# 1 MONTAGE PRACTICES: THE METROPOLIS

Among the diverse and multiple definitions of post-modernity, the loss of difference emerges most consistently as a theme: modernity's capacity to shock (along with formal tropes of fragmentation) has given way to effects of leveling, the dominance of abstract values; a loss of depth, a "slackening" (Lyotard); or the "waning of affect" (Jameson).[1] This is no doubt in part an effect of new digital technologies that "atomize and *abstractly schematize*" information and objects once experienced first hand. *Distraction, which once implied a radical model for new subjectivities becomes empty time.* Eisenstein's explosive discontinuities fade to Deleuze's "false continuities."

Two ostensibly opposed positions have emerged among architects who have addressed the pervasive role of media and technology in the city today. One asserts that architecture will fade away under the advancing imperatives of technology. Under the domain of distraction, media and technology threaten architecture with its own obsolescence. Alternatively, architects have attempted to reassert architecture's traditional capacity to represent (formally or metaphorically) the condition of distraction through a fragmented or "dislocated" architecture.

I want to propose a way out of what I understand to be a false dilemma. Early modernist methodologies of collage and montage acquired force through the collision of distinct orders, and the generation of tension across seams of difference. Difference was encoded in forceful juxtaposition. Anticipating the modernist fascination with collision, Symbolist poet Isidore Ducasse (the "comte de Lautréamont") spoke of the terrifying beauty of "...the sewing machine and the umbrella on the dissecting table." In the case of Soviet film maker Dziga Vertov (fig.1) montage has another, more politically charged function. Sudden and unexpected juxtapositions have the effect of dislocating the spectator's habits of perception. The artificial spell of the cinema is momentarily broken in order to "lay bare the device" of its own construction. Film making is shown to be work like any other: splicing and editing is intercut with spinning and manufac-
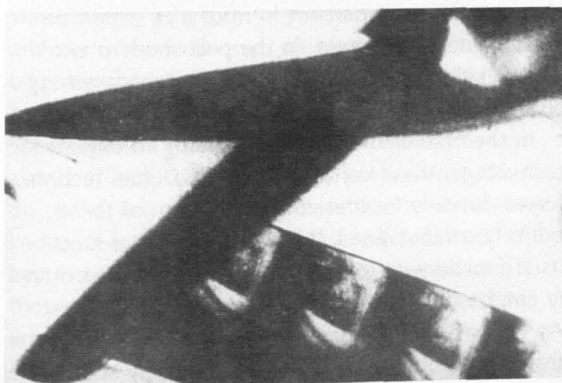
1| Dziga Vertov; Man with a Movie Camera 1928

turing. Stop motion freezes the flow of time, reminding the viewer that his own subjectivity collaborates in the construction of the movie's artifice.
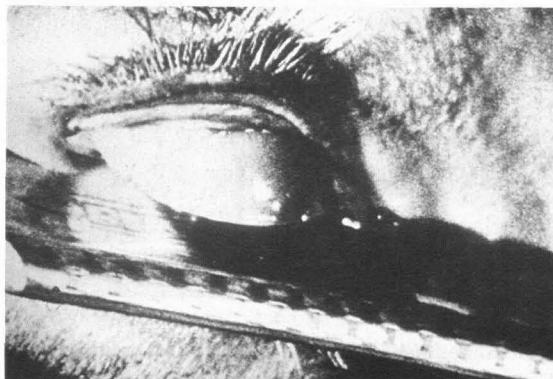
2| Salvador Dali, Luis Bunuel; Le chien andalon 1929

Vertov's political and technological optimism contrasts with the sense of absurdity expressed in *Un Chien Andalou*, the 1929 film made by Luis Buñel and Salvador Dali (fig.2). Here the violence of the modernist paradigm shift comes to the surface, expressing both the escalation necessary to maintain the project of "shock", and the loss of faith in a progressive and redemptive modernism. Surrealism erodes modernism from within, registering a creeping awareness that the whole hygienic-panoptic project of modernism – its desire to remake the world on the basis of new technologies – contains within it the potential to go disastrously wrong.

