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"Representing the Unrepresentable - Charting Urban Space"

14:00 hrs, Wednesday 17th September

Michael Gibbs - lecture for 'The City as Locus for Conflict' , AICA Conference 1997

Preface:
I will be illustrating, or rather punctuating, my lecture with a number of slides. Some of these are the source material for a number of my own photo-text works, others are the works themselves, or proposals for new, as yet unrealised works, including a series called 'Dislocations' which proposes the insertion of representations of urban spaces into sites undergoing renovation. In addition, and where appropriate, I will be showing works by Aglaia Konrad, Martha Rosler and Mark Lewis.

REPRESENTING THE UNREPRESENTABLE - CHARTING URBAN SPACE

At the end of his seminal essay, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', first published in 1984, Fredric Jameson called for an aesthetic of "cognitive mapping" as a means of enabling individuals to regain a sense of place in an increasingly dislocated and fragmented, postmodernist world. Radically new forms will have to be invented, he wrote, "as yet unimaginable" new modes of representing what he refers to as the "unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of the city's structure as a whole." It is not only the city that has become unrepresentable - the multinational, global economy in which contemporary cities are meshed is equally abstract and illegible. As Henri Lefebvre has noted "Capitalism and neo-capitalism have produced an abstract space that is a reflection of the world of business on both a national and international level, as well as the power of money and the 'politique' of the state. This abstract space depends on vast networks of banks, businesses, and great centres of production. There is also the spatial intervention of highways, airports, and information networks. In this space, the cradle of accumulation, the place of richness, the subject of history, the centre of historical space, in other words, the city, has exploded." Contemporary cities are becoming more and more indistinguishable, with shopping malls, pedestrian streets and business zones increasingly resembling one another, while the renovated centres of historical space are little more than sanitised simulacra geared to the tourist industry. New cities are being built from scratch, particularly in China and Malaysia, and with a speed that is desperately trying to keep up with the accelerating flow of global capital and technological development. In America we have seen the emergence of 'edge cities', cities that exist on the periphery, with no historical centres, no downtowns, while in many regions of Europe cities are merging into one another, into huge urban conglomerations. A decentralization of office work and business activities into suburban enclaves and even into domestic premises is taking place at the same time as an increasing centralization of decision-making in the dominant corporate cores of major companies. The public space of the city, and particularly its political and cultural functions, have been taken over by the mass media which are now globally rather than nationally-oriented.

In whose name has all this occurred? In the name of the 'public good'?
Or to meet the requirements of late-capitalist development? Historical cities are undergoing as radical a sanitisation as Baron Hausmann's strategic redevelopment of Paris in the 19th century, which was designed to prevent uprisings in the old parts of the city as had happened at the time of the Paris Commune. Hausmann demolished the old winding streets of the old city and replaced them with wide boulevards designed for the rapid deployment of troops and for the consumption of the city as spectacle and commodity. It was during the same period that the first

Parisian arcades were built, which were later to become the subject of Walter Benjamin's unfinished 'Passagen-Werk', or 'Arcades Project'. Benjamin documented and analysed the Parisian arcades, which he saw as the "ur-phenomena" of modernity and the key to understanding the times in which he lived. Writing against the grain of technological, capitalist 'progress', with its "reified dream images" and "phantasmagoria", Benjamin looked at the recent past and discovered that authentic tradition is in fact based more on discontinuity, on ruins and fragments rather than monuments and wholes. The 'Arcades Project' itself is composed of a mass of fragments, of seemingly unrelated details and fleeting images. It is a work that allows history - and the present - to be spoken through experience rather than written in academic terms.

