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Fragments began as small collage works constructed with cut-ups of photographs sourced from National Geographic magazines printed between 1960 and 1980. The images offered a rich palette of color choices particular to a period of mass production printing with what are now discontinued inks. Scanned and translated into large digital prints and mounted on magnetic sheets, they were attached to a gallery wall surfaced with steel-embedded paint. The works contain a series of progressive collage actions, beginning with the original cut-ups from the archival magazines, configured and glued onto paper, reconfigured in the scanning process, and later reconfigured again on the wall. Combined and recombined, they morph and grow.
A Multiplicity—irreducible to the dynamics of the One and the Many, an assemblage changes qualitatively with any change in the number of its constituent elements. It is not like a bag of 82 marbles, which at 81 or 83 remains a bag of marbles, but like a room at 82 degrees, which is qualitatively different from one at 81 or 83. (You can’t add 1 degree to 82 to reach 83 degrees.)

A Heterogeneity—An assemblage’s elements ignore standard taxonomies, connecting bodies, images, phobias, buildings, machines, plants, bacteria, birds—whatever—in a functioning that resembles a Rube Goldberg machine (“Simple Reducing Machine”: peas from the diner’s plate shoot in the air and strike a bell; a disoriented boxer answers the bell and falls on a mattress; air compressed from the mattress arouses a rabbit, whose leap activates a phonograph that plays the Theme of the Volga Boatmen; a Volga boatman heaves on a rope tied to the diner’s wheeled chair, which pulls the diner away from the table).

An Assembling—An assemblage is both noun and verb, the act of assembling as well as the resulting assemblage—or rather, the assemblage is constantly in assemblage, never a completed result, only its own ongoing process of self-assembling. It is an agencement (French agencer = to arrange, to order, to position, to fit together), an arranging, an ordering, a positioning of elements, a fitting together (of parts of a machine, for example), and also an agencing, a processual agency without specified agents.

A Disassembling—Assemblages include their dysfunction within their functioning. They are machines that continue to operate while breaking down and make the breakdown part of their operation. Neither purely chaotic nor absolutely organized, they are mutative processes with varying multilayered degrees of stability and instability. They also are always social and political, connected to circuits of power, in which forces of regulation, discipline and control seek efficiency and homeostasis, while forces of generation, innovation and creation promote disruptions and unforeseeable reconfigurations of elements. But both forces are immanent to the assemblage, not outside it, each a manifestation of the assemblage’s powers of assembling and disassembling, the one a repairing of dysfunctions and...
channeling of functions into predictable cycles, the other an intensifying of dysfunctions and invention of new functions.

A Rhizome—Assemblages are like crabgrass and bamboo, which have no central roots or hierarchy of elements (like a tree, with top root and subsidiary roots, trunk, branches, stems and leaves) but instead possess continuously growing horizontal underground stems that put out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals. Assemblages are acentered, distributed networks of forces, but networks of a paralogical topology and temporality. Any element may connect to any other element, regardless of their proximity or distance. Whatever the dimension of an assemblage, wormholes of time-space form its network of pulsations, flows and intensities. The time of the assemblage is at once chronometric and stemporal, possessed of durations of varying possible measure (nanoseconds to light years) and the floating time of the infinitive (“to walk,” as an enfolded co-existence of “I walked,” “you will have walked,” “they might walk,” and so on). Assemblages are polychronotropic.

An Affective Machining—Neither mechanistic nor vitalistic, assemblages are machinic. Their components are machines in the broadest sense—elements that dys/function together. (The social assemblage that created the pyramids was a machining of machines—the Pharaoh, priests, architects, craftsmen, slaves, food, quarters, quarries, stones, barges, sailors, ramps, levers, pulleys, ropes—all so many machines [and each a metamachine when viewed at the molecular, atomic or subatomic level].) Assemblages manifest an anorganic life that passes through the inorganic and organic, the natural and artificial—a machinic vitalism. At the most abstract level, the assemblage’s machines may be defined by their differential velocities, but also by their degrees of intensity, their powers of affecting and being affected. The assemblage’s intensities are characterized as much by their receptivity as their activity, both of which are measures of the assemblage’s metamorphic capacities. An assemblage’s machining is always an affective machining, the machining of an anorganic life.

An Actual/Virtual Interface—Assemblages participate at once in both domains of the real—the actual and the virtual. They are concrete, material affective machinings (the actual), but immanent within them are virtual “abstract machines,” composed of unspecified matter and nonformalized functions. (This virtual has nothing to do with the notion of “virtual reality.”) Foucault’s panoptic society is made up of multiple actual assemblages of bodies, institutions, buildings, codifications, regulations, diagnoses and judgments, organized differently at various sites (the prison, the factory, the school, the hospital), but immanent within them all is an abstract machine of surveillance—an unspecified prison-factory-school-hospital matter and a nonformalized function of seeing without being seen. The panoptic society’s virtual abstract machine is a diagram of power, a differentiator inseparable from its differentiations, immanent within the actual assemblages it diagrams.

