Marc Angélil

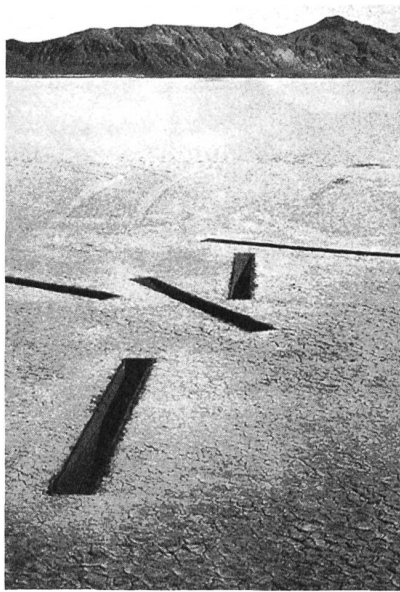# City X: A City without Qualities

The Crossing of Center and Periphery

Abb. links: Michael Heizer, Dissipate, Black Rock Desert, Nevada 1968

rechts: Mary Miss, Perimeters/Pavillions/Decoy, Long Island, New York, 1978
Michael Heizer, Double Negative, Mohave Desert, Nevada 1969
Robert Morris, Mirrored Boxes, 1965
Robert Smithson, First Mirror Displacement, Yucatan, Mexico

The following observations on contemporary urbanism are founded on the assumption that the traditional city has come to an end; that is to say, the concept of the city as an unitary body with identifiable qualities has gradually been replaced by another kind of city, a city essentially marked by a loss of identity. In order to come to an understanding of what such a city might be, one might consider a city where its quality is in the absence of qualities – in short, a city without qualities, which for the purpose of this article will be termed City X.

This kind of city can no longer be addressed in terms of traditional understandings of urban design. New approaches and methodologies need to be developed, new vocabularies explored. Within this type of urbanism, one encounters various places with no special significance attributed to their names: the peripheries of London, of Paris, of Milan, the agglomerations of Los Angeles, Houston, Atlanta, the outskirts of Bombay, Singapore, and Shanghai.

"So let us not place any particular value on the city's name," writes Robert Musil in his novel of the early 1930's, The Man without Qualities.

"Like all big cities," he writes, " it was made up of irregularity, change, forward spurts, failures to keep step, collisions of objects and interests, punctuated by fathomable silences; made up of pathways and untrodden ways, of one great rhythmic beat as well as the chronic discord and mutual displacement of all its contending rhythms. All in all, it was like a boiling bubble inside a pot made of the durable stuff of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions."[1]

The question must be raised as of how this city might be understood, nameless as it remains despite Musil's attempt later in the novel at giving it a name; "... a kind of super–American city", he calls it, "where everyone rushes about, or stands still, with a stopwatch in hand."[2]

In order to analyze this city, a strategy shall be proposed specifically focusing on the question of terminologies and their underlying conceptual structures pertaining to urban form.

The strategy suggests an intersection of two, at first so it seems, unrelated texts. The first is an essay by the post–structuralist art critic Rosalind Krauss entitled "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," in which types of formal intervention within the Land Art Movement of the late sixties and early seventies are addressed expanding the very definition of sculpture itself.[3] The second is a paper by the urban historian André Corboz entitled "The Land as Palimpsest" referring to the reading of the city as a multi–layered text, loaded with traces, and written across the surface of the land.[4]

One text pertains to art, the other to urbanism. The intersection of the two essays suggests a crossing of disciplines, a grafting of one onto the other, thus proposing the possibility of a cross disciplinary transfer from one area of knowledge to another.[5] Such an intersection of texts, while considered a form of analysis, begins to imply a process of how meaning is construed within the terrain of City X.
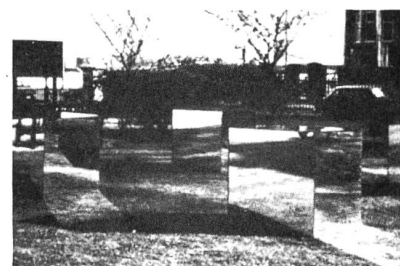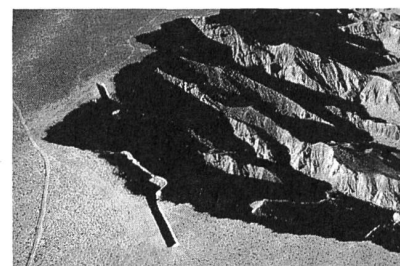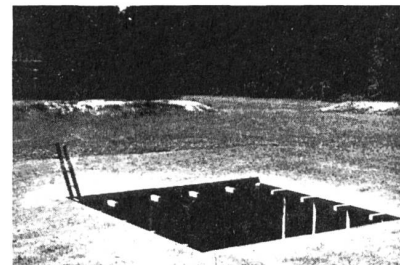
SCULPTURE IN THE EXPANDED FIELD