Architecture is of course more intimately linked to normative constraints of economic and technical reality than film or artwork, and at the same time less sensitive to the speculations of the avantgarde. Yet in the proposals of Mies van der Rohe for urban buildings in the 1920's, a similar tension is evident. His 1928 project for the remodeling of the Alexanderplatz in Berlin,(fig.3) sets a series of crystalline geometric solids against the complex and heterogeneous mix of the late 19th century city fabric. The buildings are marked by the nature of the new metropolis. As objects, they embody the logic of new technologies and changed subjectivities.; yet they also stand apart from the chaos of the city to offer a critique, to point elsewhere. It is no accident that this project is represented by means of photo montage. Through the very means of representation itself, Mies makes explicit the seams, gaps and distractions of modern metropolitan life.

K. Michael Hays, among others, has elaborated this analysis in a much more detailed manner than

> But what characterizes the montage and hence its role as a cell or movie frame? The collision – the conflict of two opposing pieces.
> *Sergei Eisenstein, 1929*
>
> Montage is the determination of the whole...by means of continuities, cutting and false continuities.
> *Gilles Deleuze, 1983*
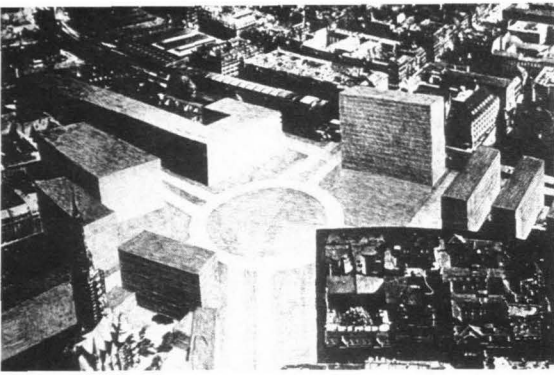
3| Mies van der Rohe; Alexanderplatz 1928

5| Tokyo street at night 1993

is possible here.[2] The point I want to emphasize here is that in Mies's collage, *disjunction* exists not internal to the architecture itself, but between the architecture and its context. Mies has established complex and discontinuous relationships between a series of objects that are themselves fundamentally regular – even geometrically pure – and a city fabric characterized by impure mixtures of old and new. As a result of the uneven implementation of modern technologies in the early twentieth century metropolis, the traditional and the modern tended already to coexist in disjunctive proximity. It is this condition that Mies has made visible in his project.

2 AFTER THE METROPOLIS

What has changed in the new urbanism of the periphery – sometimes designated as „edge city"[3] – is not so much the nature of the object as its context (fig.4). During the post-war period in the United States, massive decentralization, the construction of an interstate highway infrastructure, and new expectations with regard to housing and community all tended to move the city away from density, and to dilute its complex mixtures. And, as Marc Hacker has pointed out, this dismantling of urban density was motivated in large part by cold-war fears of nuclear attack[4] (fig. 4A). The metropolis – once a dense punctual locus of urban identity, privileged site of the encounter with the other – has faded from view, to be replaced by a vast

4| Office Building, Metropark New Jersey 1992

megalopolis interconnected by communication networks both physical and virtual.

Jameson's loss of "depth" or Lyotard's "slackening" therefore have very real counterparts in contemporary urban experience. The city today is a field of ineffable effects suspended in an ether of signs (fig.5). And signs are, among themselves, all equal. [5] The "waning of affect" is visible as the collapse of regional identity, and a corresponding loss of a sense of place. More importantly, parallel with the evening out of meaningful social and political difference is a loss of the avantgardes' special capacity, as avatar of "otherness," to measure and mark those differences. These critiques share a sense of loss at the leveling effect of new technologies. As we move from an economy dominated by technologies of production to an economy dominated by technologies of reproduction, the differences between *things* seem less significant that the poten-

6| Shinto Priests blessing F-1 fighter jet

tial sameness of *images*. In the post-modern world of simulation, anything can combine with anything else without producing a sense of shock (fig.6).

