Good Place and No Place - Susan Laxton
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Review of: Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley, eds., The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond. New York: The Drawing Center, and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 2001.

1.

How can a drawing be activist?

2.

Can a graphic mark constitute direct, vigorous, oppositional action? Graffiti, at its gouging best, comes to mind. But then, that's writing. Drawing, traditionally conceived, withdraws from the public sphere, a fugitive trace, mute consort to the creative process. And even considering the historical shifts in drawing's significance--from its function as ideational armature in the Renaissance to a model of spontaneity and expression in the early twentieth century to recent revaluations based in lability, erasure, and obsolescence--to advance its physical presence as an intervention capable of effecting political change is to take up the question of the efficacy of art in general. Specifically, it is to ask the dreadful question, "Does art matter?" and to consider further the implications of what it might mean "to matter." This is the daunting project launched in The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architectures from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond, co-edited by Catherine de Zegher, director of The Drawing Center in New York, and architectural historian Mark Wigley. While its authors would not claim to have found conclusive answers (they cannot seem to agree on a common enemy), opening discussion of the Great Unspoken of art historical discourse gives the book its contemporary urgency. Through their examination of architectural drawing as a hinge between the immateriality of representation and the materiality of lived experience, the authors probe the outcome of nearly a century's effort toward a positive breakdown between art and life, and they address the possibilities of drawing in general as a conduit for revising lived experience. What emerges is a productive examination of the medium itself: drawing's historical construction and theoretical participation in the vagaries of artistic practice, and the suggestion that the very characteristics of banality, flexibility, and disposability that have produced drawing as marginal to the arts are the grounds for its historical consideration as a site of resistance.

3.

The book is an expanded record of a symposium organized by Wigley and art historian Thomas McDonough; its title, The Activist Drawing, reflects a shift in emphasis from the more monographically named exhibition at the Drawing Center from which it derived--"Another City for Another Life: Constant's New Babylon" (2 November to 30 December 1999). Rather than merely documenting the "visionary architecture" of the Dutch artist Constant Nieuwyenhuys as it is projected in the drawings and multimedia presentations of his imagined city New Babylon (1956-1974), the participants--Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalyn Deutsche, Elizabeth Diller, Martha Rosler, Bernard Tschumi, and Anthony Vidler, in addition to Wigley and McDonough--subject Constant's project to a scrutiny that takes seriously the ideological implications of architectural projections, with their dimensionally driven aura of "realizability," and the historical imperatives that might call for their revision. The critical dimension of the book, which stands out in opposition to the laudatory conventions of the typical exhibition catalogue, is underscored by de Zegher's focus on New Babylon's own idealism. In her introduction, she draws attention to the book's emergence "in the context of a citywide celebration of 'utopia'" driven by the New York Public Library's exhibition "Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World" (14 October 2000 to 27 January 2001). New Babylon, as a fully automated city whose inhabitants, freed from labor, "play" by endlessly reconfiguring their environment to suit their individual and collective desires, is recast in this context as a plan for an experimental lifestyle which in retrospect seems to land somewhere between Fourier and Disney.

4.

The Drawing Center's exhibition and symposium took place a year in advance of the "Utopia" show, so there is no direct reference to the materials or theories made available there. But founding a theoretical critical practice such as Constant's, in which the inhabitant of New Babylon "will not have to make art, for he can be creative in the practice of his daily life" (qtd. in Constant 9), and establishing that practice as dependent on yet enacted outside of technological support, is a utopian notion which in academic circles today is widely regarded as suspect. The difficulty of attributing an unqualified materialist activism to Constant's work is first communicated in Buchloh's introductory conversation with him at the symposium. After Constant's early assertion regarding his involvement with the COBRA group--"We didn't consider ourselves avant-garde. The word is never used in COBRA [1 <#foot1>]"(16)--Buchloh leads him, not without resistance, through a succession of encounters with apparently contradictory models of vanguard influence: DeStijl, Giacometti, the Soviet avant-garde. Through an unflinching examination of the problems implied by what de Zegher calls "the dynamic intersection of drawing, utopianism, and activism in a multimedia era" (9), this book emerges as an exploration of the eclipse of avant-garde artistic practice as it is understood from its original, that is, political definition, as Constant and his project are interrogated for foreknowledge of the obstacles to such practices today.

5.

With irony worthy of the postmodern, Thomas More named "Utopia" to signify both "good place" and "no place." As the symposium participants focus on the problem of how to receive both the virtuality and the technological utopianism of Constant's project as relevant to the contemporary situation in which, as de Zegher admits, "the imagined homo ludens . . . has not brought about a daily life of invention and action but of leisure and consumption," the faint outlines of a prognosis for goodness materialize (10). Recasting Constant's utopian project as artistic practice--a mediated, semiotic intervention rather than a program with ambitions for material realization--shifts the question into the field of representation, where drawing, the point of intersection between the materiality of architecture and the idealism of artistic practice, is advanced as a space of resistance. Yet in a postmodern culture in which the master of détournement turns out to be capitalism itself, it is the "no place" of graphic utopia of which we are made acutely aware: the disappearance in turn of paper support, the analog mark, practical accountability, and political activism.

