

## PAROLES ET MENSONGES

*De plus en plus, ce que nous savons, et par conséquent, ce que nous sommes, est déterminé par des sources hétérogènes. Dans ces circonstances, "Être" ne correspond pas nécessairement avec ce qui est stable et fixe. Cette condition nous incite à réexaminer la place que prend la mémoire dans le discours architectural. Premièrement, la mémoire collective, qui porte une certaine responsabilité à l'égard du passé, ne se produit pas par la pratique de signes et de symboles épuisés, mais plutôt par l'intermédiaire d'événements vécus et d'expérience esthétique. En outre, ceci nous permet alors de nous adresser à une mémoire personnelle de l'expérience esthétique tandis qu'elle influence et se rapporte à l'acte de créer. Cet article est tiré d'échanges d'une correspondance entre deux collègues.*

**May 23 Seattle**

In your previous letter you described for me a woman wrapped in a green sari standing next to a camel. I imagine her eyes sparkling in the late afternoon sun of a city seen for the first time. With these wide dark eyes, she has captivated me. She knows an outsider should move with caution... yet she allows one careless step to betray her. Suddenly, she is swept into a hoard of handi-cam toting, postcard collecting tourists, those who commit these and other such nostalgic acts of passive accumulation. To bridge their separation from the new object the tourists collectively zoom-in; because she is, for them, the present becoming history, history reduced to information. Stricken with panic the woman tries to extricate herself from the gaze of their wildly indiscriminate snapping shutters. Futile, of course, she is reduced to an image preserved forever on the mantelpiece of some suburban home: the innocent victim of a 35mm Auto-Focus Drive-By.

On a sand covered terrace adjacent to the square a pair of eyes return to their task after witnessing the event. A leather bound tomb lies dubiously on his lap, prone to moments of imbalance and slipping frequently. It reveals itself to be an unstable construction, a field of shifting topi, and any semblance of centre is a mere mirage or aporia: a blind spot, perhaps the result of a harvested cornea, placing the limit of sight at the centre of the mind. The text as a whole defies all attempts to be retold. Previous perceptions are transformed by this integral absence: *here one sees and is seen by the same eye.*

Under the canopy of the hotel, the light is brown and ill suited to careful examinations. In every room there appears something that he himself did not place there, something beyond the specific details of his journey which are otherwise of a surreal clarity. In sublime margins of the mind lurk those infinite notions which elude the grasping hand and failing tongue - every utterance implicates itself as the site of a possible transgression. In darkened spaces the words become the locus of an event beyond those which they describe, losing their signifiatory power and becoming objects of aesthetic character.

The sheets on the table flicker under the shadow of an oil lamp, which when caressed by the breeze, sways back and forth over them. The tomb itself alters each time it is traversed. It is an instability which continually tests the history of the edifice until the hotel is finally dismantled and loses its narrative authority to separate one room/moment from another. To arrive here is to have walked in a swirling wind or trailing an evergreen bow behind oneself, to cover ones tracks. Sentiments which resist amnesia emerge, despite the oscillations of an unstable and conflicting reality where words are muted by their endless deferral and the signifying object is reduced to silence.

M.



**June 21 Nepal**

I have just returned to the city after a long absence. My route had lead me to remote trails, across lands of snow covered mountain peaks standing at unreachable pristine heights. Villages dotted the cultivated rice fields in the deep valleys below. No walls or boundaries were felt. The sky had no limit. Never had the desire for the density and the enclosure of the city, for its points of reference and places of ritual, become so overpowering. However, upon approaching the city's walls, the old perceptions of this place resurface deceptively.

*The same structures and backdrops still stand but the story has changed. A new face has now come to greet her, different from the one she left behind. She is confronted by the elusiveness of her bearings. Nothing is fixed - this she knows.*

*This reality reveals itself in the transparency of a dream. A once familiar place appears before her. Particular smells, echoing voices and past events resurge from the depths, yet she barely recognises the physical aspects of the room. It has been re-constructed from dislocated fragments of space, scale and time. Still, she knows she is standing in the same place. Transformed, it has been stripped of the superfluous leaving behind a bare essence.*

*Only a thin and fragile surface exists between her and the realm beyond, where everything - convictions, love, faith, and history - loses meaning. She realizes that it takes so infinitely little for a person to be pushed across this threshold. However, this is where human life takes place: in the immediate proximity of this border, even in direct contact with it.*

"The city must never be confused with the words that describe it... there is no language without deceit," writes Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities*. *Mais, je me demande: était-ce un mensonge qui me disait toujours la vérité?*

The story continues.... Never completely graspable, it is continuously in production and only in the present tense. Its development is never a direct product of a physical place or site. The place can only act to evoke invention, leaving her to interpret and recompose. She is simultaneously the story's main character and main audience and her displacement is essential to a possible reconstruction.