In the case of the shift from analog to digital technology, these concerns are real. Digital technologies not only facilitate the production of these unlikely combinations, the nature of digital media itself functions to even out the differences previously emphasized by collage and montage practices. As Vivian Sobchack has pointed out: „Digital electronic technology atomizes and *abstractly schematizes* the analogic quality of the photographic and

cinematic into discrete *pixels* and *bits* of information that are transmitted *serially*, each bit discontinuous, discontiguous, and absolute – *each bit 'being in itself'* even as it is part of a system."[6] A field of immaterial ciphers is substituted for the material traces of the object. Hierarchies are distributed; "value" is evened out. These ciphers differ *one from the other only as place holders in a code.*

Like it or not, this is the reality given us today, However, I am not convinced that the pessimism of critics such as Jameson is entirely justified. My title "After Mechanical Reproduction" is an obvious reference to Walter Benjamin's famous essay, and I want to refer in particular to Benjamin's idea that one effect of the technological shifts of early modernism (shifts that are evidenced sooner in popular culture than in high culture) is the emergence of new forms of subjectivity. Benjamin describes, for example how early film viewers learned to manage distraction, and in the process began to come to terms with the disjunctive new reality of the metropolis. If we accept, as Benjamin does, a certain fluidity in the construction of the self under changing technologies, I think we can extend the argument, *and be guardedly optimistic about our ability to* learn to manage this new post-modern distraction. And as creative authors, we might be more justifiably confident in our abilities to invent new forms adequate to these new experiences. That having been said, I also want to register a caution. The effects of the early modern metropolis, so well theorized by Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer or Walter Benjamin need to be understood in precise historical context. It is not simply a case of escalation, and we cannot transpose the terms of this analysis to the present. Distraction in the shopping mall is not the same as distraction in the arcades.

A similar effort to understand the complex condition of the contemporary city is required, and continual experimentation on the part of creative artists can only begin to set the terms for further work. *Architecture and urbanism have a primary* role, and it is in this spirit that I show some recent projects.

Architectural work by its nature endorses the value of the physical over the virtual. Yet if understood simply as a form of resistance to the virtual, architecture risks its own obsolescence. It needs to be remembered that the capacity to actualize the experience of the virtual (think of Borromini, or of Scharoun) is a fundamental and even traditional aspect of architecture. Only by paying close attention to the ways in which architecture is already marked by the complex relations of real to virtual, and by creatively examining the role of the architect in these changed urban economies, can architectural practices evolve the means to remake the world.

3 INFRASTRUCTURE: BEIRUT SOUKS

To reconstruct a city which has grown slowly over time to encompass the architectures of many cultures it is imperative to recognize the passage of time, and to accept the partial and incomplete nature of the planning process itself. Precise definition of the architecture is required, but it is also important to recognize the intrinsic limits of the design operations. A city culture as complex as Beirut's cannot be recreated overnight on the basis of a single "masterplan".

How to impose a measure of unity while respecting the essential diversity of the city to come? This is a fundamentally architectural approach, concentrating the design effort at the level of the *urban infrastructure*. Unity is achieved by the continuous rhythm of the roof structure, while the diversity of city life is cultivated below. It should be noted here that while for the purposes of the competition, preliminary proposals are made of the souks and the other buildings, a major advantage of the scheme is that it anticipates the incorporation of various styles and various designs within an overall framework.

Hence it allows phasing, incremental realization and broad participation in the reconstruction process. It is an optimistic approach, confident that the will to rebuild is strong enough to accommodate the complexity of the city to come.
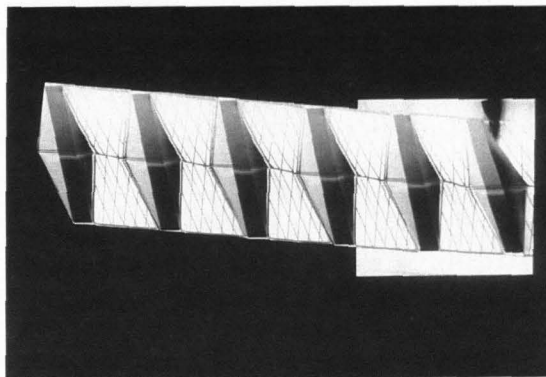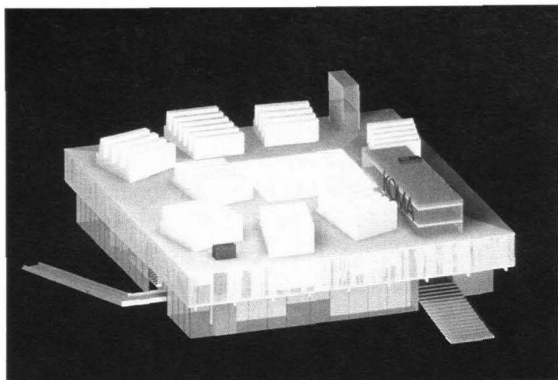

