

# Delta, or the transgression of limits

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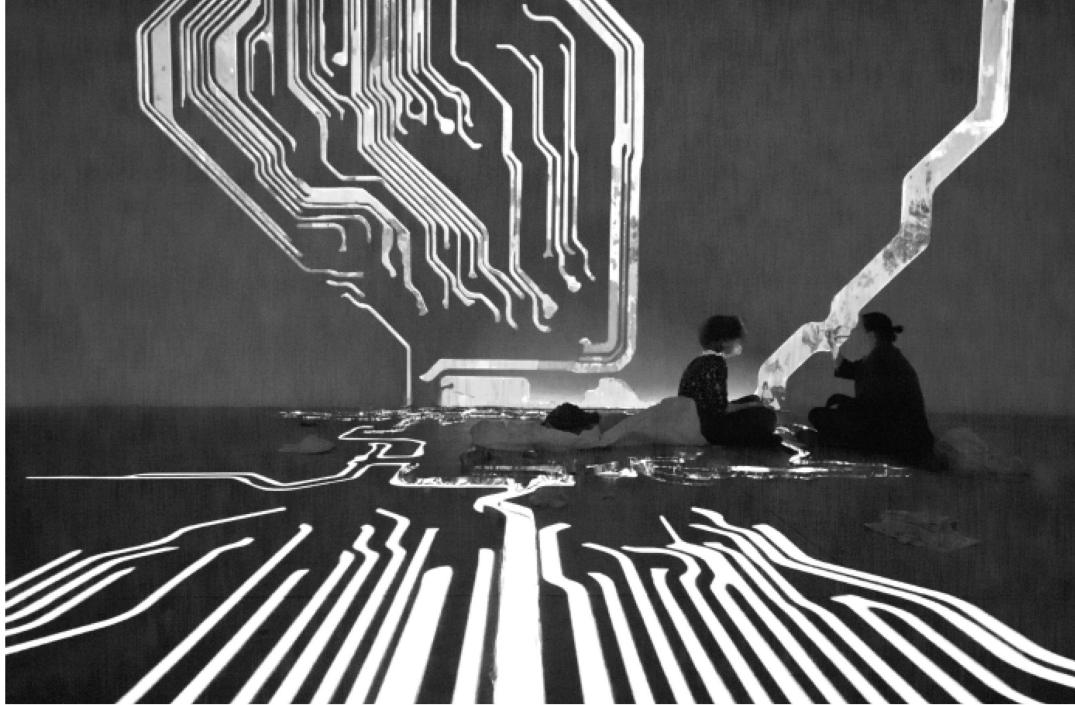
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"In a Net of Desires" at the Architecture as Art exhibition, XXI Triennale di Milano

## DELTA, OR THE TRANSGRESSION OF LIMITS

Catherine Mosbach

Translated from the French by Lara Mehling

The world is restless; the world is stirred by movements enacting new configurations for our planet. It is caught between the turbulences of the atmosphere and lithosphere. Turbulences, or variations on the same theme, are slowly but steadily giving form to our surroundings while also shaping us.<sup>1</sup> Inherent repetitions of our terrestrial universe—are we so little inclined to become aware, understand and know the capacity and plasticity of the elements?

**Deltas** open up vast geographical expanses where spectacular fluid forces assail the shorelines. **Deltas** carve the limits that separate and redistribute the solid, the liquid, the aerial—the visible from the invisible. More than the result of these rearrangements, however, it is the act of transgression, or the conditions for emergence, that make these synergies—exposed to light and air—momentarily accessible to our vision, thus engaging us with curiosity. To reach these emergent compositions we must shift perspective—widen our visual fields to become aware of the sedimentation, transportation, and transformation of materials over the long term; refine our vision to perceive the tenuous, that which lies within, the *infra-mince*,<sup>2</sup> microscopic and instantaneous, which enables these movements by activating the right conditions for plant or mineral concretions. It is through these migrations between extreme poles that the organisms divide up the living space needed for their proliferation and fertile “installation.”