We dream in pictures, not in words. This morning, awakening with the penetrating white light of the morning sun, I could hear children's voices singing in the school yard next door - sounds from the lightness of the heavens. Today is the longest day, I am looking for some shade.

L'H

## July 7 Seattle

I still have no permanent address. The constant movement takes its toll; time is a distance now, a blurred flow past one's reflection in the window, set against a passing town or the rolling countryside. The flicker of street lights on the vinyl seats of a night train careening through welfare towns. Between each illuminated instant a face flashes on the glass against the darkness beyond.

**11:16pm** Blown red light... corner 6th and Main... no cops... too close... white knuckles on the wheel, frantic wiper blades on the screen. Sharp right, the syringes rattle in their bottles. Right again... lightning flash... cemetery gates...

...beyond the gates lie monuments, erected in the hopes of filling the gap. Yet by attempting to name this absence, to stand in the place of fallen objects, they reveal limits. For should I accidentally span this gap in a glimpse of the absolute, I could never say, "I have seen it," I must rather say "what I have seen eludes my understanding." It would evade all the language I could conjure, determined to evoke in my soul only by sublime form what is worth recalling.

Blank stare, beads of sweat, a holograph come to life on the fine skin of the train. Beyond, a bobbing power line dictates the cadence: black on black sky. The details of unremarkable towns pull away... new ones advance to greet it.

**11:29pm** Donor spotted: warehouse district... white male... late 50's, 170 - 175 lbs... grey overcoat... alone on foot... north on 17th... entering railyard.

Eyes flick from side to side following an object for an instant before moving on to the next. Resting now on a peeling billboard, now on a waiting car under a solitary sodium light, a lone figure in the shadows, a brick wall. The train moves on.

**11:49pm** Second contact established... by the book so far... vital signs stable... steam rises into the night.

In certainty there is comfort... and death. The result is a world littered with immobile, well defined objects, leaving no room for any other. The train never slows, eyes peer in from the darkness and back from across the compartment. Drops creep across the face on the glass....

**11:54pm** ...jar... operating smoothly under a street lamp... items retrieved... little waste... by the book... this face haunts you now because you cannot recall it. Every other detail on this night has been picked and replaced too many times, always ending in frustration, with your own unbroken reflection. Only black now. The train moves on, ever slower, pushing aside the thickening night...

Nostalgia is the worst kind of necrophilia.

M.

and the repulsion of the rejected. Hanging stoically on aluminum hinges encrusted with years of corrosive galvanization, the screen door ticks quietly, punctuating the pauses within.

A behemoth of dark wood sleeps on one side of the

## July 23 India

Temples and places of worship are completely interwoven into the old core of the city. In this sacred space, manifestations of the *Puja* are captivating and pervade the air I breathe... candle wax accumulates, shed from golden flames, dripping along the wrought iron holders, falling to rest on the weathered stone floor. Traces of black soot on white stucco. Offerings of rice, flowers, oils and incense wait to be washed away by the approaching rains of the monsoon. These layered recordings are the traces of architecture's story - the marking of the earth. They are a history articulated through gestures, not mere words. This is a spiritual place, composed of stages for collective rituals. A place which has encompassed both social and personal histories of its people.

I also witness the irrational envy of this culture towards the short history of the west. Evident in their adoption of the western suit and tie, never designed for the scorching summer sun. Reliance on air conditioning boxes have rendered the design of buildings inefficient towards climatic conditions... a sudden power failure... trapped inside, the heat becomes unbearable. These incongruities confuse me. I do not see their culture through their eyes but through my own - from where I come from.

*The recognition of the mind's capacity to deny, to render numb and absent one's own body and thoughts, is frightening. Blindness confronts itself, an anxiety she longs to dispel. It emerges, for example, at the moment of the sudden realisation that one's own body has been mutilated in some way. A physical trace appears, a deep cut or a protruding growth, with no prior sensation or pain. That moment, at the sudden sight of blood... drenched socks drooping around the ankles, panic stricken eyes run up the side of her legs to find the unknown source.*

With a red ribbon tied around my finger, we chased each other and danced around the great prayer wheel today. It was magical - if only for a moment.

L'H.

P.S. Prayers according to Tibetan beliefs are transmitted into the air through vibrations and movement. Prayers are printed with black ink onto coloured cloths and hung on lines to reverberate in the wind. Prayer wheels are spun clockwise. The chanting has just started. The sounds echo from the backdrops of the buildings. The city is washed in amber reflections of the setting sun.