Rosalind Krauss' essay begins by tracing a historical line of development within sculpture focusing on the emergence of new tendencies in the 1960's. She discusses the work of artists involved with precise interventions within the natural landscape, as for example a site construction by Mary Miss on Long Island in New York, which could simply be considered as a pit in the earth. The square face of the opening can be seen, "and so we stare at the pit in the earth," writes Krauss, "and think we both do and do not know what sculpture is." Also, to be seen are the ends of a ladder needed to descend into this excavation. The work reveals itself surprisingly as a delicate structure of wooden posts and beams, an unexpected construction of tectonic quality below grade. Krauss terms this kind of Land Art work as a site construction.
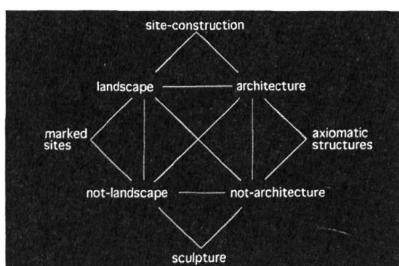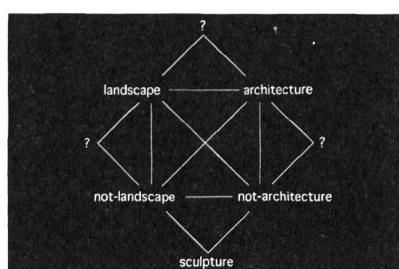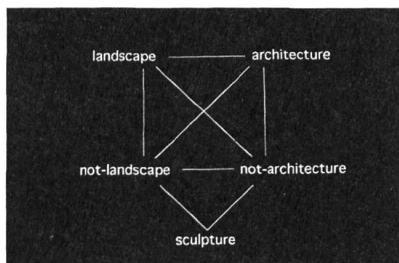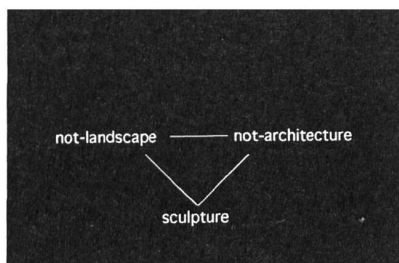
Other examples belonging to Land Art interventions include the marking of sites, such as Michael Heizer's incisions in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada, created by means of a series of wooden boxes carefully depressed within an existing dried lake bed – its corresponding other being a series of small scale incisions entitled Matchdrop perfectly engraved in Düsseldorf within its sidewalk of granite. At a much larger scale, Michael Heizer's Double Negative, a cut within a cliff at the edge of the Mormon Mesa, recalls earth movements generally associated with civil engineering works.[6] "And so we stare at these cuts and think we both do and do not know what sculpture is." Krauss terms these Land Art works as marked sites.

Land Art interventions include strategies of displacement as deployed by Robert Morris' Mirrored Boxes. While visually integral to their setting by mirroring grass and trees, these boxes simultaneously distinguish themselves from their immediate surroundings. They are undoubtedly a part and apart of the landscape that they reflect. A similar practice was pursued by Robert Smithson: projecting the sky onto the ground, displacing the notion of groundedness. Such structures, according to Krauss, are axiomatic in the sense that they belong to the transformation of a given condition based on the deployment of specific concepts as, for example, that of displacement. "And so we stare at these bits of sky on the ground and think we both do and do not know what sculpture is." Krauss terms such kind of works axiomatic structures.

At the core of Land Art interventions, the very definition of sculpture seems to have been displaced. The term must be "stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity," writes Krauss, in order to include such art forms as earthworks, excavations, trenches and the like. They are "that which they are not." As art works they are not–landscape, although inherently connected to the natural sites in which they are inserted. Similarly, they are not–architecture, although inherently tied to aspects of materiality, building technique, and production. In this sense, Land Art as sculpture, according to Krauss, could be considered "a combination of exclusions" resulting "from the addition of the not–landscape to the not–architecture." Sculptural art operates on the outer limits of those terms here stated as a pair of negatives. These terms, however, include by definition their respective polar opposites expressed positively, namely landscape and architecture – sculpture as a double negation, a Double Negative, to borrow an expression from Michael Heizer.

We see here Krauss at work, performing a mapping operation taken from the field of mathematics, specifically referred to as the Klein Group Expansion, in order to identify a field of possibilities within which the term sculpture might be situated.[7] An expanded field is thus generated by

not-landscape ——— not-architecture

sculpture

landscape ——— architecture

not-landscape ——— not-architecture

sculpture

landscape ——— architecture

not-landscape ——— not-architecture

sculpture

site-construction

landscape ——— architecture

marked sites

axiomatic structures

not-landscape ——— not-architecture

sculpture

linke Seite: Rosalind Krauss, Klein Group 1978

rechts: Richard Serra, Shift, 1970-72
Richard Serra, List of transitive verbs, 1967-68

"problematizing sets of oppositions" between which the category Land Art is suspended. The term oscillates between various definitions given in this example by the classification of sculpture, site construction, marked sites, or axiomatic structures. These terms open up potential forms of reading founded upon formal operations on a set of cultural terms, shifting the set standards of given definitions.