In the sciences, is a delta not used to define the difference between two magnitudes? If there is a difference, let us explore each nuance and pursue the representation of these intermediate states, which act as indicators of formations, continuous and discontinuous, beyond ourselves, a part of the universe that concerns us. We explore contexts

1 According to Gilles Deleuze, the Nietzschean concept of power is “an essentially synthetic principle” that controls nothing, “that is not larger than what it conditions, that transforms itself with the conditioning, that is determined in each case with that which it determines.” [quotation translated from the French by Lara Mehling] Georges Didi-Huberman, “En souffrance, en puissance,” *Peuples en larmes, peuples en armes: L’œil de l’histoire*, 6th ed. (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2016), 35.

2 The French term *infra-mince* emerged from a conceptualist idea developed in the 1930s by Marcel Duchamp. While Duchamp declared the term undefinable, it literally means “ultra-tiny” or “ultra-thin” and is typically used to refer to that which is significantly insubstantial while also establishing a way to think and speak about physical and temporal dimensions.

in all latitudes. Assuming a shifting viewpoint and a change in scale, we can investigate positions presumed to be stable and perennial, as if gained for the common good. Let us seek to know, that is capture, accumulate, and preserve that which arises temporarily while still allowing it to evolve. Let us follow this path of tireless composition, this operation of polarization and depolarization. Used as a scalable tool for framing—of a design’s composition and decomposition—this operation is rendered sensible, known, and recognizable.

Activating landscape operations within contexts delimited by space and time means intensifying and exposing “delta operations,” making them visible and perceptible within the confines of our limited lifestyles. Accessing the morphogens<sup>3</sup> of this empiricism may awaken our imagination, open our eyes to the way we approach and initiate the unforeseen and unconstructed by preparing and evaluating the tools for a landscape “montage”—designed and constructed.

The folding, unfolding, and refolding of the different layers laid bare by a landscape project set in motion—both the cultural ones built up through understanding and transmission and the physical ones achieved by construction—reveals the capacity of the substrates to act, react, and interact. The preparation of these operations through drawings (plans, sections, collages), which themselves are generated by literary research and explorations linked to specific contexts and questions posed by a project’s brief, directs all future realities. Coming into physical contact with the terrain during the construction phase often means revisiting the design, adjusting drawings on a moment’s notice to achieve the project’s objective. In this way, reality continuously calls into question our interpretive framework. A game of calibration and recalibration prepares the instruments for capturing all feasible variants and arranging them into the polysemic temporalities of a system of rearrangement, always revisited.

In a recent interview, Georges Didi-Huberman points out the risk of limiting one’s vision too soon:

<sup>3</sup> Morphogenesis is understood here as the formation of landforms or other structures.



Seeing is not an ability, it is an experience that requires a reshaping, each time a fundamental reconstruction... In fact, I have the feeling that I am continuously working “on two paintings” at the same time. Let the inconceivable happen in a practice of suspended awareness and at the same time develop a method of analysis as modest, patient, and rigorous as possible. This method consists of finding the path between vision and words, sensory experience and the practice of writing.<sup>4</sup>

The emotion felt upon seeing one’s design project take on shape in the physical realm during the construction process is the last bastion which may keep Walter Benjamin’s claim that “experience has fallen in value”<sup>5</sup> at a distance. Instantaneous access to the totality of data and a steady flow of information propagates an average attitude deduced from the smallest common denominator, which cloaks the outposts of the so-called civilized with a colorless, odorless, and imperceptible veil.<sup>6</sup> It is as if the construction of living spaces by knowledge and advanced technologies<sup>7</sup> inevitably involves the deconstruction of another substrate as well as its context. In other words,

4 Excerpt from an interview with Georges Didi-Huberman on the occasion of his exhibition *Nouvelles histoires de fantômes* at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (14 Feb.–7 Sept. 2014).

Georges Didi-Huberman, “Regarder n’est pas une compétence, c’est une expérience,” interview by Jean-Max Colard and Claire Moulene, Jean-Marie Durand, *Les Inrocks* (Feb. 12, 2014), accessed on Jan. 30, 2017, <http://www.lesinrocks.com/2014/02/12/arts/tout-est-la-rien-nest-cache-11472282/>

[translated from the French by Lara Mehling]

5 Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968; first printed in *Orient und Okzident*, 1936), 83. Cited in Georges Didi-Huberman, “Emotion, pauvreté, dignité: l’économie et le conflit,” *Peuples en larmes, peuples en armes: L’œil de l’histoire*, 6th ed. (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2016), 55–56, using the french translation by Pierre Rusch: Walter Benjamin, *Experience and Poverty* (1933), trans. Pierre Rusch, *Œuvres*, II (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 365.

