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ARCHITECTURES OF THE INSTANT: GLIMPING THE UTOPIAN IN THE SUSPENDED MOMENT

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ARCHITECTURES OF THE INSTANT

David Claerbout ‘The Algiers Sections of a Happy Moment’ 2008
Stan Douglas ‘Mare Street’ and ‘Pembury Estate’ 2017

For a moment the football game is forgotten. The camera pulls in, shallow depth, the boy looks up as the seagull dips for the offered food. The image dissolves to another, the focus is close, a different view, a child’s smiling face. Dissolve and up, we are aloft now, amongst the gulls, wide angle. Below us the city of Algiers stretches to the sea.

It is strangely quiet, but for the noise of the helicopter below us. East London is set out beneath like a map. Some streets are empty of traffic, we can see people running, others are gathering, waiting. Fires have been started. We are high above, the people are tiny, but from here we can see everything, every detail.

But from where, when, and how do we see?

To image or imagine the city is to address not only the production and representation of space, but also the mediation of its heterogeneous temporalities, in these examples by photography and film. What demands and affordances do still and moving images make; when is the time and where is the space of the digital image? To ask this is also to address what is perceptible, and what may be occluded, in both the image and in the lived city.

Civil Imagination

Making the contemporary legible to itself is a task of art practice. Thus aesthetics must always concern the political and the ethical, not necessarily in what art represents, but how it does so. As a pre-figuring of the possible, it enables form-giving to what can now be imagined, experienced, distributed and collectively understood. The role of the art in the formation of the civic sphere is both of concern in the oldest texts of political philosophy and a topic of great contemporary urgency, as reflected in the work of Žižek and Agamben. There is increasing acknowledgment of the aesthetic sphere as one where engagement - being-together but not necessarily in consensus - constitutes a political sphere, as in Mouffe and Groys. Participatory and relational art practices have interrogated distinctions of public and private spheres, of coercive and disciplinary manifestations of power, and encouraged public discourse on the relation of the individual to others, where it has been lacking politically. Žižek suggests the political force of art may lie in its redistribution of the sensible: a reordering of what can be visible and thinkable. Azoulay brings a new critical imperative to the analysis of photography as political ontology: the act of imaging / imagining as that which can bring forth the civic, for 'civil imagination is a tool for reading the possible within the concrete.' So how might this re-ordering and imagining not only make the contemporary city legible to us, but allow us to glimpse the city as otherwise?
To answer this, through the artworks here under discussion, is to consider how city the reveals itself to the camera and to our gaze, and how this information might constitute a form of civil knowledge. In their temporal and spatial ‘flows of life’, the modern city and the films that captured these flows seemed to share affinities. The life of the street was marked by encounters structured and contingent, shaped by rhythms of work and leisure, but also improvised, ephemeral, spontaneous. These affinities have been thoroughly explored; the city’s ‘optical unconscious’ has long been in analysis.7 The observations of Benjamin’s companion Franz Hessel, in his ‘Architectures of the Instant’ 1927 (cited in Friese8) seemed to apply equally to the ever-shifting visual cityscape and to film’s capacity for its capture as indexical trace, conjuring its own temporal and spatial architectures of experience. Kracauer, who originally studied architecture, would later echo such structural equivalences in his consideration of the cinematic object, now available through previously unimagined spatial and temporal perspectives through the close-up, the long shot, the slowing of time.9 Equally, the city might be considered, via filmic devices of slowed time or the long shot, as a redistribution of the politically sensible. A projection of the civil imaginary revealing the yet-unrealised city, making visible where State power becomes inoperable on bodies in spaces, for Agamben ‘art is political in itself, because it is an operation which contemplates and renders non-operational man’s senses and usual actions, thus opening them to new possible uses.’10 In his ‘Right to the City’ 1967 Henri Lefebvre defines the city as a projection of society on the ground, not only onto the actual site, but as projection onto thought: on how the city is perceived and conceived. It is also a projection of the social as a set of temporal modes, of times and of rhythms.11 The projection in and onto space, perception, modes and rhythms of time: the language is intrinsically cinematic. But what does this cinematic framing foreground, or reveal, of the city as a set of social relations? Can the art of our time show us the city as a projection of our own socio-technical and civil imaginaries?