A Dys/Utopian Converter—As rhizomic assembling/disassembling actual/virtual interfaces, assemblages may coalesce as components of dystopian megamachines, such as the panoptic society, but immanent within any such regime of power is a counter-power of mutation that opens assemblages toward new, unspecified and unpredictable configurations. These configurations are nowhere—our “hot spots” that cannot be mapped in advance. It is only as processes, not products, that assemblages may be utopian, as acts of invention and creation. Their elements are always assembling and disassembling, and each element is a potential point of conversion from one configuration to another. Within any dystopian assemblage are utopian metamorphic elements that can induce new configurations. But conversely, such utopian elements are always open to reappropriation by other dystopian formations. There are no guarantees in creation, no assemblages that necessarily lead to a better future. Only tendencies, points of conversion, processes of experimentation that test the real and its virtual possibilities.

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Constructed out of cardboard and paper, Model City (Constraint) suggests a landscape of brute forms, referencing both geometric abstraction and modernist architecture. This configuration of models is part of an ongoing production, an ever-growing inventory, of architectural phenotypes realized by way of simple planar constructions. Something sinister is revealed in the cool language. Angled models suggest observation towers, enclosures without exits, windows for hidden eyes, and coliseum-style pits. Their fortress-like construction speaks of how enclosures offer at once protection and entrapment. Directly referencing the ways architecture can frame or control the dynamics of looking and being looked at, they reflect the power relationships inherent in all architectural spaces.
What connects Great Zimbabwe, intergalactic space stations, the pyramids of Mesoamerica and Egypt, with the industrial and post-industrial cities of the West? Utopian ideals, embodied as geometric forms. Eulogistically implanted in ancient and futurist architectures, this ideal is preserved, in the modern project, as a failed ideal: Urbanization created the city as a product of surplus value.¹ Capital accumulation conjures railways, highways, parks, and skyscrapers; urbanization summons alienation, dispossession, and displacement. For every gated community there is a slum. For every metropolis a colony.

In the colonies, an invasive species of modern architecture was a weapon of cultural imperialism and colonial hegemony. The logic of accumulation-by-dispossession did not end with the demise of industrial capitalism and colonialism, and so new global post-industrial megalopolises bloom in the same asymmetrical modes of production. If the modern city is a space of alienation, the postmodern city is a space of precariousness. Viewing modern geography through Marxist thought, David Harvey observes that “every urban area in the world has its building boom in full swing in the midst of a flood of impoverished migrants that is simultaneously creating a planet of slums.”²

An intricate maze of boulevards and cul-de-sacs, inverted ziggurats and pyramids, sunken temples and palaces, stadia and coliseums constitute Kendall Buster’s geometric, cardboard and paper model cities in Model City (Constraint) (2016). These retro-futuristic mini cities share structural affinities with earthworks, such as Michael Heizer’s City (1972-ongoing) and James Turrell’s Roden Crater (1977-ongoing), but their most defining feature is an ubiquity of watchtowers reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon—a calculated carceral technology designed for prisoner surveillance and the internalization of discipline. Drawing on Bentham, Michel Foucault defines panopticism as a technique for the governing of bodies that emerged in the 19th century in the West and facilitated the growth of capitalism. The symbiosis of surveillance and control spills beyond the bounds of institutional incarceration, permeating the social fabric with a mandate to maximize the body’s productivity. Panoptic regimes deploy social tools, such as architecture, exemplified by the International Style, to shape individual action within the capitalist space of the city. The skyscraper asserts the capitalist’s phallic and hegemonic presence; the city grid exemplifies a logic of order and control. The zoning and partitioning of space through boundaries and demarcations predetermine the behaviors of the disciplined body. City shapes subjectivity. In other words, the city-dweller is made in its image.

2 Ibid.
The city is undemocratic. Through a multiplicity of architectural technologies, urban space empowers the capitalist elite, while marginalizing the working class majority and people of color. Urban design perpetuates racial and socioeconomic divisions and puts each in their place. Imagine living in Houston, a city shaped by the oil industry, without a car. Brutal bureaucratic edifices, alongside miles of anonymous concrete, glass, and steel ‘non-places’ imprison the wandering imagination of the worker. Where color and images disrupt the grey monotony of concrete and steel, it is as spectacle, to entice, distract and disempower.

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The control towers hovering above Buster’s sanitized model cities, with their glaring whiteness, allude to scopic regimes and fracture the idea of the modern city as utopia. High walls and deep ditches limit free movement. In South African cities, during apartheid, freeways and railway lines demarcated racially segregated areas. Now, in the post-apartheid, neoliberal dispensation of economic segregation—which compounds problems of racial segregation—their borders divide public from private, and extreme wealth from extreme poverty. Highways, high rises, ghettos, suburbs, and gated communities function as structures of segregation, limitation and control. Police order is brutal in metropolitan epicenters of capitalism. Yet, technologies of control are not as total and efficient in the cities of the Global South, as in the cities of the Global North. That is why, thankfully, life spills beyond the bounds of governmentality in postcolonial cities, such as Blantyre and Nairobi.