August 27

I have seen the first signs of a fall in the sky today. Dusk in the new city. Headlights dance across the viaduct under new born sodium light. From a balcony a young man scans this city, his city, spreading out before him wrapped in blue light. The wind picks up across the bay, the trees stir and the leaves flutter and twist across the abandoned lots and parks where he used to play. Across town to the neon streets where, in some momentarily chic basement bar, a delusional jazz poet sacrifices his mediocre prose into the smoke until his words bleed into the disinterested conversation of others. His ideal reminiscence of the open road or nostalgic boxcar ride surrenders, fractured by the discrete stratagems of a hostile takeover or by a young salesman's leisure suit seduction of an aging boheme. She produces a contrived excuse to break through his barrage of drunken posturing and with considerable effort, leaves him to ponder her batik frock and turquoise jewellery.

A step closer to the edge of the balcony, the city snarls beneath his feet. The isolation in the shadows of heroic monuments host nameless performers, innumerable acts of epiphany and atrocity. The city is a victim described and violated by the actions which it supports...

"...like words."

These last words escape his lips accidentally, regrettably.

"What's that?... Are you ever coming back in?"

He shudders and turns to look into the apartment. Half hidden by the swaying curtain, behind her pale, grey face he can see the glowing screen. They spin the great prayer wheel beneath bright lights, pastel and glitter. *I'd like to buy a vowel.*

"No," he finally answers.

A step over the edge of the balcony. The wind whistles past his ears. Vertiginous descent, again the city, that pathological space which reveals great fears. He understands the certain collisions; checker cabs and horse carriages. Thinks of a dark corner where bewildered tourists are surely being relieved of the burden of their wallets at knife point. Thinks of the park where the slaughterhouses used to be, where red is introduced in the abstract forms, shaped and charged by events of a new order. Thinks of crack and hourly rates - places of Dionysian releases have been totally integrated within the core of the city... artificial vertigo will fill his lungs. Thinks of being released into the night.

M.



September 18

Images of the hearth, security and permanence stand in contrast to those of the eternally displaced wanderer... yet perhaps there exists a reconciliation. In Greek mythology, the coupling of Hestia and Hermes, goddess of the hearth and god of the metaphysical respectively, expresses in its polarity the tension marked in the archaic representation of space. The threshold between them demarcates a synchronous and conflicting desire to arrive and to depart.

The suitcase accompanies me wherever I go. It offers a certain solace. It is not a box in which objects are conserved intact, but a receptacle of mediating character. Its porous skin progressively absorbs, accumulates and discards. Superimposed images are projected within, new meanings emerge. The buckles flick open, reflections are caught and others slip through the seams. The suitcase has become the hearth around which fragments gather. It is carried by a traveller who continuously alters its contents appropriately along the route. Out of necessity, he eliminates all that burdens his steps.

*Manthana* is a Hindu word without a precise English translation. It is a term which can be used in relation to Indian myths that have changed over time either through an outside intervention or a resurfacing from the past. The resulting absorption, conflict, tension and churning that takes place is called *Manthana*. This process supports a crucial distinction between a mere superficial transfer and a fundamental structural transformation. Transformation involves an absorption, an internalisation and ultimately a re-invention of the myth. Each time this metamorphosis occurs, a new era, a *Vistara*, is opened up to our sensibilities. To classical Indian musicians, singers and dancers, the expansion outward into space is simultaneously a journey inward into their own selves.

"... two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge... and *another edge*, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect.... These two edges, *the compromise they bring about*, are necessary. Neither culture nor its destruction is erotic; it is the seam between them, the fault, the flaw, which becomes so."

- Roland Barthes on M. de Sade from *The Pleasure of the Text*.

L'H.

room. Heavy, impossible furniture of ambiguous purpose reflects the life of the room with a long low window into its own history. Smooth curved legs support the heavy drawers, their black handles tapping with the footsteps of passing life. There is a regular silence to the rich green walls of this space, a new green, soaked into the smoothly textured grain of plaster, which once lay beneath a coat of the same golden paper enclosing the telephone. The oak frames of the bay window, darkened in the stain of years, remain untouched by the present. Beneath these darkly framed lights of the gray day, a long low shelf of light unfinished pine stacked together with books and blocks stands heavily on the soft floorboards. Through and beneath the circular surface of a veneered oak table, standing within the wall and overseeing the silence of this room, is a tall dark mantle. Carved oak columns the thickness of a human arm reach up around a beveled mirror, its silver flaking from behind. Long ago, fires forsook this place, first replaced by a gas burner of heavy black cast iron, then by silence and darkness. From floor to ceiling, the mantle casts a presence disproportionate to the rest of the room. Sharp gothic edges reach out to hazard life and dominate space. A small corner, worn from the passage of time, turns toward the phone. Against a wall, cramped within this corner, a table with long lathe-turned legs, supports for long oval flaps, holds a machine incoherent in the room. An institutional green plastic box encases a heavy steel sewing machine. Within the box are countless curses of frustration, let out periodically to cast a pall elsewhere throughout the house. Set into the floor beneath this table, surrounded