Digital image construction belies the indexicality of there / then, here / now, or even distinctions between photography and film: we might therefore ask what temporal compressions, expansions or suspensions become available between the still and moving image. Cinematic architectures of the extended ‘instant’, as in these artworks, demand that the viewer treat the dynamic manipulation of viewpoint, framing and time as critical vantage points from which to address the city as a social projection.

What space then becomes available for that which previously had no-place, the utopic? Lefebvre suggests “Utopia is to be considered experimentally by studying its implications and consequences on the ground. These can surprise. What are and would be the most successful places? …What are the times and rhythms of daily life which are inscribed and prescribed in these ‘successful places’ favourable to happiness?”12 To explore these questions I will return to the 2008 work by Belgian artist David Claerbout.

**A Happy Moment**

A thirty-seven minute film, projected as an ongoing continuous loop, The Algiers Sections of a Happy Moment transports us to a Casbah rooftop. A group of boys and their football game, a space appropriated from the steep rise of the old city, a sun-filled day, seagulls wheeling overhead. At first we might read the unhurried frames as slowed film, but as each stilled image fades into the next we become aware we are viewing a single moment in time. More baffling still, the lexicon and syntax of frame and edit, focal depth, close-up, aerial view and long shot explore the space so thoroughly, it becomes apparent that this cannot possibly be a single moment captured from multiple vantage points.
The privileged, decisive moment of photography is at once denied and spun out like a thread through cinematic space and suspended time. And indeed this mobilised view is an exquisitely crafted digital construction that voids any distinction between still and moving: thousands of photographs from which hundreds were chosen and sequenced into the form of a film.

The moment, fleeting and almost ungraspable, has a particular relation to time and to representation. It is both a privileged exception to the flow of time, its interruption, and something that has always already moved away. The dual inference of stillness and momentum leaves it perfectly poised as stasis and as change.

Into this temporal space, our contemplative gaze has time to roam and inhabit the privileged, kairotic instance of happiness. Lying dormant in the everyday, for Lefebvre such moments can detonate into fully lived presence and intensity – as such they cannot endure but should be grasped in all their utopic potential. Claerbout states that an intention for The Algiers Sections was to disarm and relax the ‘suspicious gaze’. The line of sight made available to us in this happy moment might be not just be spatial, but an attentive awareness of the fully present and inhabited now-place, to be in-time with others. Thus a city space, adapted and improvised by its residents, becomes accessible to us as a projection of civic imagination. Importantly this ‘moment’ never was an event but instead a cinematic image as temporal and spatial excess, an impossible-possible granted to our gaze. The viewer joins those imaged in a paused fragment of happiness, now manifest as a field of relations that might define a liveable, civic space.

For the eye to move so freely through the suspended instant also allows other images to rise up and dissolve: most notably the luminous monochrome frames of Pontecorvo’s 1966 Battle of Algiers, in which the everyday lived spaces of the old city are both the physical and conceptual spaces of resistance to those of the coloniser. It is worth noting how urban planning of Algiers in the 1830s helped establish colonial spatial and cultural dominance. It was a spectacle of sovereign power, in its ability to destroy and to construct, an exemplar of political-aesthetic reordering.

Or perhaps more recently recalled scenes from the so-called ‘Collateral Murder’ Baghdad airstrike of July 2007, with footage from the Target Acquisition and Designation System of the Apache helicopter, leaked controversially into the public domain. The gunsight camera, from its circling aerial vantage...
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(long-shot) and precision targeting (close-up) scans the rooftops and courtyards of the city suburb, rendering in hazy monochrome the people gathered below. The suspicious gaze of the apparatus identifies its own mirror image - a camera telephoto lens as a weapon - with lethal effect. These examples remind us of other contexts and narratives that filmic images make available: how images construct and are constructed, how the image is a surface, a ground onto which society is projected, but also a means by which its concepts are circulated and distributed. How important it is to understand the vantage point from which an image is captured. How important to engage as a viewer-actant in the civil discourse of the image.

Mare St and Pembury Estate
I will turn now to the pair of large photographs of Hackney, east London, ‘Mare Street’ and ‘Pembury Estate’, made in 2017. They form part of a current project by Canadian artist Stan Douglas, examining the global upheavals and emancipatory demands of 2011, from Zuccotti Park to Tahrir Square, the ‘year of dreaming dangerously’.