In Buster’s metropolis, chambers and enclosures have no doors, and staircases and passageways lead to nowhere. One can almost locate the densely populated slums and expansive palaces in these imagined miniature cityscapes. Seemingly beautiful, they are also fragile, constantly revealing themselves, even as the next promise of utopia is renewed.


Mark Poster, “Surveillance and the Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible, i.e. a system of coordinates defining modes of being, doing, making, and communicating that establishes the borders between the visible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable.” According to Ranciére, this term should not be confused with the low-level police force that the word commonly refers to in English. Jacques Ranciére, The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 93.

Modern World is a video constructed of scanned archival photographs, sourced from 1950s-1970s architectural periodicals housed in the Built Environment Library at the University of Cape Town. The montage of stark black and white images of modernist architecture in Southern Africa and iconic examples from other parts of the globe, was composed in several iterations, each scored to samples of various drumming tracks. As the rhythm slows and picks up pace, the images accelerate in tandem, from slow single beats to an aggressive rapid flashing, with the buildings perceivable only as abstract shapes. In these images architectural form asserts itself as object, its geometry unyielding.
When architects design new buildings, they, I suppose logically, design the biggest elements first—the building’s footprint on the earth (as seen from above), the building’s height, shape, and interior divisions. At the end of this process the small things get decided—all the things we touch when we use the space—the floors, windows and doors, buttons, and handrails. I can’t help but wonder what would emerge from reversing this. I’d like to know if it is possible to design an entire building around a single doorknob.

This is a section of a text I wrote recently in conjunction with the production of a series of small table-top sculptures. I was trying to understand more about the ways we experience architecture with our bodies, focusing in particular on the many odd and overlooked intimacies of these relations—living inside the body of the building, wrapping my hands around the architectural details and pressing my feet against the floors. All of these instances of tenderness with this built structure, and disquieting moments too—the loose doorknob comes off in your hand like the house losing a tooth. Like tripping, or forgetting a word you know you know. I am living inside buildings as a body inside other bodies.

My observations about the ordering of the architectural design process come from an unlikely series of events that led to my participation in designing a large-scale residential building during the years I was in graduate school. My father, an academic philosopher and SDS leader turned global warming activist, spent the first decade of the 2000s working with a series of architects to design a Passive House apartment building. I drifted in and out of this process over these years, and as a non-designer I was struck by the top-down movement of the design process—biggest to smallest, from the outside to the inside. Past a certain point of scale, the architects were generally no longer concerned with the decisions—they became known as “architectural details” and thus became the purview of the feminized role of “interior decorators,” or, barring that, the decisions of the contractors or developers perusing the finishes in big box hardware stores like Home Depot. Meanwhile, the architects looked at renderings of the building from above and far away, impossible or nearly impossible vantage points from which to view the building. In these God’s eye view AutoCAD renderings, tiny people regularly appear, doing typical human things in neat contemporary outfits—sitting on benches, walking down the sidewalk, easily navigating a ramp in a wheelchair—a rainbow of races and ages. These figures exist in a world of efficient yet leisurely mobility, without pain, disease, homelessness, gender ambiguity, red-lining, or segregation. These renderings are perfect examples of Michel Foucault’s “heterotopias of compensation,” spaces which are “as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill

constructed, and jumbled. The images on magazine pages are as easy to grasp as the architectural renderings from which they were built in turn produces an answer to the question lies in what might be an incompatible yet coexisting intimacy with buildings to coexist with the dehumanization of the architectural rendering of from-afar magazine photographs? In Modern World, Kendall Buster gives herself permission to inhabit both of these positions simultaneously, in a disinterested recognition of these photographs. Buster followed her attraction to this accidentally discovered trove of images, and loves them despite the many real problems that the buildings pictured in them pose. What is the nature of this attraction to these images?

The answer to this question lies in what might be an incompatible yet coexisting intimacy with buildings. Is it possible for the pleasure of this kind of pictorial intimacy with buildings to coexist with the dehumanization of the architectural rendering of from-afar magazine photographs? In Modern World, Kendall Buster gives herself permission to inhabit both of these positions simultaneously, in a disinterested recognition of these photographs. Benson followed her attraction to this accidentally discovered trove of images, and in doing so produced an artwork that embodies this intimacy with buildings to coexist with the dehumanization of the architectural rendering of from-afar magazine photographs? In Modern World, Kendall Buster gives herself permission to inhabit both of these positions simultaneously, in a disinterested recognition of these photographs. Buster followed her attraction to this accidentally discovered trove of images, and loves them despite the many real problems that the buildings pictured in them pose. What is the nature of this attraction to these images?

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