In analogy, works of Land Art are marked by distinct operations carried out as interventions within a given context. Sets of action, as listed by Richard Serra, include acts of cutting, digging, slicing, carving, removing, displacing etc. which are mapped onto the surface of the land. Such works can be understood as the traces of processes, notations of procedures, or cartographic representations of applied operations, shifting the set standards of given conditions.

Serra's project entitled Shift at King City, Canada is an intervention on a given site. The work could be read as an act performed onto the land. Serra operates with form. The land is read as a formal artifact onto which form has been applied. Serra's medium could be considered form performed on form. A series of six concrete slabs are sliced into the landscape. While the walls become a part of the land, they fundamentally transform its very nature. With the investment of formal manipulations, form – i.e. the land – is here being transformed, deformed, informed. Walking through the work, the six walls or "stepped elevations," Serra writes, "function as artificial horizons cutting into, extending, and continually shifting the real horizon." The walls are, according to Serra, "totally transitive: elevating, lowering, foreshortening, contracting, compressing. The line as a visual element becomes a transitive verb."[8]

THE LAND AS PALIMPSEST

André Corboz's text, "The Land as Palimpsest," follows, although of a different subject matter, a structure of analysis parallel to that of Rosalind Krauss. He constructs, as Krauss did, a field in which to develop understandings of the land as territory, repeatedly shifting horizons of reference. His observations range from definitions of the land as a category of the rural to that of the urban. The transformation of earth into land is the result of various processes, he writes. Land clearing, terracing, irrigation, the construction of roads, the erection of structures "turn land into an unceasingly remodeled space." The land becomes an object of construction, a project, a type of artifact to be produced. It "has a form," or "better still, it is a form."

The dynamism of the phenomena of formation and production succeeded historically in subjecting the land to increasingly urban operations. The city has always imposed its will on the countryside. This subjection of the one to the other undoubtedly marked the history of urban development. "The city grew," writes Corboz, "was planned, transformed, produced, exchanged, exploded and spread."

In this process from which new urban landscapes emerge over again , a kind of "developmental or planning relation" with the land is established. Corboz points to the specific instruments deployed in initiating this relation vis–à–vis the land. Particular significance is attributed to the role of the map as an instrument for planning. It is through the map that a developmental relation with the land is implemented. The map provides a survey of a territory, which in reality cannot be entirely perceived. Whole regions can be taken hold of at a glance. A map is an artifact artificially produced. It is at times an object of contemplation displayed as a collective good, as was for example the case with the map of London showing anticipated post–war developments of the city region.

What is the relation between the map and the land, between the means of representation and that represented? "To represent the land means to understand it," writes Corboz. Such a graphic depiction however is "not a tracing" nor a direct reproduction of found properties but constitutes in itself "always a creation."

In its most direct form, the map is an abstract survey of a given condition. An early fifteenth century representation of Champeaux shows a selection of significant features as well as relationships derived from a reading of the place. Elements of the existing fabric are brought to the forefront, others are omitted. The territory is abstracted and depicted as a formal system. Mapping is in so far a creative act in that it always involves interpretation.

With the development of precise surveying instruments, the map becomes a projection of the land. Entire territories are geometrically described, measured, triangulated. The surveyor's grid is superimposed onto the land, as was proposed by Thomas Jefferson, unifying with great regularity and a sense of egalitarianism "the vast open territories of America."[9] The plan of Los Angeles of 1875, for example, shows the spatial extension of the grid beyond the limits of the city covering its yet unoccupied surrounding landscapes awaiting human settlement. The grid evolves as the armature of future development determining the structure of the city – at first its land subdivision and street patterns, followed by the infill of the urban fabric.

With the graphic denotation of transportation networks, density distributions, and land use allocations, an active role in zoning and planning processes is ascribed to the map. It takes the role of an agent for future projection, its function being that of a manual of instruction putting forth what needs to be cleared, terraced, irrigated, accessed, and built upon. It is a trace of processes, or better still, a cartographic representation of potentially applicable operations. Sets of actions are mapped onto the surface of the land including acts of cutting, digging, slicing, carving, removing, and displacing.

The land is being undoubtedly transformed, as much physically as symbolically. Every map is more than just the representation of a physical reality, for it is a bearer of intention always ideologically marked. The land becomes semanticized with layers of meaning which are manifested through physical intervention. Value is attributed to the land's constant re–configuration. This assigning of "value is and can only be cultural," writes Corboz, concepts such as nature, land, urbanity being that "which culture designates to be such."