6.

Mark Wigley takes on the challenge of reconciling the mechanical and the creative by arguing for their ontological presence in drawing itself. In his essay, "Paper, Scissors, Blur," Wigley establishes drawing as the very ground of architecture's acceptance as a fine art in the Renaissance, and drawing's own emergence as "origin" and site of authenticity as having been established only through the sacrifice of paper: a disappearance of the ground in the presence of the graphic mark. This deconstructive observation alone, of an origin based in absence, places drawing at the center of the current theoretical fray over virtuality, simulacra, and digital processes as they relate to representation. But Wigley goes further, to establish the historical "rise" of drawing as utterly coextensive with the mass production of paper and the widespread use of the printing press, that is, as dependent on early modern technological innovation and the appearance of a "cult of reproduction." For Wigley, drawing at its inception is at once essential and dependent, ideational and expressive, somatic index and symbol of the utterly rational. As he traces drawing historically through the pressures of modernism to the prevailing ideologies of Constant's postwar context, what emerges is an image of drawing's inner plurality, of a medium constituted by complementary differences. He writes, The project turns on the fragility of the line between originality and reproduction, unique unpredictable events and mechanization, spontaneous play and automated machinery. In the very techniques of drawing, Constant encounters the logic of the project that he is trying to represent. As the drawings of New Babylon slide from "mechanical" to "expressive," the relentless smoothness of the slide, the extremely minor variations from drawing to drawing, and the repetition of the same images in different media, effectively undermine the standard oppositions. A sense of reproduction is embedded in a string of originals and thereby conveys the organizing principle of the project.

The effect of a hundred unique works on paper is that vast mechanical structures assume an atmospheric immateriality and expressive flashes assume a structural physical presence. The collapse of the distinction between mechanization and spontaneous originality that is meant to be enacted by New Babylon is first enacted on paper. (41-2)

7.

New Babylon's political potential is here located in an indeterminacy and play of meaning that finds its ideal medium in drawing. This ideology of infinite flow is identified as a founding principle of the Situationists, the overtly political movement of the 1960s with which Constant was associated at New Babylon's inception. The Situationist critique of commodity-driven spectacle centered on an idealist revision of urban experience (and the architecture that determines it) through the practice of experimental counter-behaviors such as dérive, aimless wandering in a city designed for productive use. Thomas McDonough's contribution, "Fluid Spaces: Constant and the Situationist Critique of Architecture," identifies what he calls a "fundamental misrecognition" at the heart of the project: that the endless mobility and dynamism of New Babylon, set in opposition to instrumental reason, could also strike a blow against capitalism--a movement which is itself dependent on fluidity and incessant change. In its ambition to set in motion the salutary demise of drawing and art in general, New Babylon "forgets" the divisiveness and alienation that results from the vagaries of individual desire (an outcome of which Constant became convinced after the events of May 1968, resulting in a protracted autocritique that produced considerably darker versions of the project in the 1970s). And while Constant's détournement of architecture--his use of architectural means to critique its static conventions--is meant as an attack on functional space, it ends up paradoxically prefiguring the dystopia of present-day public spaces. This is the theme taken up by Martha Rosler's untitled presentation of her Airport Series, photographs of the anonymous spaces that characterize the architecture of postmodern transit and mobility. Mobility in the grip of commerce, she argues, relinquishes its activist potential along with its humanist aspirations: ...the closely controlled empty spaces of transit, the terminals and lounges, promised (and symbolized) safety from the urban transients and the threats of disorder they represented . . . . The minimalism of such spaces, which appear to answer to the disjunct needs of modern transit and commerce, mutely promise the giant empty room that Adorno and others used as the presiding metaphor of the modern surveillance society--the society of total administration. (128)

8.

Rosler's project asserts that global technology and industrialization, which promise unlimited freedoms and the fulfillment of every desire, actually subordinate social relations to quantifiable units of exchange to the extent that they deliver only freedom's effect. The critique of Constant's project is never made explicit, but it is clear: New Babylon's premise of infinite traversal, far from presenting a model for resistance, is the perfect vehicle for the confidence game of pure exchange. Rosler's position implies that where a century of political action has failed to refract the trajectory of extreme regulation, to consider that drawing, with its overtones of ideational purity and rarefied audience, could possibly succeed in doing so is laughable. Yet in her unflinching account of the unfolding postmodern condition, Rosler insists on drawing as a kind of creative humanist recourse set against the mechanization and homogenization that are equated with technological rationalism.

9.

