Autonomous Worlds: the Works of Larissa Fassler
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Catalogue Essay for *Walking in Place*

"It is only in the manner of immense parentheses that non-places daily receive increasing numbers of individuals… The non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society."
Marc Augé, *Non-Places*.

The projects that Larissa Fassler has collected together in this catalogue chart the everyday spaces of the modern city. Fassler focuses on the most banal, sterile, quotidian, and unimaginative aspects of the city as it is experienced on a daily basis by its inhabitants: the underground pedestrian-ways and train networks, the squares, streets and residential complexes they connect to, and the spaces that are a by-product of bureaucratic problem-solving, rather than social or design sensitivity. These are the spaces Marc Augé, the cultural anthropologist, has defined as "non-places," characterized by the "atomization" of people in which "community" is dissolved into seas of discrete, anonymous individuals ("customers, passengers, users, listeners"), and "place" is substituted with "space," resulting in the depersonalized and homogenous transit hubs that demarcate the contemporary world. As Augé writes,

"The air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called 'means of transport', the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself."[1]

These non-places form "a succession of autonomous worlds" that facilitate flows of people and capital.[2] Writing about 1920s Berlin, Siegfried Kracauer noted how the transitory space of the hotel lobby created a similar effect. A space of "relaxation and indifference," the hotel lobby was already a prototypical non-space: a space of pseudo-togetherness (anonymous and atomized) that Kracauer terms a "contentless solemnity" which erases difference. An enclave of "pseudo-life" constructed from a surface aesthetics, the lobby is the spatial formation that manifests the rationalized society, which "exists only as a concept."

The British novelist J. G. Ballard devoted his career to describing such disarticulated, alienating, atomizing, and reifying spatial forms that are the epitome of the modern city. (His concerns were foreshadowed by the earlier generation of Weimar theorists, including Kracauer, Georg Lukács, Georg Simmel, and Walter Benjamin). For example, Ballard's early novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1966-1970), saw the city as an intersection of concrete landscapes—overpasses, parking structures, plazas and geometries of high-rise balconies (many of which were in ruin), and the mediatic effects of curtain walls, giant billboards, radioscopes, antennae, and satellite dishes. Published around the same time as *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Guy Debord's manifesto of spectacular modernity, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), describes a spectacular space that operates as a form of distraction and illusion, creating a space dominated by advertising spectacles and media flows. Debord's

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[1] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Antropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London/New York: Verso, 1995), 79.

[2] See Hans Ibelings, *Supermodernism: Architecture in the Age of Globalization* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2003), 78. Ibelings is borrowing the term "supermodern" from Augé.

argument updated Marx's theory of reification, in which social relations between people are mediated by commodities and objectified through their labour in capitalist processes of production and consumption. "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail," Debord writes, " presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles... The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image."[3]

Inhabiting these imagistic spaces, Fassler's work is only ostensibly concerned with the spatial forms of Berlin's "non-places." Although she uses the conventions of architectural representation—scale models, plans, sections, elevations, and projections—to map these spaces, Fassler is interested in an entirely different agenda: the practices of everyday life that animate—and critique—these spaces. Here we could think of the architectural practices of the 1960s and 1970s that sought similar aims through drawings and mappings, such as the British architects Peter and Allison Smithson's interest in elevating everyday space (in particular the conjunction of concrete and steel banality) with the spectacular neon-lit bill-board scaled world of advertising that is ubiquitous to the modern city. The Smithsons passed this interest on to Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown in the United States, whose seminal book, produced with Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972) involved mapping the Las Vegas Strip of the 1970s. Signage, density and intensity of lighting, program, uses of words, images, and icons were among the elements mapped, set out on plan or elevation drawings and abstracted in diagrams. Crucially, this the research focused on the user's perspective—mapping the entire strip, for example, as two sets of photographs: one taken from the windscreen of a moving car, the second taken out the side window and mapping the strip as a continuous elevation.