With this operative function attributed to mapping processes, an unexpected reversal takes place: the map is substituted for the land. It is the map that is constructed, worked upon, and formed. The land becomes accordingly the representation of the map. Corboz recalls an ancient fable quoted in a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, in which cartographers draw a map at full scale covering an entire region.[10]

The city is written by the map. Corboz compares this appropriation of territory with a text, a text tirelessly erased and rewritten, a type of palimpsest. If one considers the map as a notation of processes, then the city as a palimpsest could be perceived as an accumulation of maps layered one onto the other.[11] One property of a palimpsest is its recurrent modification due to the erasure of a written piece and the subsequent addition of a text or text fragment. Corboz applies this concept to the unceasing transformation of the city body. Modifications of the city's textural fabric are
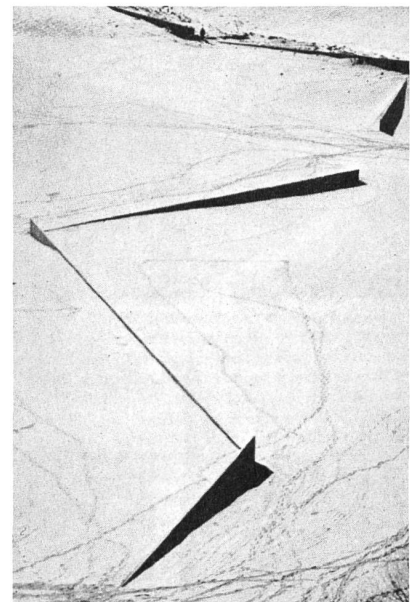
to scatter	to modulate
to arrange	to distill
to repair	of waves
to discard	of electromagnet.
to pair	of inertia
to distribute	of ionization
to surfeit	of polarization
to complement	of refraction
to enclose	of simultaneity
to surround	of tides
to encircle	of reflection
to hide	of equilibrium
to cover	of symmetry
to wrap	of fluctuation
to dig	to stretch
to till	to bounce
to bind	to erase
to weave	to spray
to join	to systematize
to match	to refer
to laminate	to force
to bond	of mapping
to hinge	of locations
to mark	of context
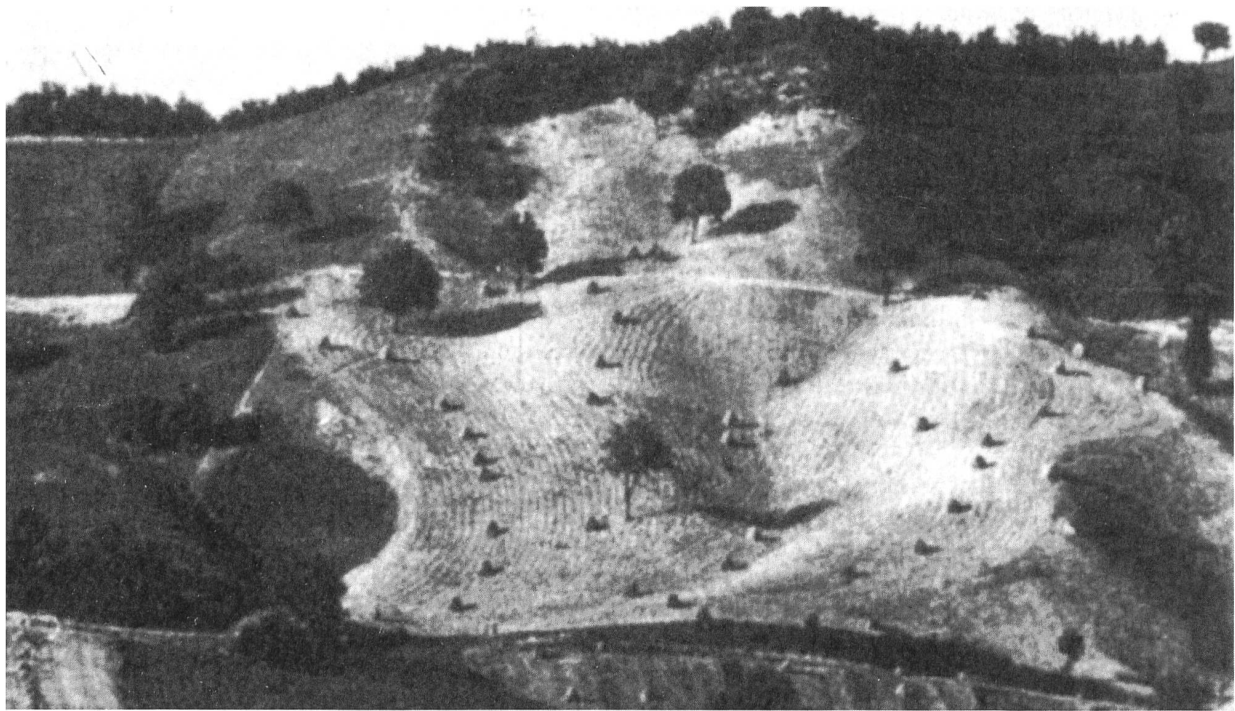
counteracted by enduring structures remaining as traces within the changing urban condition.[12] The city is considered by Corboz as a text form that is continuously read, re–read and thus re–written again.

But what about the contemporary metropolitan fabric, which in the past decades has grown – seemingly out of nothing – at the peripheries of cities and forming entire regions? Could such territories, "fragmented and laced with infrastructures," in which "interventionist policies have created a multi–tiered land through the material superposition of networks," be considered palimpsests instantly produced? Here the land has been subordinated to an artificial stratification creating unprecedented morphologies of the urban landscape.