The London riots of that August were triggered by the police killing, in unclear circumstances, of a minor criminal. Local anger at the police escalated into rioting and looting across London, then nationally to other cities. Three years into austerity, in the wake of the financial crisis, it was the nearby City and Canary Wharf financial districts that appeared to have been bolstered at everyone’s expense.

Douglas has always been interested in these moments of unpredictability, when history might go one way or another and a potential is found, or perhaps squandered. For the rioters, the potential - as power, and in the sense of a future inscribed in the present - lay in occupying those streets in a moment of apparent subjective freedom, enabled by the coming together of bodies in space. This was the terror, and the revelation, of the crowd.

Combining meticulously researched documentation, from news footage to Google Street View, with newly-shot aerial film, Douglas assembled a (re)construction of the gathering disturbance. Great care was taken to replicate the details of the shopfronts and signage, exactly the ephemeral architectures of the instant that fascinated Hessel. Asynchronous, temporally distributed images build a spatial, visual field that is at once past, and tangibly present before us.

Focus, clarity and narrative truth are desired from visual documentations and from historical perspectives: Douglas problematizes simple access to either. We are made aware that these images are actual, virtual and historiographical.

Douglas utilises the grammatical structure of panoptic surveillance then displaces their agent. There is an unmooring, a rupture in the closed system whereby structures of representation and power implicate each other. The apparatuses of these are in the optical structures - viewpoint, perspective - but we cannot locate, and identify with, any single vantage point amongst the dense composited layers of the image. The master narrative of what ‘is happening’ is both offered and occluded. Most images of riots place us, dramatically, at street level. Instead, it is the viewer that has to choose where to place and move their gaze, a mobile and focused attentiveness. What might narratively unfold as a sequence in film is available to us, all-at-once, across the surface of the two photographs. Our gaze overrides the cut, the edit. And what might seem contingent to the narrative of unfolding violence are the tangible traces of lives lived, improvised and routine. The washing drying on balconies of the Pembury flats, the worn-out summer grass around the playground, the plastic chair in the yard, plants in a window box: the compressed spaces of the city. All are rendered in equal focus, an uncanny hyper-clarity that telescopes proximity and distance.

Central and periphery are always in play in Douglas’ work, a consideration of social and ethical frameworks – of race for instance - hidden in the everyday. Who decides what stays local, or becomes significant? Histories still residual, or marked as absences; in making present these failed past utopias, his works operate as virtual images of what might still shape futures yet to come.
The Pembury Estate is emblematic of the utopic ideals of pre- and post-War social housing programmes for London’s East End: a production of the social through architectural and spatial planning. As such it is equally a physical structure, and an ideologically contested zone of public and private space. Estates were a significant focus in the search for blame, or cause, in the wake of rioting: framed as either private or public responsibility, individual or collective failings, whose emblems were the malfunctioning consumer-citizens who disrupted codes of spatial practice, looting rather than shopping, rioting rather than organising politically.\textsuperscript{21}

Lefebvre reminds us ‘The urban cannot be defined either as attached to material morphology … or as being able to detach itself from it. … It is a mental and social form, that of simultaneity, of gathering, of convergence….It is a field of relations including notably the relation of time (or of times; cyclical rhythms and linear durations) with space (or spaces: isotopias and heterotopias).’\textsuperscript{22}

Hackney is a heterotopic space of multiplicity and difference, historic neglect and local resilience. In August 2011 construction continued at the nearby Olympic Park, with less than a year remaining before the Games, the promises of prosperity and legacy still abstract. Prosperity remains elusive for many Hackney residents. The Park however is an isotopic space, a space of post-industrial leisure and lifestyle that smooths difference, aligning itself not with its near neighbourhoods but with similar locations across London, and globally.\textsuperscript{23}

**Representations of Space, Spaces of Representation**

So how might we think the overlap of a critical spatial practice with a critical art practice? Lefebvre suggests that the colonisation of everyday life was underwritten by visual regimes of signification: single point perspective, space measurable and geometrically distributed. The facades, monuments, lines of sight, and vistas of architecture treat space as a predominately visual medium: something that is common to urban planning and film alike.\textsuperscript{24} The panoptic ‘view from above’ that flattens and abstracts space whilst also mapping and surveilling it: the gesture of the coloniser, the flight of the drone, and more than ever the visual regime of our time.