Event, and the experience and journeys of the urban dweller were all interests of the Smithsons or Venturi and Scott-Brown. In this sense, of the most significance to Fassler's project are the infamous psychogeographic maps that document the *dèrives* of the French Situationist International, the movement headed by the provocateur Guy Debord. These maps followed the Situationist's drunken ramblings through Paris, reorganizing the traditional map of the city into a new system of connections and networks that traced relationships rather than geographical locations, layering the topological over the topographical. Similarly, Fassler undermines the rationality of architectural representation and measurement through a strategic reworking of unit and data: length and distance is measured in number of footsteps, height as "me + arm + hand" or "me + arm + hand + hand." Site notes include the number of people who cross the bridge, the number of bikes, the weather, where punks sit, where people urinate, where the illegal Vietnamese cigarette seller stashes his wares, when police cars arrived, how much a beer and sausage costs, together with train times, bikes, signs, plaques, regulations, billboards, posters, graffiti and stickers, photos of historic events that took place on the site, newspaper articles, cost projections for redevelopment of the sites, municipal reports, crime reports, and even novels.

With this multiplicity, Fassler's interest in "the public," rather than "public space" or even "public art," links her work to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's definition of the "multitude," whose movements "designate new spaces" and "establish new residences."[4] Michel de Certeau also identified tactics with the multitude: tactics are the operational modalities of users, consumers, those subjected to regimes of power. Strategies are the operational

[3] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994 (1967)), pp. 12-24.

[4] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 397.

mode of power, interested only in circumscribing the space of institutions of power in order to determine—and control—relations with exteriors distinct from them. Tactics do no not rely on established borders or visible totalities—the tactic is always localized, always "on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing.'"[5] Their operations and results are unpredictable, noisy, and dirty.

Fassler's techniques of documentation and representation are—like the Situationists' maps before them—a form of tactic: they map a dense multiplicity of fragmentary and incommensurable effects. Like Ballard's analysis of the city, Fassler sees media, architecture and body as inseparable. Her work is thus in tandem with contemporary interests of architecture that seek to create "event space" out of a confluence of form, effect, spectacle, and user. Her drawings, however, owe and allegiance to those of Archigram, who used the trappings of media culture and advertising to develop "instant cities" and events that both celebrated pop culture and subverted the tired urban and entertainment spaces of 1970s Britain.

A psychotic space perhaps, but Ballard's urban world was phenomenal nonetheless, a realm in which spatial organization, sensation, and corporeal existence merged and contaminated each other. Kantian biologist and precursor of Phenomenology, Jakob von Uexküll, defined the concept of the "*Umwelt*," the subjective environment, an "environment-world" or the spatio-temporal context of an organism. Martin Heidegger followed this thinking, distinguishing between measured, rational space (that of the architect, builder or engineer) and experienced space—the situational, contextual present of the sensing, perceiving body in space. Fassler's personal measurement systems and her notational tracings of experiential and archival information constantly negotiate the gap between these two notions of space.

Walter Benjamin ascribed a synaesthesic mode of perception to the cinema and architecture in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility," in which he distinguishes between an absorbed concentration, the way in which a new arrival perceives the city, and a distracted attention, in which the resident unconsciously understands a familiar city.[6] A distracted reception or perception of the urban environment is, for Benjamin, a visuality that becomes "tactile, akin to "feeling one's way."[7] Measured with her body and recorded through her impressions of these imagistic spaces, Fassler's optical-tactile experiencing of space is similarly one in which the real and virtual collapse—a space in which imagination, fantasy, hallucination, affect, and fiction, mingle with the material, the visual, the sensory.[8] This is Fassler's world.

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[5] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Unviersity of California press, 1984), p. xix.

[6] "In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968): 239

[7] Linked to habit rather than attention, perception of the built environment is only incidentally or peripherally optical, or "absent-minded."

[8] On the question of delirious effects, see Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for New York* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994 (1978))