Such urban structures are hardly founded on principles, whose qualities could be associated with the term city as culturally established. This type of city is accordingly met with difficulty, being for most planners and designers still a terra quasi incognita. In order to address this city, entirely new vocabularies have emerged including such as edge city, conurbation, sprawl, ville diffuse, hyperville, megalopolis, suburb, technoburb – a terminology pointing to the very incertitude encountered.[13] "And so we stare at" these bits and pieces of city "and think we both do and do not know" what urbanity is, what land is, what space is.

With a consideration of the city as a landscape palimpsest a possibility might be offered to address the dilemma. A reading strategy is here being proposed that encompasses the processes of urban formation. In other words, implicit in Corboz's text is included, not only how the city could be read, but also how it might be written.

CROSSING

The intersection of the two texts by Rosalind Krauss and André Corboz, while aimed within at the possibilities of cross disciplinary exchanges, could suggest a sort of intertextual transfer, as much of terminologies as of concepts. This attempt at crossing specific propositions from different disciplines raises at first a number of questions. Can urban development, as encountered today at the peripheries of most cities, be understood as a landscape in its own right? Could the superimposition of built works onto the land be perceived as land intervention, and are its structures, such as
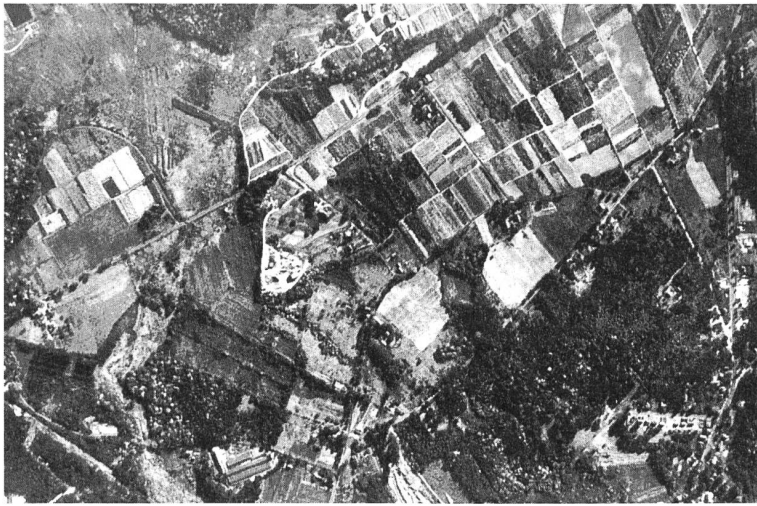
those dictated by traffic engineering, possibly making land art by default? Must the term urbanity be "stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity," in order to include vast extensions of undifferentiated built substance?

Is the new city that which it is not? To borrow Krauss' mapped operation, is it a combination of exclusions operating on the outer limits of terms stated as a pair of negatives including their respective opposites: not–landscape, not–architecture, landscape, architecture? Indeed this type of sprawl is neither landscape, in its traditional rural sense, nor architecture in its traditional urban sense. It is a territory in which the distinction between town and country has been effaced; a territory of the neither/nor.

An expanded field, comparable to Krauss' mapped operation, can thus be generated by "problematizing sets of oppositions" within which the category of the contemporary city is suspended. Such an operation on a set of cultural terms might shift the set standards of given definitions opening up forms of interpretation, re–defining understandings of what urbanity is, of what land is.

The meaning of the term sculpture is subverted by Krauss, in correspondence to a procedure, which within philosophy has been called by Martin Heidegger Durchkreuzung and by Jacques Derrida une écriture sous rature.[14] In this, a word is written and then crossed out leaving the term in its barred condition forming an autonomous expression. As the word has lost its meaning, it must be dismissed; as it still maintains its significance, it must be retained.

In Corboz' text, the term city is likewise subjected to a similar operation. The word appears to be metaphorically barred pointing to a potentially different interpretation, whereby keeping a trace, as it were, of its original meaning. In a process of analysis of a seemingly known phenomenon, such as the city, one encounters unexpected circumstances requiring established vocabularies to be exposed to "an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity."

Other terms could correspondingly be tested. The word center for example, standing commonly for a city's downtown area, seems to gradually loose its significance in the context of the present rise of civic forms. The urban tissue is essentially decentralized in its structure. The notion of a fixed center – understood as a point of concentration and from which everything evolves – is thus questioned, suggesting a barring of that term.