Walter Benjamin’s intuition holds more relevance today than ever before, particularly in fields that address living beings. Confrontation with reality is the only reliable means of transcribing or capturing in images an association of images lived, felt, experienced, and perceived as conflicts or synergies of other states. The process of a landscape architectural project is made up of hypotheses rigorously adapted to correspond with the stated objectives. The reality of deltas, and coming into contact with the physical and chemical processes of a context, went far beyond our imagination—we had not seen this complexity and scale addressed by current thought patterns. This point is all the more critical as our landscapes are being maintained and renewed with an eye to sustainability. How to renew what is not yet known if not through the observation and the slow and patient trial and error that lets “the inconceivable happen in a practice of suspended awareness and at the same time develop a method of analysis as modest, patient, and rigorous as possible”? Georges Didi-Huberman suggests that “This method consists of finding the path between

the communal, generic, or plural part absorbs the singular, individual part even though the creation of one by the other is what offers “delta opportunities”—those which do not abandon soil as substrate (a source of nourishment) or support (the ground beneath our feet) for the instrument of soil—treating the material solely as a device with which to reach a particular goal.<sup>8</sup>

The following projects are described in the dichotomous or reciprocal sense of an alternating diastole-systole rhythm: a composition in contact with another takes form by enacting the hypothesis that initiated its implementation. They are presented here in their actual temporalities, reflecting the amplitude of oscillations between scales of inconceivable worlds: the larger the formation of the continent, the smaller the creation of matter—beginning at the invisible end of the visible spectrum.

We tested the potential of a polarization-depolarization device in addressing the rather unconventional prompt posed by the competition brief of the Bordeaux Botanical Garden. It called for a representation of the macro within the micro. That is, the landscapes of the entire Aquitaine Basin were to be captured within the limits of the botanical garden, a microcosm of the region to be set within a developing residential district. At first these demands appeared

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vision and words, sensory experience and the practice of writing.” What holds true for the path holds true for the physical and chemical resurgences and the capacity for acceptance among the people in constant search for stable reference points and the benchmarks of a contemporary lifestyle.

Georges Didi-Huberman, “En souffrance, en puissance,” *Peuples en larmes, peuples en armes: L’œil de l’histoire*, 6th ed. (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2016), 35.

[translated from the French by Lara Mehling]

- 6 If in the literary and visual arts the outbreaks of resistance are becoming more prevalent because of resources, the origins of a language, in architecture or landscape, the International Style incorporates all terrains regardless of context. In addressing the disorienting effects of today’s overload of [often conflicting] images and emotions in his article “Les émotions médiatisées:

L’antipathie et le marché aux pleurs,” Georges Didi-Huberman makes reference to Susan Sontag’s seminal work *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003).

Georges Didi-Huberman, “Les émotions médiatisées: L’antipathie et le marché aux pleurs,” *Peuples en larmes, peuples en armes: L’œil de l’histoire*, 6th ed. (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2016), 70.

- 7 Jillian Wallis and Haike Rahmann investigated different types of performance in public places through generative and/or predictive devices within contemporary public spaces. This work sketches the outlines of a technological [r]evolution as well as its limits. Jillian Wallis and Heike Rahmann, “The Performative Park,” *Landscape Architecture and Digital Technologies: Reconceptualising Design and Making* (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2016), 45–61.
- 8 For our competition project for the Place de la République, we explored soil’s qualities, instru-

absurd to us. It seemed physically impossible for the botanical garden to contain this massive scale within its small confines and to serve as both an educational resource and a research tool, a cultural institution and a recreational space. However, trained professionally to solve spatial problems, we took the question seriously and addressed all the factors posed by the brief through drawings and models, so that both researcher and visitor might be drawn in. The sliver of ground exposed to the air and other elements lent itself to expressing polarities of scale, both spatially (the immense within the minute) and biologically (the surface exposing the subterranean) in a timeless composition.