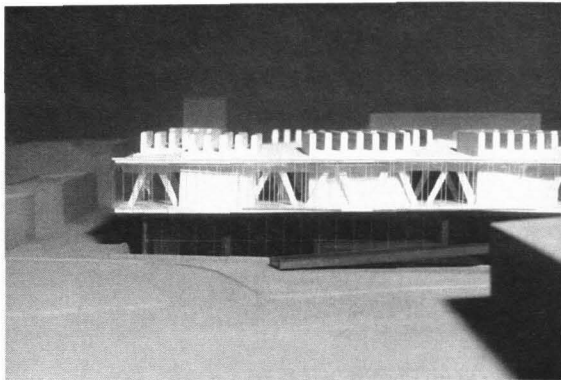7| Stan Allen, Project 1994; reconstruction of the Beirut souks, detail of roof module
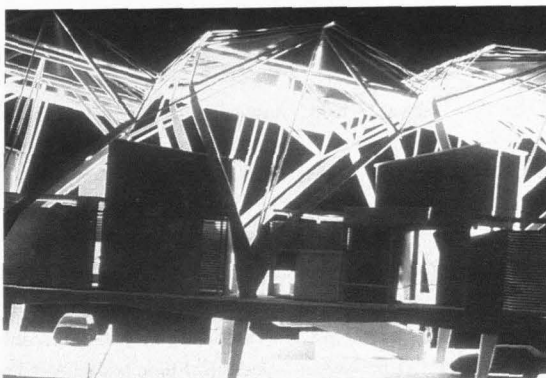
8| Stan Allen, Project 1994; reconstruction of the Beirut souks, section model

9| Stan Allen, Project 1995; Korean Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.; volumetric projection

10| Stan Allen, Project 1995; Blank boxes, Korean Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA.; elevation of model

4 COMPLEX CONTAINERS: KOREAN AMERI-CAN MUSEUM

The building proposes an urbanism characteristic of Los Angeles: long and low, horizontally layered, filled in but not densely packed. Except for a generous garden court, the entire site is filled up to create a *complex container*: a loose protected precinct, within which the diverse life of the program can unfold. The interstitial space becomes the primary space of public occupation. Within this frame, the two scales of the site coexist: the fine grain of the single family houses is reflected in the gallery enclosures, while the large volume refers to the scale of the commercial buildings on the boulevard.

The lower level is open to the street and the surrounding neighborhood. Multiple access points bring all visitors to a common lobby area. The Auditorium, Garden and Temporary Galleries are located at ground level. Permanent Galleries occupy the raised volume, protected by a double outer wall. Each gallery is a discreet skylit volume, scattered over the full extent of this level.

Public functions (Lobby, Gift Shop, Cafe, Tickets, Auditorium access) slip in between the Galleries, occupying the voids between these volumes, creating a linked series of public spaces, with the character of a medieval street or village.

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Notes:

1 See Jean-Francois Lyotard: "Answering the Question: 'What is postmodernism?'" in: The Postmodern Condition (Minnesota, 1986); Fredric Jameson: "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left review 146 (1984): p. 53–92.

2 See K., Michael Hays: Modernism and the Post-Humanist Subject, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1993 or the Essays collected, in: The Presence of Mies , ed Detlef Mertins, MIT Press, 1995.

3 See, among others, Joel Garreau, Edge City: Life on the New Frontier, Doubleday, New York, 1991.

4 Mark Hacker: "Notes on a Changed World" Perspecta 21, Yale, 1983.

5 "Playful or tragic, universal or particular works of art, the oppositions of one world to another or of a cat to a stone are all equal among themselves." Viktor Shklovsky, Cited by Manfredo Tafuri, in: "The Dialectics of the Avant-garde: Piranesi and Eisenstein" Oppositions 11, Winter1977 (Cambridge, MIT Press) p.79.

6 Vivian Sobchak: "The Scene of the Screen: Towards a Phenomenology of Cinematic and Electronic Presence," in: Post-Script 10 (1990) p. 56.