution, the multiplicity of the suburban resembling something more dreamscape than real estate. Lacking a city centre, the suburbs are architectural rhizomorphs that endlessly sprawl out across horizons. Without the identifiable features of the urban landscape, the suburbs are delocalized and disoriented (one is never so completely lost

as when in the suburbs); their patterns of recurrence transcend arborescence and lend them a fractal surreality. The suburbs' "long *allées*, soothing symmetries, weedless clipped lawns, and floral parterres unfold the security of a formal order" (26) and give them a vastness on par with the mathematical sublime.

The city is likewise afflicted. Its anonymity and multiplicity — recalling Benjamin's claim that the "crowd is the veil through which the familiar city beckons as . . . phantasmagoria" (*Arcades* 10) — induces, in *Occasional Work*, a particular kind of urban delirium. "Neither palatial nor theatrical but soft" (13), Robertson's formulations reject both architecture's propensity to inspire awe (its "palatial" inclinations) and to represent (the work is aware of how, in Robertson's own British Columbia, "English ethnic connotations of the aesthetic served to both screen and promote a naturalization and domestication of colonial power and capital" ["PhillyTalks" 24]). Instead, architecture's soft and malleable nature lacks a determinate delineation. Rejecting the rigid identities through which "colonial power and capital" can represent themselves, Robertson seeks a way to "shape or describe delusional space" ("PhillyTalks" 38). Softening the architectural surface to accentuate its porosity, she enables a subject to open up and interact freely with the environment, creating delusional hybrids between herself and the objects she encounters. "Psychology pours from our objects" (54) as it does from ourselves; projection is reversible. *Occasional Work* is informed by an aesthetics of delirium that blurs the subject/object distinction in such a way that both become "delusional and critical" ("PhillyTalks" 38). If we follow Robertson, subjectivity is structured by a "dialectic of cohesion and dispersal" (12), determined by surfaces that behave less as strict lines of demarcation and more as permeable zones of cross-contamination. The dialectic, itself a "fundamentally spatial" construct, since "it implies domains of 'inside' and 'outside'" (Eyers 7), is the most permeable concept in philosophy, perpetually absorbing outside elements into itself at every turn. Similarly, for Robertson, the dialectic is capable of disassembling rote perception into a dynamic and ever-changing awareness of converging states of identity, where "sheer variability kept the surface in vibrant dialectic with structural essence" (129). Depth is distributed across the surface, as the surface infects its own foundation. Robertson's use of the dialectic to describe the underpinnings of surface and structure, undulating in the flux of

"cohesion and dispersal," sustains *Occasional Work*'s mutual dissolution of the monadic subject and its surroundings. We have become the city.

This delirious absorption of the environment places Robertson's work in a definable intellectual trajectory. Rainer Maria Rilke, for instance, provides an exceptional anecdote describing the way that the houses around ourselves become internalized:

> I never saw the remarkable house afterwards; when my grandfather died it passed into strange hands. As I find it again in my retrieved childhood memory it is not a building; it is completely divided up in me: a room here, a room there, and a piece of corridor that does not connect these two rooms but is preserved by itself, as a fragment. Everything is scattered around in me in this way: the rooms, the staircases that unrolled downwards with great complexities, and other narrow, spiral staircases whose darkness one negotiated like blood in the veins. (17-18)

Not only do we perpetually recompose our surroundings within our consciousness, but they in turn become thoroughly enmeshed in our identity, and vice versa. "One of my hearts is in the building," observes Robertson, and this is not to be taken figuratively (16). The subject can never be removed from the field; both endlessly rely on each other to propel themselves forward on a trajectory of determination. Other examples from this heritage are explicitly acknowledged in Robertson's bibliography. Thomas De Quincey is an important antecedent, particularly for his descriptions of the interaction between the city and altered states of mind. In a typically evocative passage from his *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, De Quincey describes his enjoyment, after taking opium, in wandering "forth, without much regarding the direction or the distance" (81) through the streets of London:

> Some of these rambles led me to great distances, for an opium-eater is too happy to observe the motion of time; and sometimes in my attempts to steer homewards, upon nautical principles, by fixing my eye on the pole-star, and seeking ambitiously for a north-west passage, instead of circumnavigating all the capes and headlands I had doubled in my outward voyage, I came suddenly upon such knotty problems of alleys, such enigmatical entries, and such sphynx's riddles of streets without thoroughfares, as must, I conceive, baffle the audacity of porters and confound the intellects of hackney-coachmen. (81)