As with the Botanical Garden, our design process for the Solutré archeological and botanical park relied on the soil profile as a guide for the site's conservation. The archeological aspect introduced the paradox of cutting earth for both its conservation—to study and share it with future generations—and its transformation, meaning in this case the formation of a living thing through accumulation or sedimentation.<sup>9</sup> This principle delineates the limits of our practice: retain in order to compose, let go in order to be surprised by what has not been identified, known, or mastered. Theodor Adorno addresses a similar dilemma in his *Minima Moralia*: “Is not memory

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ment, support, and substrate as a combination of urban “performations.” The term “performance” brings together the contradictory processes of performance and formation from the arts and sciences respectively. It urges for a reconciliation of artistic practices nourished by anthropological research and the frameworks of scientific literature that examine the living through continuous morphogenesis (formation of landforms). Even if these borrowed processes are complex and remain to be thoroughly studied, both within the arts and the sciences, it seems to me that considering where we are today, confronted with the question of how to share resources on a global scale, we can propose models that closely associate past bodies (biological evolution) with selected bodies (cultural evolution). This should give this art—ephemeral and yet, at the same time, the oldest artistic form known to humanity—a trajectory

that is anchored in a physical context. In this way, the user or viewer is invited to the heart of the creative work and vice versa: the artist's approach enters into the quotidian environment. Kelly Crossman, “Performations,” *Entropic Territories*, Ai (Architecture and Ideas), vol. XI, guest ed. Alessandra Ponte (Ottawa: Carleton University, 2011), 96–120.

- 9 The first human remains from the Solutrean Epoch were identified because they were protected and buried by the collapse of the Solutrean rock overhang. Remains from a particularly well-documented Paleolithic time are still being excavated. In his article “Au bord du trou,” Denis Delebarre refers to the emergence of an interdisciplinary archaeology which gave rise to the practices of landscape projects. Denis Delebarre, “Au bord du trou,” *Carnet du paysage*, no. 27 (Paris: Actes Sud, 2015), 12–25.

inseparable from love, which seeks to preserve what yet must pass away? Is not each stirring of fantasy engendered by desire which, in displacing the elements of what exists, transcends it without betrayal?”<sup>10</sup> This underlines the potential of building on the desire to transgress limits, eliminating the boundaries set between exterior and interior, the distant and the near—to view these rather as porous thresholds, sensorially reversible and interchangeable through delta operations.

Addressing this unconventional approach in our work on the Louvre in Lens and Phase Shifts Park in Taichung meant operating within a boundless scale, for both contexts are subject to the temporalities of sedimentation and accumulation, both giving shape to the site whilst transforming it. Our work at Louvre Lens reflects the project site’s history as a former coal mine which acts as a living memory of multiple transformation cycles: dead plant matter is buried by sediments and compressed into a combustible sedimentary rock; the rock is resurfaced, mined as coal for its economic value; then, by an inverse symmetry, the abandoned coal pit is exposed to oxygen, preparing the degraded ground for the reemergence of spontaneous vegetation; finally, the restored landscape is reclaimed as a cultural resource in the form of a museum park. The museum’s brief emphasized the growth of a joint economy—of man-made production and tool development (to extract, transport, and distribute a raw material) and temporalities from the history of art (to bring this “cultural substrate” back in contact with the ground). In this way, the ground, at first inert, soon becomes exposed to time past and time-in-the-making through the power of spontaneous plant recolonization. Here the polarization-depolarization operation displaces or replaces the extraction, the transport, and the distribution of natural resources reclaimed as cultural resources through a movement that transforms both materials and ideas.

In a simplified and abbreviated manner, the plasticity of moss proliferation typologies—as a limiting factor (in an ecological sense)

<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (Radical Thinkers), trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 117. Cited in

Georges Didi-Huberman, “L’Emotion ne dit pas ‘je’,” *Peuples en larmes, peuples en armes: L’œil de l’histoire*, 6th ed. (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2016), 51.



of inert soil invested with cyanobacteria<sup>11</sup>—motivated the sampling of soils set into openings through which plants could grow. The design explores multiple proliferation features<sup>12</sup> in addition to remnants from the mining operations that have been made available to visitors. The morphogenesis of the mosses is activated horizontally as well as vertically on the strips of silt excavated from the museum’s foundation and exposed on the facade as a significant and transformative medium.