By contrast, Anthony Vidler finds qualified potential for activism in Constant's project precisely in its generation from the most mechanical of drawings. In "Diagrams of Utopia," Vidler examines the New Babylon drawings through the conceit of the "diagram," theorized here as a drawing with a mandate to action--directions, as it were, for the achievement of a plan. The diagram's performative, machine-like function, if administered politically, serves not only to alter the internal conventions of architecture, but also to galvanize social change. While Rosler's and Vidler's respective positions could be seen as representative of the rift between the pragmatic and the theoretical within intellectual discourse (and consonant with radically divergent notions of line enclosed in the definition of drawing, that is, line as bodily expression and as pure abstraction), Vidler's characterization of the diagram as the trace of process aligns it with action, effectively breaking down the

separation of the practical and the conceptual to produce a third, transgressive category that is essential to the notion of any representation's political efficacy. Rosalind Deutsche extends this abstraction into the material field in her essay "Breaking and Entering: Drawing, Situationism, Activism" by insisting on the urgency of critical responsibility in artistic practices. Deutsche invokes the urban theories of Henri Lefebvre to demonstrate the importance of critical practices at the formal level in the work of Gordon Matta Clark (who called his "building cuts" drawings)--an instance in which drawing broke with its paper ground to physically assert itself against the homogenization of the city.

10.

At apparent loggerheads with the material activism of Rosler and Deutsche, the essays by architects Elizabeth Diller and Bernard Tschumi present two different facets of theorizing architectural drawing into the "beyond" of the book's title--the time/space matrix made available by the advent of digital processes. Diller's "Autobiographical Notes" step off from the moment in the 1970s when architectural drawing became freed from practice, and drawing for its own sake was widely pursued. Diller's own conceptual projects, reproduced in her essay, are the natural extension of this replacement of the tectonic with the graphic, a trajectory that inevitably resulted in "the denaturalization of building to emulate the abstraction of drawing" (131). That this abstraction, in its withdrawal from material imperatives, would slide easily into the virtual world of digital processes with consequences for social relations that might not have been entirely salutary is suggested in her projects, but never overtly stated. Rather, Diller celebrates the "uncanny disembodiment" marked by the shift from analog to digital drawing as a "new [way] of rethinking the relation between drawing and space" (133). As a result of her neutral delivery, activism seems out of the question in media in which pragmatic realization is eliminated as a possibility.

11.

This is not the case for Tschumi, who also delivers a detached analysis in "Operative Drawing," yet insists that all of the strategies described in his overview of drawing are deployed in the service of function and utility. While his codification of architectural practices is generated out of a cybernetic matrix that Tschumi seems to take for granted, it is also made clear that he means to subordinate digital processes to an end result that will enter, and alter, the built environment as a functioning structure in the traditional sense. That is, Tschumi's drawings are ultimately meant to be realized as buildings; drawing for him is a useful means to a higher end. The question of whether buildings generated from a digital medium can escape the imperatives of technological control to the extent that they could critique, rather than reproduce and reinforce them, is not addressed by Tschumi, although it seems clear from the premises of the symposium that it should be. Particularly questionable in this context would be the last of Tschumi's four drawing strategies, the terrifyingly opaque "interchangeable scalar drawing" (136), described as a universally applicable unit of expression that transforms polar opposites (such as solid and void) into a heterogeneous whole.

12.

Such transcendent expressions of the sublime skate far afield from the populist strategies posited by the other contributors, which tend to preserve difference and happenstance as fields of resistance against the hegemony of standardization. The advantage of the symposium form from which The Activist Drawing is derived is that it stimulates a multivalent, critical dialogue on its subject, generating spontaneous and unexpected exchanges and responses. This sense of the fortuitous is the special potential of collaborative work: the "lucky find," at the intersection of widely divergent, often unconceivable ranges of experience. Faced with increasing uniformity in the lived environment, the unknowability of the subject emerges as a last recourse to human engagement, if humanity is the figure that is to be set against technology. Likewise, drawing's value to the arts, as well as its value to activism, lies in its own predisposition to the aleatory, what Henri Michaux has appraised as drawing's bias toward the unanticipated: "Could it be that I draw because I see so clearly this thing or that thing? Not at all. Quite the contrary. I do it to be perplexed again. And I am delighted that there are traps. I look for surprises." The aberrant mark, the false start, the doodle or marginalia, the incomplete erasure, all serve the

unpredictable, and all are lost to digital processes. This revelation is the trouvaille of The Activist Drawing.

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Notes

1 <#ref1>. COBRA, the expressionist art group named from the first letters of the three capital cities of the countries of its founders, Asger Jorn (Copenhagen), Corneille (Brussels), and Karel Appel (Amsterdam), was founded in 1948 and disbanded by 1952. Constant was associated with the group in Amsterdam at around the same time that he began to assimilate the tenets of architecture through the work of the radically opposite De Stijl movement.

Works Cited Michaux, Henri. Henri Michaux. Trans. John Ashbery. London: Robert Fraser Gallery, 1963.