1 Robert Musil, The Man witout Qualities, translated from the German Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (1930/32) by Sophie Wilkins, Alfred A. Knopf (New York), 1995, p. 4.
2 Ibid., p. 26.
3 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1978), The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 1985, pp. 276-290.
4 André Corboz, "The Land as Palimpsest," Diogenes 121, Unesco, 1983.
5 For a reference to the transfer of Land Art principles to Urban Design see: André Corboz, "Grossstadt Schweiz," lecture held at the ETH Zürich, 1987/88.
6 Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Double Negative: a new syntax for sculpture," Passages in Modern Sculpture, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 1977, pp. 243-288.
7 On the "Klein Group" and its relation to Jacques Lacan's "L Schema" see: Rosalind E. Krauss, The Optical Unconscious, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 1993, pp. 1-30.
8 Rosalind E. Krauss, "Richard Serra, a Translation" (1983), The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths, MIT Press (Cambridge, MA), 1985, pp. 260-274.
9 André Corboz, "Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go," in Looking for a City in America, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities (Los Angeles), 1992; originally published as "Non-City revisited," in La Ville Induiète, 1987.
10 Viajes de Varones Prudentes, Suárez Miranda, 1658; quoted by Jorge Luis Borges, Historia universal de la infamia "Etceteras", 1935.
11 See for example Kandinsky's painting Les Deux of 1924, which bears more than a casual resemblance to a stylized urban plan and in which during the construction of the painting parts were added, superimposed, and removed over again. David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity, Basil Blackwell (Oxford), 1989, p. 280.
12 A similar approach is pursued by Aldo Rossi in his urban analysis of Split. He compares the fabric of the city with that of a text. As the developments of linguistic structures are marked by complex processes, according to Rossi, so are also the developments of urban form. Modifications of the city's textual fabric are counteracted by enduring structures, such as the geometries of Diocletian's Palace at Split, remaining as traces within the changing urban condition. Aldo Rossi, Texte zur Architektur, Swiss Federal Institut of Technology (Zürich), WS 73/74, U27, p. 30.
13 See also André Corboz, «Die vier Phasen der theoretischen Auseinandersetzung mit der Stadt im XX. Jahrhundert. Eine Profilskizze,» archithese, Verlag Niggli AG (Zürich), 1993, Nr. 3, pp. 93-96.
14 Martin Heidegger, The Question of Being, trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde, College and Universty Press (New Haven), 1958; Zur Seinsfrage, 1956. Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press (Baltimore), 1976; De la Grammatologie, Les Editions de Minuit (Paris), 1967.
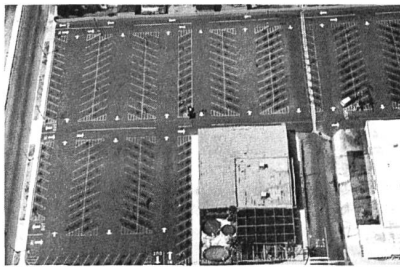
15 Edward Ruscha, Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los

Since the center has forfeited its importance, then the word periphery ought to be reconsidered. Per definition, only from the vantage point of a center can a periphery exist. If there is no more a center, by consequence there can no more be a periphery, suggesting a barring of that term.

One could proceed in this manner, working toward revised understandings of such words as street, square, neighborhood, park, monument, facade – crossing out and thus expanding their traditionally attributed meanings.

THE LANDSCAPE PALIMPSEST

The present city is formed of a series of components. These elements are part of the built fabric and contribute to the morphology of the urban landscape. From the point of view of a typological analysis, new constituent standards have evolved pertaining to specific functional demands. Some of these type forms shall be distinguished:

PARKING LOTS: Parking lots are predominant elements within the terrain of the contemporary city. They are monotonous and repetitive, as is well demonstrated by photographs of the American artist Edward Ruscha who presents thirty–four of them as one might display objects of art. This series recalls, by means of its persistence, works of the Conceptual Art movement. Donald Judd wrote, "the order is ... simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another." Parking lots are placed next to, behind, in front, below, in, or above buildings.[15]
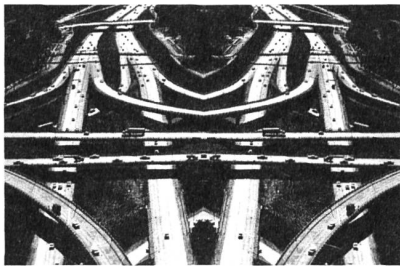
FREEWAYS: The freeway system according to Reyner Banham could be considered as a transportation palimpsest overlaid onto the urban territory. Its built structures, on and off ramps, embankments, underpasses and bridges have a monumental presence of scale within the city. As stated by David Byrne in his film True Stories, "freeways are the cathedrals of our time, someone said – not me." The Land Art artist Robert Smithson describes these structures erected for traffic engineering purposes as "man–made geological networks of concrete," part of a "crystalline landscape."[16]

SUBURBIA: The bucolic dream of one's private home in an Arcadian setting has evolved into the proliferation of a model for suburban living. The consequence, as sung in the mid 1960's by Pete Seeger, is "little boxes, little boxes, little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky–tacky, and they all look just the same." Thomas Pynchon, in the novel The Crying of Lot 49, depicts a suburban neighborhood as "a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well–tended crop, from the dull brown earth," forming a pattern comparable to a "printed circuit" on an electronic board of a transistor radio.[17]

THE STRIP: The strip is the new shopping street of the city. It was introduced and thus made admissible within the discipline of architecture by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown through their studies on Las Vegas. The commercial strip, with its cacophony of signs and billboards, is the place where the driver is enlisted to enter, to park, to buy. Recently, public institutions have established themselves along the strip's edges, expanding the variety of commodities offered. The cheap and mundane language of the strip, the ugly and ordinary, pervades public buildings as well, making them in Venturi's words "all most all right."[18]