In another context, Phase Shifts Park is situated at the foot of Taiwan’s dorsal spine, the island’s central mountain range, shaped by the lithosphere’s continuous activity. Here, **delta** is no longer a figure of speech—it suddenly gains concrete meaning, becomes a “figure of schism” to be tamed and transfigured for a residential district. On this side of the planet, the folding of the ground is embedded in the subconscious of the people beginning at a very young age. It is closely associated with the effects of one of the most important ocean currents, the Kuroshio (sometimes referred to as the Black Stream), and the atmosphere’s turbulent air masses, which collide with Taiwan’s dorsal spine. Static and dynamic elements produce the vicissitudes of a variable climate or environment designed to sustain itself. This park of seventy hectares reflects this paradox of wanting to expose and at the same time protect oneself from the mighty forces of land, water, and air—it aims to feed people’s desire to go out and come into contact with the elements rather than confine themselves to air-conditioned shopping centers where consumption becomes the ultimate recreational activity.

At Phase Shifts Park, the earth, as a great morphogen—a catalyst for land formation—is excavated and extruded until it attains the status of a proper work of art (hill, tunnel, walkway), a vast landscape rising out of a sea of traffic. A reference to ruptures of the earthen

<sup>11</sup> Cyanobacteria are microbes which, during the installation of moss, prepare the ground for the establishment of higher level plants. Their performance of revivification and nitrification gives them an ecological role often overlooked, especially on exposed soil. By their capacity for airborne dispersal and rapid colonization, these microbial cyanobacteria, together with the

associated mosses, form a thin skin over the earth to prevent its erosion. This skin enables the proliferation of opportunistic higher-level plants at the forest’s edge.

<sup>12</sup> Irwin M. Brodo, Sylvia Duran Sharnoff, and Stephen Ahrnoff, *Lichens of North America* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2001).



crust caused by shifting plates: material emerging initiates further material collapses, the ground folds and refolds, reenacting the rise and fall of a seismic wave. At the initial stages, the loose material is scree eroded during the orogenic process of mountain building, when the plates buckled and folded to form this major continental mountain range. The control of this territory and the regulation of the heavy rainwater across the 250 hectares of this new urban district, including the park, echoes the earlier geological process and formation by appropriating its contours for twenty-first century living. Here the contours of an urban skyline become the operating scale, consuming the individual silhouettes that rise up across the vast territory in the name of comfort and experience. Whether from a distance or up close, the capacity for “performations”<sup>13</sup> of this extent present “delta opportunities” for the places as well as the people who traverse them.

We are working on two more, ongoing experiments that explore delta opportunities, though they might be better described as visions rather than actual realities for their operations are not physically rooted in any particular time or place. But both address the medium of fluid dynamics—our collaboration with the Art Mill cultural center in Doha in the context of the origin of continents around the Persian Gulf, and a darkroom test on the emergence of matter from thin air “[with]in a Net of Desires” at The Milan Triennial. The Art Mill is to be built on the historic site of a former flourmill at Doha’s port on the Persian Gulf. The competition called for designs for a new museum of contemporary art.

Architecture on this side of the globe promises to accommodate, bring comfort to, and protect the environment; landscape architecture retraces its roots. As was the case in Taiwan, the folding in Qatar was violent, provoking the abrupt formation of the Zagros Mountains in Iran and the brackish basin of the Persian Gulf. What is initially an oasis, a green artery nourished by the Euphrates and the Tigris, finally becomes an arid plateau or a desert, the earth’s

13 Kelly Crossman, “Performations,” *Entropic Territories, Ai* (Architecture and Ideas), vol. XI, guest ed. Alessandra Ponte (Ottawa: Carleton University, 2011), 96–120.

outermost skin stretched wide and bare across the lithosphere.<sup>14</sup> Water is the great progenitor; its fluid dynamics the source of all living things, their genesis and regeneration. The constant exchange of water and air and the ceaseless advancing and receding of the waves define the edge between the mill and the shoreline while far below the earth's crust, dunes are being modeled into mounds and depressions, folding and unfolding contours—to protect from the scorching sun and provide groundwater, to sustain this cultural-natural oasis. The dialectic of an architecture that protects and further sustains the exchange of elements—that work to form the tools, which, in turn, shape the project—reminds us to always consider where we are coming from in the evaluation of where we might go next.