It is the other spaces, what Foucault called Heterotopias, that reveal the authenticity of the city. In Benjamin's day it was the decaying Parisian arcades, today it's the out-of-town shopping malls, the airports and business centres that offer the dialectical key to understanding modern life. On the one hand, these are places (like Foucault's prisons and hospitals) that give the appearance of completely controlled environments; on the other hand, these same places are vulnerable to disorientation and subversion, or 'détournement', to use the Situationist term. Shopping malls are patrolled by guards, but this cannot prevent (and indeed may actually precipitate) the eruption of anti-social behaviour.
For Foucault, the heterotopia par excellence is the ship, "a floating piece of space that departs from the land." Allan Sekula's project 'Fish Story' explores the social, political and economic meanings of contemporary maritime space. Like the 'Passagen-Werk', it is a hybrid assemblage of texts, quotations and analysis, complemented by hundreds of documentary photographs taken by Sekula himself. Foucault concludes his lecture on "other spaces" with the words, "In civilisations without ships, dreams dry up and the police take the place of pirates." Sekula, too, sees the subversive potential of these floating microcosms of urban society, citing the mutinies that often took place on board ships (including the famous example of Battleship Potemkin). The pirates and revolutionaries are with us too in the urban environment. As Michel de Certeau has written, "Today (...) we have to acknowledge that if in discourse the city serves as a totalizing and almost mythical landmark for socio-economic and political strategies, urban life increasingly permits the re-emergence of the element that the urban project excluded." Among these elements we might mention vandalism, graffiti, skateboarding, and other expressions of disaffected youth or alienated ethnic groups.

"We are bored in the city, there is no longer any Temple of the Sun", wrote Ivan Chtcheglov, one of the original group of Lettristes and Situationists in the 1950's. Indeed, it was during the 1950s, after the trauma of the 2nd World War, when optimistic attempts were being made to rebuild Europe, aided, of course, by the ideological and capitalist imperatives of the US-inspired Marshall Plan, that a critique of urbanism began to emerge. One of the key figures in this was Henri Lefebvre, who began his career in association with the surrealist group and was largely responsible for the introduction of Marxist dialectics into French thinking during the 1930s. After the war he explored issues relating to 'daily life' and published 'Everyday Life in the Modern World'. This drew him into the field of urbanism and he wrote several important books on urban space and politics, culminating in his magisterial work 'The Production of Space'. As professor of sociology at Nanterre in the 60s, he had a major influence on the development of the Situationists critique of urbanism and the French student revolt that erupted in

1968. One of Lefebvre's main tenets is that space is socially produced - spatial relations, particularly in the city, are determined by how people live and interact. The abstract, totalitarian schemes of urban planners, he complains, are misguided at best, since they fail to take into account the everyday desires of ordinary people, desires that are expressed as 'moments' in time, rather than in terms of space or place. It is those ephemeral, fleeting, intense moments of lived experience that count the most, no matter where they take place. Lefebvre castigates the Bauhaus tradition for producing a "worldwide, homogeneous and monotonous architecture of the state, whether capitalist or socialist", and he is equally critical of Siegfried Giedeon for promoting a purely abstract, geometrical concept of space which was to inspire the totalitarian fantasies of Le Corbusier. Lefebvre insisted on the people's right to the city. Yet this right has hardly been taken up, except by a few revolutionary and artistic groups. Urban life has yet to begin, he complains, still putting his faith in the revolutionary initiatives of the working class. And until genuine urban life does begin, what hope do we have of representing it except as dreams or nightmares?

The Situationists were one such group of revolutionary dreamers. They took up the Baudelarian notion of the 'flaneur' and merged it with the Surrealist practice of randomly exploring the city in search of the unusual and the erotic, as exemplified in Andre Breton's novel 'Nadja'. They sought a heightened awareness of the existing conditions of everyday life through aimless strolls through the urban environment. The name they gave to this practice was the 'dérive', or drift, which had earlier been one of the practices of the Dadaists, and was later taken up by the Fluxus artists in New York. The derive was also intended as a form of what they called 'psychogeography' - an exploration of the "precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals". The concept of the dérive also informs an Internet project I recently completed, which offers a choice of six 'ideological paths' through an area of Amsterdam scheduled for economic expansion and redevelopment. I was interested in exploring a series of dialectical relationships: utopia and oblivion, spectacle and reflection, and desire and alienation; an alternative geography, if you will, or an experiment in cognitive mapping, using a variety of images and texts.