## November 11

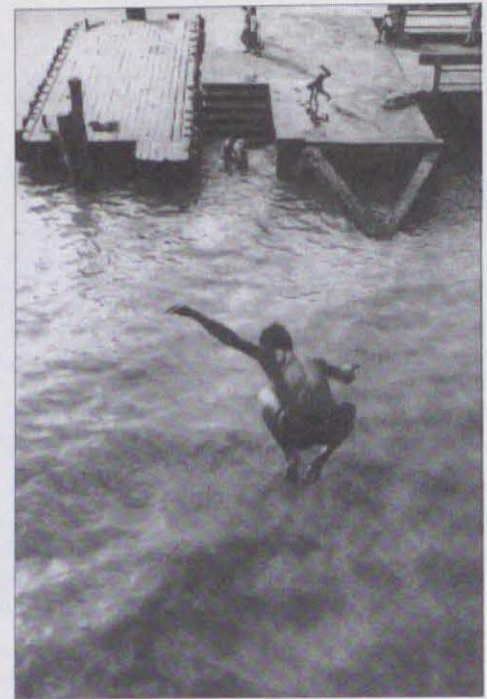
There is comfort in travel, the apparent loss of fixed reference makes us acutely aware of the weight of accumulation. Gather up your few belongings before dawn to stand in anticipation at the gates of the great city. Amongst the warrior monuments and travertine columns, the air is still and cold, the city wall reflects a pale light, though there is no apparent source. Bare feet sink into the dew soaked ground. From some dark recess a chant, an anguished wailing to accompany the vigil of two huddled figures kneeling at the wall, emerges. Every crack and hollow in the sacred surface before them has been consumed, allowing their fingers to glide blindly across it, anticipating each turn, every subsequent shiver - perfect skin. The illicit embrace they desire emerges from unconscious motives.

The first light of dawn calls attention to the oncoming silence. A thick mist renders the scene: an aging photograph or a grey page in a foreign news journal. Fragments hidden in the undifferentiated margins of darkness until now reveal themselves: the cracking paint of an aging sign, the weathered face of a toothless beggar. The monuments stir, warm veins beneath an alabaster shell turn stone to flesh, they survive, continually resurrected despite their maniacal conception. From their shadows emerges an oppressive breath, a cold hand upon the nape of your neck. New evidence that *being* no longer requires that which is stable and fixed: the coarse burlap against your face, the smell of earth which lingers within the hood, the chanting muted. The skin you caressed, once radiant silk, seems now no more than a dismembered leather doll. They have blindfolded each other. In the darkness of this deception everything is texture. Clarity is a needle verging on breaking the flesh: the instant before the skin returns to form. The steel penetrates, the fluids exchange, the excess gathers in a hollow of the flesh. The trace: a single drop on a white sheet. The wailing stops in this instant, amid the shattering separation of bone and tissue.

A hidden atrocity - a missing witness, no fingerprints, a scene wiped clean by conspiracy. These absences are in constant production, a term of the present and by no means a catalogue. Event no tomb could resurrect, no amount of earth could bury. Irretrievable, even in the eyes of those who did not turn away. The aftermath: a wrinkled hand on a firm thigh, a scarring on the limbs of an alabaster statue. There is a deep gouge in the stone where they now lie collects and re-collects the fluids, tomorrow the rain.

We await the next millennium.

Marc Baumgartner, *B.Arch. Carleton School of Architecture.*  
 Marie-Hélène Canakis, *B.Arch. McGill School of Architecture.*  
*This article was composed from notes and reflections that were exchanged between the authors.*



## References:

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text.* and *A Lover's Discourse.*  
 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience.*  
 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities.*  
 Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.*  
 Gregory L. Ulmer, *The Object of Post Criticism.*

## Illustrations:

Postcards:  
 p.11. Hatta Fokker, Rietveldacademie Amsterdam.  
 p.13. Hommage ann Joseph Cornell, Ernst Kamphuis, Leiden.  
 p.14. Azië, Fotografie Herman van Heusden, Haarlem.  
 p12-13. Seattle pictures from letter by M to L'H.