For “In a Net of Desires,” our contribution to the *Architecture as Art* exhibition at the Milan Triennial, we installed mold. In the process, microfauna transformed available nutrients from water and air into matter and morphogens. This experiment tested the full spectrum of an extreme landscape: a darkroom within an exhibition room. What the Louvre Lens achieved by the work of cyanobacteria, the exhibit at Milan attained through a set of recessed joints which retained the humidity of vaporized air to produce favorable conditions for mold proliferation: airborne spores landing on the moist substrate to quickly grow colonies. Their incredible ability to produce something out of apparently nothing, at least not visible to the naked eye, falls under what Georges Didi-Huberman refers to as the inconceivable. This landscape operation introduces the minimal conditions necessary for the inconceivable to become just substantial enough so as to protect our minds from being held captive by the pretext of not understanding or grasping something larger than ourselves.<sup>15</sup>

These landscape experiments, concretions in continuous formation, share a dissolution of limits—understood not as the erasure

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that the morphogens originating on the Arabian Peninsula are nothing more than salt domes (diapirs) deposited in an enclosed sea (in Jebel Ali south of Dubai, Jebel Dhanna west of Abu Dhabi, and on Persian Gulf islands such as Sir Bani Yas). The flora and fauna characteristic of Proterozoic-Algonkian periods are nothing more than photosynthesizing

cyanobacteria—the very same cyanobacteria that led to the more recent identification of traces of life preserved in the depths of the earth's crust for 3.7 billion years despite their existence under immense pressure and high temperatures (E. Savatier and Allen Nutman, University of Wollongong).

<sup>15</sup> This exhibition took place at the XXI Triennale di

of boundaries, but rather as transitions, transmutations, and migrations; that is, they share a fragmentation of static states and temporalities so as to initiate the fiction of multiple states of stasis through material and factual operations of figuration and reconfiguration.

The botanical-archeological dialogue introduces temporal and spatial fragmentations, which are reconfigured simultaneously. The scales are recarved out of the originally contrasting soil horizons. This reduction of “horizons,” both in terms of vertical strata and horizontal accumulation, shifts the perception from a scale of proximity, intimate and in direct contact with the material, to the scale of territory—with a view of the entire composition articulated by superimposed points of view. The silhouette moves through a reassembled geological time as through the reassembled space of a landscape fiction.

The mining-seismic dialogue reflects the ground material in a way that is least museum-like and least stable. Its aim is to dig into the subsoil and to peel back the earth’s layers, to make of it an object to experience, a “material” for the landscape at the Louvre Lens to display, rendering the main enclosure of the park a part of the museum’s collection. At Taichung, the surface material forms the main enclosure of the park and redistributes itself in a manner greatly reminiscent of subsoil—always active and exposed to a diluvial rhythm by the fluctuations of tropical waters that are distributed between thick layers and across vast territories.

The macro-micro dialogue reflects the amplitudes of living or surviving at the scale of the formation of continents and at the scale of a mold’s cell, both of which exist due to the ability to capture water, the elemental source of morphogenesis. The proliferation of mold from bacteria and the emergence of biological life from salt domes—beginning with the Arabian Plate—relies on a process of multiplication and division and a shift in scale that exposes all complexities of life from the very smallest to the largest.

Here, the material is returned to the productive interaction of water and air (through the photosynthesis of cyanobacteria) and the

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Milano (*Architecture as Art: 21st Century Design after Design*) building on the experiment at the Louvre Lens. Here an installation of molds was enhanced

by a light and audio installation (in twelve languages) in collaboration with Ovvo Shandor Chury.

cultural interaction of the inhabitants of a territory in continuous flux (by an open, transformative device), so that the revealed layers may be elevated to the status of a work of art or a sensory experiment.

Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of the delight of discovering a conceptual framework that “means, for Eisenstein, opening the image to the outside world (in terms of history and politics), but also looking more deeply into the image to discover something like an interior world (in terms of subconscious thoughts and desires).”<sup>16</sup> In short: “He [Eisenstein] managed to reconcile in the same work the vertigo of proximity [the detail, the atom] and the vertigo of distance [the atmosphere, the flow].”<sup>17</sup> It is here that **delta** acts as a concept for transgression, restrained by neither framework nor force.

<sup>16</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, “Obraz-obrez: La coupe et le gros plan (vertiges du proche),” *Peuples en larmes, peuples en armes: L’œil de l’histoire*, 6th ed. (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2016), 256.  
[quotation translated from the French by Lara Mehling; all emphases by the author]

<sup>17</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman is speaking of Leonardo da Vinci, the foremost teacher of Eisenstein.  
Georges Didi-Huberman, “Obraz-sreda: La brume et le milieu (vertiges du lointain),” *Peuples en larmes, peuples en armes: L’œil de l’histoire*, 6th ed. (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2016), 264.