Jameson suggests that the task of the cognitive map is to provide an ideology - "the representation of the subject's imaginary relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence". Now, ideologies can vary, and some are more dominant than others. A businessman will have a different experience of the city than a tourist will. And an artist concerned with issues of social space will have a different experience still. The critical artist, as Adorno reminds us, is someone who has one foot in the culture and one foot outside it, who is participant and observer at the same time. And it is the artist's task to provide the third part of the ideological equation, which is, of course, in Lacanian terms at least, the Symbolic. How do these symbolic representations work? Through metaphor and metonymy, displacement and substitution. The work of art - and here I am referring mainly to works that use photography - symbolises an imaginary relationship to real conditions of existence. The photograph depicts that reality, but it has already undergone a displacement, a removal from reality, not to mention the excision of space through cropping, as well as a substitution onto the aesthetic or discursive plane. In the case of photographic representations of the city, however, we run into further problems, as Henri Lefebvre has pointed out. "Can images", he asks, " really be expected to expose errors concerning space?". "Hardly", he answers, "Where there is error or illusion,

the image is more likely to secrete it and reinforce it than to reveal it." City life, as countless photographers have discovered, is supremely photogenic - from the soaring of skyscrapers to the frenzied activities of shoppers and the dynamism of busy streets, from decisive moments to forgotten corners, from advocating progress to protesting against alienation, photographing the city offers raptures of intensity. The dominant ideological forces have already made the city into a series of images, that reinforce the homogeneity of the very concept of 'city'. What are needed, then, are alternative ideologies, heterologies, than can go beyond the banality of the normal and relate to the heterogeneity of the city as it expressed through the ways that different social groups make use of it.

Martha Rosler is one artist who approaches urban issues with a mixture of social concern and critical comment. She too distrusts photography, seeing it as an already incriminated medium. Her 'Description of the Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems' is ostensibly about the bums and winos who inhabit the Bowery district of New York. But she refuses to identify her subjects as victims, indeed she does not identify them at all for they are completely absent from the photographs. Only occasionally do we see traces of them in the form of a discarded bottle. They are represented instead by a lexicon of words used to describe the state of being drunk, a 'poetics of drunkenness', which is, of course, equally inadequate a description of the social reality. Rosler's on-going project, 'In the Place of the Public: Airport', utilizes photographs that she has taken during more than a decade in the many airports that she has passed through on her frequent travels . For Rosler, airports represent abstract spaces that have displaced public functions into an oppressive and repressive temporal regime, in which, in the words of Henri Lefebvre, whom she quotes in the piece, "Time is reduced to constraints of space: schedules, runs, crossing, loads". The texts accompanying her photographs are a dense, poetic collage of a variety of voices, definitions and comments on the concept of cultural spaces. The dense layering of the work of such artists as Rosler attest to their belief in the contextual contingency of artistic practice (or what Catharine David calls "critical ambiguity"). Complex social issues cannot be represented by single images alone, no matter how powerful; they demand instead the production and deployment of a heterogeneous discourse, one that makes use of multiple modes of address.

Ultimately, it is through discourse, and language, that we can hope to make sense of the city and the urban experience. The city is already inscribed with a multitude of texts. "The city writes and assigns", says Lefebvre, "that is, it signifies, orders , stipulates. What? That is to be discovered by reflection." This is the sort of reflection, one that is attendant to the overt as well as the covert discourses prevalent in contemporary cities, and to the contradictions between these, that underlies Mark Lewis's ironic views of post-Communist Eastern Europe.

If the Socialist utopia has fallen into oblivion, what are we to make of that icon of free enterprise, the Internet? Cyberspace is offering a further challenge to the discursive possibilities of representation, for how can something be represented that only exists as the infinite and immaterial sum of electronic communication and data flow. The grids of information highways and byways are not even spatial in an abstract sense, despite the use of such metaphors as 'Navigator' and 'Explorer' - rather, they function more within the dimension of time, connect time, so many bits per second. It is not so much where you go as how much time it takes to get there. As someone wrote recently, "Today's children are more likely to get lost in a labyrinth of media images than in a labyrinth of city streets." Our lives are becoming increasingly lonely as we negotiate a world of supermarkets, airports, motorways,

TV, cash dispensers and computers. Since we rarely encounter the Other in the flesh, it is becoming increasingly difficult to follow the Hegelian precept of recognising ourselves through the other. The utopian moment of cyberspace communities has already faded into the past: big business and multinational corporations intent on a borderless global economy are colonising cyberspace as fast as their modems allow. What was once championed as the ultimate public realm is already privatised, and our privation, our deprivation, our loss, is the result. Once again we have lost our right to the city, unless, perhaps we can re-conceive it and draw new cognitive maps and new modes of representation.