The city, even when navigated by an astronomical compass of stars, ends up twisted like thread into knots and tangles; in this way, its topography corresponds to an opiated consciousness. Much like Benjamin's blurring of veil and veiled, there is a breakdown of subject and object here, as both dissolve into the fabric of the city. Is it the drug or merely the architectural bent of the city that coaxes the subject into a delirious mindset that conflates dweller with dwelling? Things fuse as we interact with our surroundings; here, according to Robertson, "not identity but incident" rules the urban landscape (15). This vacation from identity guides her forays into architecture: "Architectural thought has been feeding me means for considering subjectivity as a flow across systems, an access and escape agency that absorbs, mimes, enfolds, rejects, becomes, severs and transforms spaces and forms of the whole urban complex" ("PhillyTalks" 32). Benjamin and De Quincey are like-minded. For the former, the hallucinatory subject experiences the city "rather like being wrapped up, enclosed in a dense spider's web in which the events of the world are scattered around, suspended there" (*Selected* 2: 86). In narcotic Weimar-era Berlin, his mind sits suspended in silk thread, caught in overlapping zones of life and death. Robertson's "flow across systems" is perceptible in this network of silken wires that crisscross in a hallucinogenic haze.

For Benjamin and De Quincey, subject and object merge into a single-sided swatch within the urban dynamic. This topological process informs *Occasional Work*, whose Soft Architect is woven into the fabric of the city. "Now part of my body is this book and the room around it" (67); the subject is homotopically deformed by the curves and crevices of its metropolis. Roberson's attraction to surfaces is explicitly founded upon her recognition of their "topological value" (129). This interest is a notable feature of contemporary architecture; the work of Peter Eisenman, for instance, reminds us that "the bends, folds, and cusps present in curvilinear architecture are in fact singularities that constitute topological events" (qtd. in Di Cristina 171). But even beyond formal events, the city bends and folds around us, as we, in return, haunt it like spectres.

Robertson's interest in the Situationist practice of *détournement* — defined by the Situationist International as a "reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble" (55), the reconfiguration of older elements into newer juxtapositions — enhances her topological forays.

Détournement, in its diversion of pre-existing elements into a "synthetic organization of greater efficacy" (Situationist 9), is a homotopic unity of different parts. As Robertson describes it, the practice of *détournement* underlies her interest in the "transformative agency" contained in specific sites, their "blocks falling and rising again almost catastrophically, whole neighbourhoods morphing as fast as new investments cd [sic] pour from one shore to another. The city annotates those flows, like some sort of remarkable single fluxing instrument of plexi and cheap concrete cladding" ("PhillyTalks" 32). In other words, cities are plastic: constantly moving, deforming, and rearranging themselves in a dynamic pulse. This phenomenon is similarly present in the Situationists' *détournement*, which diverts pre-existing flows into new orientations. Like a pun in which different meanings play out simultaneously, the Situationist treatment of the city twists its most conservative elements into liberating configurations. This reorientation was greatly informed by the Situationists' awareness of topology; founder Guy Debord spoke of being "very interested in the situological and situographical development of topology" (368). This would provide a crucial theoretical scaffold to Situationist thought: "I consider this *blend of interior and exterior* as the most advanced point of our experimental construction" (Debord 326). Part of Robertson's attraction to this technique is an inherent "dissatisfaction with the abjected notion of gendered otherness" witnessed "in some feminist and psychoanalytic work" ("PhillyTalks" 32); "I prefer to think of both the spuriousness of nature and the spuriousness of femininity as phantom" ("PhillyTalks" 23). Beyond gender binaries, *Occasional Work*'s critical edge lies in its melding of oppositions: "As for us, we too want something that's neither inside nor outside" (166). This desire explains Robertson's interest in other forms of architecture beyond traditionally built structures, where "the same skeleton [keeps] repeating itself continuously" (128); "architecture is entombed structure or *thanatos*" (127). Gardens, on the other hand, differ not only in being alive, but also in that they "can receive the stamp of fashion somewhat more economically and therefore more frequently than the relatively immovable, and culturally monumental, structures of architecture" (101). The desire is for malleable or ephemeral environments that can easily take on the shape, style, and ambiguity of their inhabitants.

Such topological features are equally present in the holes, perforations, and decayed, sponge-like cores that mark the Soft Office. More

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than just allying fabric and architecture, Robertson's "clothier emitting moths" speaks to the vermiculated and frayed surfaces endemic to architectural structures. "Surface morphologies . . . include decay, blanketing and smothering, shedding, dissolution and penetration" (130). In lieu of homogenous structures, the Soft Office revels in the rough and chaotic unevenness that permeates entire city blocks. Robertson's morphologies undermine the demarcations of interior and exterior, creating irresolvable levels of ambiguity by introducing discontinuity in three-dimensional space. If the relationship between interior and exterior is fundamentally binary, then surface discontinuities collapse this dichotomy and turn things inside out. The moths infest the inside not to bring down the structure, but rather to build it across a more complex vector. There is thus a second order of building: building by decay, dilapidation, and entropy. "The ultimate truth of decay," writes Reza Negarestani, "is that it is a building process that builds a nested maze of interiorities whereby all interiorized horizons or formations are exteriorized in unimaginably twisted ways" (385). Decay, he continues, becomes "an irresolute process of building that potentiates architectures" rather than neutralizing them (386), a subtractive yet germinal development whose output is not merely material but also crosses into the emotional and mnemonic economies. Within memories dissipating from the ruins of history, subjectivity "absorbs, mimes, enfolds, rejects, becomes, severs and transforms spaces and forms of the whole urban complex" ("PhillyTalks" 32). Robertson sees decay not as a negative force, but as one that permits an ecological possibility. "This is the *pharmakon*," she writes, "An indiscrete threshold where our bodies exchange information with an environment" (143). The moth becomes a phoenix arising from the dust of the urban dynamic.