SHOPPING MALLS: Shopping malls are the new centers of public life. They are separated from their surroundings, conceived as well protected islands within dispersed urban conditions. While keeping the outside at a distance, an internal world unravels as an ostensibly pleasant network of

15 Park Lot, Los Angeles, see Edward Ruscha, Thirty Four Parking Lots in Los Angeles, 1967
16 Freeways in Los Angeles
17 Suburb in Pennsylvania
18 Main street in Camden, New Jersey
19 Shopping Mall in Southdale, Minneapolis
20 Union Carbide Corporation, New York, by Roche and Dinkeloo, 1976-82
21 Airport in Frankfurt, see Fischli and Weiss, Airports, 1990

pedestrian connections, squares, and passages within which one is enticed to promenade, to eat, and most importantly to shop. Here the distinction between commerce and entertainment is blurred. Malls are organized according to predetermined themes. As Michael Sorkin asserts, they have evolved into "variations on a themepark."[19]

CORPORATE OFFICES: Out of reach of the unpleasantness of urban life, corporate firms have established their headquarters, as suggested in Shampoo Planet by Douglas Coupland, in "technically invisible low flat buildings that look like they have just popped out of a laser printer," surrounded with meticulously manicured "fetishistic landscaping," and "new–cars–only" in the employees' parking lot. Such offices buildings, he writes, are "the same the planet over," modestly identified with "any–language names of the company housed inside: Cray, Hoechst, Dow, Unilever, Rand, Pfizer, Sandoz, Ciba–Geigy, NEC."[20]

AIRPORTS: Airports have a tendency to look alike, as displayed in a photographic essay by the Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss. They are an expression of an unsurpassed absence of identifiable qualities combined with an all encompassing banality, which Peter Eisenman describes as "the crossroads of every place and no place." Regional differences are only discernible in the type of souvenirs displayed. Economic and functional criteria seem to justify an esthetic sensibility that has been globally dispersed, a typical condition not limited to airport architecture.[21]

Beyond this initial attempt at a classification of individual type forms, such components should be further addressed in terms of their relationship within the urban fabric. Notwithstanding its apparent disarray, an underlying structure must be at work, as made apparent by the similarity of reoccurring developmental patterns. The elements are adjacently placed or superimposed. In between are gaps within the fabric, the residual spaces commonly identified as no man's land at freeway ramps, parking lots, and undeveloped parcels – to quote Musil, a city "punctuated by fathomable silences." In its entity the urban landscape appears as an amorphous conglomerate of fragmented parts which could hardly be associated with unifying ordering principles. The city is sometimes homogeneous or heterogeneous in its structure. Continuities and discontinuities coexist in close proximity. Here the question must thus be raised as to what constitutes the structure of this city and whether the term structure still can be applied.

If one would depict the city cartographically as a system of points, as illustrated with a drawing series by Sol Lewitt, then their interrelation could be continually reassessed. In view of changing conditions, various configurations would be formed. Corboz, in an essay entitled "Learning to decipher the urban nebula," compares this urbanism with the properties of hypertexts, a term taken from the field of digital technology. Hypertexts are a–hierarchically structured. New relations can at any time be established provoking a restructuring of the text. This implies for the city that its structures unceasingly vary offering an array of multiple, at times irreconcilable, meanings.[22]

If one would depict the city cartographically as a system of lines, as suggested in a sculpture by Greg Olson, then a field of forces or vectors might be generated. Lines of movement, of development, of convergence contribute to the city's mutable structures. The urban territory is constituted, to use an expression by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, by "lines of flight and intensities" forming webs of "rhizomatic" quality.[23] Through their concentration complex arrangements arise. Lines are interwoven, networks placed onto networks. The city is perceived as a field, open in its configuration, leaving room for the possibility of interpretative transformations.