These representations of space are abstract, conceptual, they delimit boundaries of public and private. This is space looked at from the outside, the first (arche) differentiation. This is space that can be thoroughly quantified and expressed as economic value. Likewise its temporality can be measured, as rational economic units, linear and directional.

In contrast to these prescriptions and proscriptions of the city there is space as it is lived in, inventively, unpredictably, often precariously. For Lefebvre these are spaces of representation whose meanings or patterns emerge from the inhabiting of lived space, from its uses, creating cycles of return or divergence. These spaces have participatory rather than economic value: civic spaces for being-with-others, in consensus and dissensus. It is these spaces of representation that express bodies politic. Not space from the inside but space understood without the need for such differentiations; porous and adaptable. The time of this lived space is dilatory, uneven, time as it is felt: time that pauses in ‘moments’ of play, wonder, or absorption.

I have argued that these art works open up architectures of the instant as modes of analysis: spaces where thought can move around. Digital assemblage, not indexicality; multiple and suspended time, not linear flow. These acknowledge the conditions of contemporary image production, and the experience of the contemporary city. The layering of conflicting temporalities, proximities and vantage points acts as aesthetic strategy and as critical strategy.

Douglas’ photographs collapse panoptic mastery and the intimacy of lived detail into the same space. A vivid moment when the street is occupied differently, but the possibility of the crowd or of agonistic polemic cannot find legitimate expression: what is right there, yet is occluded. The Happy Moment dilates and pauses time: it constructs a temporal space of representation, a freedom to survey and to inhabit this present moment of happiness. This might address the question of where we look for the successful spaces on the ground of lived experience, the times and rhythms of the city ‘favourable to happiness’. A virtual possible-impossible, right there, but now no longer
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occluded. Lefebvre asserts that the ‘urban remains in a state of dispersed and alienated actuality, as kernel and virtuality. What eyes and analysis perceive…can at best pass for the shadow of a future object in the light of a rising sun’.25

Claerbout and Douglas return the city to us as such a future object, and its shadow, in images made of light and darkness. This is the city available to ‘eyes and analysis’: real and imagined, constructed and contingent, quotidian and now utopian.

REFERENCES

4 Boris Groys, Going Public (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010).
10 Agamben, Art, Inactivity, Politics, 140-141.
12 Lefebvre, Right to the City, 151. More (1516) would also have been aware that Eutopos – happy place – was a near homophone of Utopia.
15 This also recalls Bloch’s definition of the lived moment as Utopian: ‘The final will is that to be truly present. So that the lived moment belongs to us and we to it and ‘Stay awhile’ could be said to it. Man wants at last to enter into the Heve and Now as himself, wants to enter his full life without postponement and distance. The genuine utopian will is definitely not endless striving, rather: it wants to see the merely immediate and thus so unpossessed nature of self-location and being-here finally mediated, illuminated and fulfilled, fulfilled happily and adequately.’
17 Made available to Wikileaks in 2010, the attack killed twelve civilians, including a Reuters journalist and cameraman. Accessed February 16, 2018, https://wikileaks.org/wiki/Collateral_Murder,_5_Apr_2010
19 This crowd, as an articulation of the people (for whom and from whom democratic political representation arises) seemingly had no coherent agenda from which to contest power: rather the destructive mob (still incipient in these images) turn on their own neighbourhoods, an accessing of a particular power for ‘defective and disqualified’ consumers (Zygmunt Bauman’s term) those who could neither inhabit the streets legitimately as consumers nor feel represented as citizens of a city in transition.
20 of attention, an attending to: a reaching towards with the gaze and with a presence of mind, constituents of subjectivity.
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22 Lefebvre, Right to the City, 131.
23 “It was never clear how an Olympic Games could or would address inequalities which derive from relative poverty... market led physical development of the kind now underway cannot address core areas of need, and runs the risk of excluding or even displacing those with little market power.” Ralph Ward, ‘Regeneration Games’ In Olympic Games Impact Study: Post-Games Report 2015, 154-5 accessed February 11, 2018, https://library.olympic.org/Default/doc/SYRACUSE/161895/olympic-games-impact-study-london-2012-university-of-east-london?_lg=en-GB An apparently public project has delivered significant private gain.
25 Lefebvre, Right to the City, 148.

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