Conclusion

Robertson is reluctant to consider the subject under the Idealist rubric of pure apperception, preferring "to think of subjectivity not simply as constructed but as being continuously, dynamically, and unpredictably modified" ("PhillyTalks" 27). In *Occasional Work*, the subject fades and blends into an urban landscape that becomes more opaque in turn. There is a translucent subject in *Occasional Work*, one that travels the city like a phantom, through which windows, walls, and billboards can be seen as it passes by. This phantom seemingly glides through inter-

iors and exteriors as if such divisions were meaningless. It moves with Robertson against the static model of subjectivity: "as if subjectification were all interiority, no plication, and as if the process were not in constant flux" ("PhillyTalks" 33).

Robertson's political homotopy can be seen in her treatment of more conservative architectural developments. Vancouver may "dissolve in the fluid called money" (1), but this dissipation can be leveraged into an attack on its own ideological presumptions. Assuming the quick and ephemeral qualities of economic forces, the Soft Architect reconfigures the city through the drifts that absorb disparate elements into her ambulatory mode of subjectivity. In this way, the separate elements of urban living meld in morphological delirium. This blending is also apparent at a formal level. The book — never quite poetry, never quite essay — is a strange blend of styles and satiric gestures, so that her rhetoric also becomes porous, breathing in genres, manifestos, and the air of alien styles. These "new hybrid architectures" (129) resonate with the city's heterogeneity. Noting that we are increasingly "infected with temporal simultaneities" ("PhillyTalks" 24), Robertson invites us not to fight these overlays but rather to "see what agency the new hybridity wd [sic] release" ("PhillyTalks" 24). Though cities such as Vancouver constantly change in the winds of finance, demographics, and government policy, the most effective means for recapturing their buried memories may not be to evoke a conservative nostalgia, but rather to sew past, present, and future into the delusional fabric of the city. As Robertson states, "My outlook is not liberatory except by the most minor means, but these tiny, flickering inflections are the only agency I believe" ("PhillyTalks" 38). "Inflection," then, describes not only the plasticity of rhetoric, but also an ideological strategy that eschews direct opposition and instead opts for infection, infestation, and subversion. The flexibility of inflection gives the Architect a tactic to infiltrate the city via the softer parts of its armour. Like a ghost floating beneath a white sheet, the Soft Architect embodies a delusional fabric and glides through concrete.

Robertson's *Occasional Work* is exemplary of a new exploratory poetry that has emerged within recent years, one that steadfastly skirts the rules of genre and pre-established forms and instead floats in and out of different modalities. Beyond its formal properties, Robertson's work offers a new way to understand the subject as it makes its way through an increasingly urbanized landscape. As our houses begin to sprawl

past unforeseen limits, so too will rhetorical strategies grow and expand with them. Like Bachelard's "house that grows and spreads so that, in order to live in it, greater elasticity of daydreaming, a daydream that is less clearly outlined, are needed" (50), Robertson's work embroiders a fascinatingly complex and creative stitch onto this languid daydream.

Author's Note

Notes

[1] Of note is the recent special section on Lisa Robertson in *The Chicago Review* (51:4; 52:1) and the *Open Letter* issue devoted to the Kootenay School of Writing. In "Site Surfeit: Office for Soft Architecture Makes the City Confess," Jennifer Scappettone deftly explores the book's theoretical/feminist underpinnings, whereby "devising shimmery, dissolute sheets of text" and "sentences that obey the syntax of dissolving, sopping space" becomes a rhetorical strategy over the "march of tolerable grammar" (74). Paul Stephens's article, "'The Dystopia of the Obsolete': Lisa Robertson's Vancouver and the Poetics of Nostalgia," interestingly sees Robertson's work as redefining nostalgia "as a collective re-possession of the past," instead of desire for a lost moment in time (26). Stephens also notes Robertson's attempts to disperse identity across various surfaces through a variety of tactics.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all citations will refer to Robertson's *Occasional Work*.

[3] Paul Ricoeur writes that, for Aristotle, "*mimesis* does not mean duplication of reality; *mimesis* is *poiesis*, that is, fabrication" (317). This relationship was also a focus in Hannah Arendt's work, where *poiesis* as fabrication undergirds her concept of *homo faber*.

[4] For example, Matthew Gregory Lewis writes, "the needle, not the pen, is the instrument they should handle" (qtd. in King 77). Freud famously lists weaving as one of women's few important "discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization" (164).

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