Angeles, photographs by Art Alanis, 1967. Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," Arts Yearbook 8, 1965, p. 82.
16 Reyner Banham, Los Angeles, The Architecture of Four Ecologies, The Penguin Press (Harmondsworth), 1971. Robert Smithson, "The Crystal Land," in The Writings of Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt ed., New York University Press (New York), 1979, pp.19, 20; originally published in Harper's Bazaar, 1966. "The highways crisscross through the towns and become man-made geological networks of concrete."
17 Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, Harper & Row (New York), 1966, p. 24.
"She drove into San Narciso on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate."
18 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour,Learning from Las Vegas, MIT Press (Cambridge), 1972.
19 Michael Sorkin ed., Variations on a Themepark, The New American City and the End of Public Space, The Noonday Press (New York), 1992.
20 Douglas Coupland, Shampoo Planet, Simon & Schuster (London),1992, p. 218. "You are not supposed to notice futuretowns - they're technically invisible: low flat buildings that look like popped out of a laser printer; fetishistic landscaping; new-cars-only in the employee lots; small back-lit Plexiglas totems out front quietly brandishing the strangely any-language names of the company housed inside: Cray. Hoechst. Dow. Unilever. Rand. Pfizer. Sandoz. Ciba-Geigy. NEC. Futuretowns are the same in Europe as they are in California. I figure they're the same the planet over. Futuretowns are like their own country superimposed onto other countries."
21 Peter Fischli & David Weiss, Airports, IVAM,
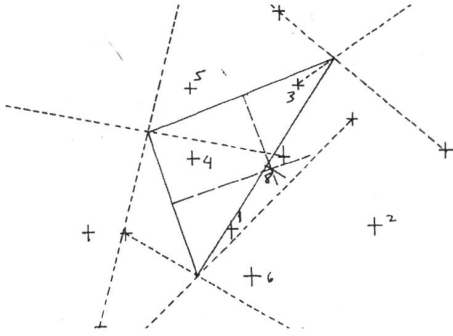
oben: Sol Lewitt, The Location of Eight Points, 1968
rechts: Frank Stella's studio
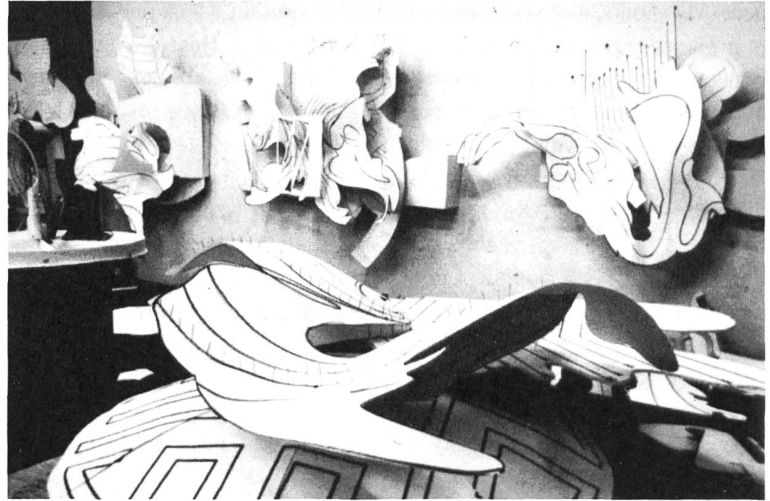
Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno, Edition Patrick
Frey (Zürich), 1990.
22 André Corboz, "Apprendre à décoder la nébuleuse
urbaine," Du centre à la périphérie: une autre logis-
tique de l'art, Institut pour l'Art et la Ville, Maison du
Rhône (Givors), 1994, pp. 5-12.
23 Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Mille plateaux, Les
Éditions de Minuit (Paris), 1980, p. 13.
24 Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, "Transparency:
Literal and Phenomenal," Perspecta, The Yale
Architectural Journal (New Haven), No. 8, 1964.
25 William Rubin, Frank Stella 1970-87, The Museum
of Modern Art (New York), 1987, p. 77.
26 John Cage, X:Writings'79-'82, Wesleyan University
Press, University Press of New England (Hanover, NH),
1983.

If one would depict the city cartographically as a system of surfaces, as represented by Claes Oldenburg's soft sculptures of Manhattan in which diverse versions of the same context are rendered, then a montage of territorial demarcations would be delineated. Zones would be defined and differently emphasized according to chosen vantage points. Territories are laid over territories, their boundaries being unsharp, flexible, modifiable. Through such superimposition results a condition of transparency, to consider a term put forth by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, pertaining to multivalent readings of given phenomena accepting conflict and contradiction.[24]

If one would depict the city cartographically as a spatial system, as drawn from Frank Stella's exploration in the Exotic Birds series, then a seemingly indefinable continuum, an expanding mass without limit, would be recorded. Such a map might disclose a space in the 2.7th dimension, posed by Stella as a space in–between, neither of the second nor the third dimension. Here the distinction between figure and ground is erased. The city appears as a topologically derived spatial terrain in a pertetual state of flux, stretched, bend, pleated, – a space infiltrating every crease of the urban fabric – a space ultimately folded upon itself.[25]

Independent of the reading strategies pursued, specific common characteristics might be extracted. Attempts at mapping urban form reveal that inherent within its structures are principles of uncertainty at work. Incertitude – pertaining to a realm of unpredictability – could be endorsed as a constituent factor of current developments. With that, another meaning of the letter X, as in City X, is implied. X not only stands for any one city, X not only understood as a crossing out or barring of established terminologies, but also X considered as the unknown, or as stated by John Cage in reference to his compositional use of the notation X: "X as something not thought of at all."[26]

The city is structurally undetermined. That is, however, not to say that the city has no structure, but that its structures are open. In this sense, one could read the urban palimpsest as an open text, as a complex entity comprised of layers of meaning, their mutual interdependencies suggesting possible but never exclusive interpretations. A textual indeterminacy determines the city. Its organizational patterns form a field of possibilities predominantly including "that which it is not." Pertaining to a continually shifting horizon, the city is "totally transitive: elevating, lowering, foreshortening, contracting, compressing" – to paraphrase Richard Serra: the city becomes a transitive verb.