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**THE DISENGAGEMENT OF THE BODY  
IN CONTEMPORARY SPACE**

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## PIVOT OF THE WORLD

“[...] if it’s true that I’m conscious of my body via the world, [...] it’s true for the same reason that my body is the pivot of the world : I know that objects have several facets because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense, I’m conscious of the world by means of my body.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, 1945

After ages of relegation to a simple recipient for the spirit, the figure of the body comes to a new philosophical vividness through phenomenology. Particularly Merleau-Ponty, insisting on the “corporality of consciousness”, sets the body as the essential condition of our being-in-the-world. By perceiving, originally, we everywhere and always *are-in-the-world*. This corporal experience of the *here* and *now*, inextricably associates our consciousness of space and time to the consciousness of our own body. Space and time, we could say, exists within us only by means of our body, through the perception of distance and duration. Perception reveals its active dimension, working as a *metaphor* of the world.

“Breath, you invisible poem! Pure  
continual exchange of our existence  
for the world’s extent. Counterbalance,  
wherein I rhythmically recur. [...]”

Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus (II - 1)*, 1922

Rilke’s poem crystallizes the fluid dialogue between the body and the world, allowing our experience of it to make sense. Architecture, sculpture, dance, and all the arts that tangibly articulate our body to space and time, have a common origin in the human propensity to nourish this essential dialogue.

*Kneading* space and time is first a matter of taking the measure of them. The history of measuring units is intrinsically bounded to bodies, celestial

for time, human for space. Armfuls, palms, feet, inches, have been making up the architecture referents for ages, and architects constantly returned to the body in order to establish the right proportions in buildings. The rightness of these ratios, from the *Vitruvian man* to the *Modulor*, stands in the fact that they speak the language of the body, that the dialogue is significant between one’s body and a space composed under their terms. The human body truly is this “universal measurant” (Merleau-Ponty) : world can’t make sense without it, and conversely.

But now ? Very deep changes are going on in our being-in-the-world : we assist to the general tendency of human environments to make the body obsolete, to bypass it - hence to dissipate our traditional comprehension of space and time.

“One has become imperceptible and clandestine in motionless voyage. Nothing can happen, or can have happened, any longer. [...] I no longer have any secrets, having lost my face, form and matter. I am now no more than a line. [...] One has painted the world on oneself, not oneself on the world.”

Deleuze - Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980

# The obsolete body

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## CONSTRUCTION / COMMUNICATION

“Architecture is the art of organizing space. It expresses itself through construction.”

Perret, *Contribution to a Theory of Architecture*, 1952

Auguste Perret, in its typical pragmatic, *concrete* way, sums up here the fundamental articulation operated by architecture, between construction and signification : it *expresses itself* through construction, so it arranges space in order to make its experience by the body significant. By building space - to be more precise, by situating material objects in space, which shape it and dialog with the human body, architecture makes possible for *meaning* to emerge from the spatial experience. To be maintained as a language, as a medium of communication, architecture leans on its efficiency, its communicative power.

“The sign for the hotel Monticello, a silhouette of an enormous Chippendale highboy, is visible on the highway before the motel itself. This architecture of styles and signs is *antispacial* ; it is an architecture of communication over space ; communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape. But it is for a new scale of landscape. The philosophical associations of the old eclecticism evoked subtle and complex meanings to be savoured in the docile spaces of the traditional

landscape. The commercial persuasion of road-side eclecticism provokes bold impact in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex programs. Styles and signs make connections among many elements, far apart and seen fast. The message is basely commercial, the context is basically new.”

Venturi / Scott-Brown / Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas*, 1972

Not every city look like Las Vegas, but the “basically new context” picked out in this excerpt has taken place in every contemporary urban space : these get filled with objects of direct, persuasive, enthralling communication, which make a clean sweep of the complex process of dialog with architectural space. Their mode of signification only requires a minimal engagement of the body : no exchange, no active perception is needed for their messages to be transmitted - they get to us as soon as we have our eyes opened. In that sense, “architecture of communication” - if we can still call *architecture* the effective distribution of communication objects in space - is “*antispacial*” : it competes with space as a source for meaning, and overcomes it by spreading boundless information. Urban space in itself is pushed in the background of message production - becoming a simple *stand* for it. This is not only a matter of contents : the slighter engagement of our body that follows from these changes is modifying our relation to space in its very form.

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## VOLUME / SURFACE

“Architecture is the learned game, correct and magnificent, of forms assembled in the light.” (*or, to be closer to the french original statement, “of volumes assembled under the light.”*)

Le Corbusier, *Toward an architecture*, 1923

Something primitive springs from Le Corbusier's definition of architecture - maybe the most diffuse of its statements. Its vast echo might be due to the fact that it makes resound in ourself the very essence of our relation to space : volumes refer to the natural form of perception ; under the light, they acquire a material, earthly dimension. Architecture is not a matter of representation, it is concrete, since the body goes through a tangible experience of volumes.

Such a terse conception of architecture calls us to constantly take up with its foundations. A damage in disguise, we could say. What is usually held against this definition is its possible application to sculpture. If both arts find their common origin in men's spatial sensibility, architecture shapes our daily life, while sculpture responds in its own way to the demand of being released from it. Architecture deals with the *polis* ; its production is constrained in a complex field of tensions, polarized by instituted powers - nowadays : economic, political, mediatic. Between the volumes and the light has cut in a layer of signs, which models urban space on the new structure of society, while it radically deforms our relation to space. During the XXth century, a structural revolution took place in occidental societies. Because of its tight link to the dissipation of body, space and time, a short note about its lines of force might be useful here, at the risk of being imprecise.

The movement of this revolution matches the passing of production - as the motive force of Capital - into an immaterial dimension, that of representation, image or virtuality. Everything changes when social objects start circulating as signs, when these signs become determining factors of value. The sign is worth something different from itself, and it's precisely the consumption of its signified that gives shape to the new social relations - from men to objects, from men to each other and even from objects to each other. This deep transformation of the occidental daily life occurs in a comparable way on the scale of the city-object.<sup>1</sup>

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1 This very concise summary mainly leans on Baudrillard's interpretation of our social revolution, through his work in extent, especially *The Consumer Society* (1968), *For a Critique of the Political Economy of Sign* (1972) and *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976). Nevertheless, similar revolutions dawn in the work of other thinkers, contemporary of Baudrillard. For example Debord, in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), who announces in his very first thesis that «everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation», or also Deleuze in *A thousand Plateaus* (1980), whose excerpt quoted in the introduction can be interpreted in that sense.

In order to work, the new system of society requires a general participation of human environments to the *information* of the signifieds - at once the shaping of their form and the diffusion of their value. As we saw it already, the spatial layout of the city is now an obsolete medium - too slow, too *oblique*, to transmit the colossal amount of information that now needs to circulate. Urban space proceeds to a *mise en abîme* of its mediatic dimension : from a single volume-based medium, we go over to the swarming of differential surface-based media. Advertising, signage, functional and institutional marking, begin to invest every urban surface. What follows from it is a dimensional contraction of our relation to space, from volume (kept silent) to surface (hyperbolic).

In what should now be called *urban environment*, body and space are vanishing under the effect of *sign-surfaces*. By this formula we mean not only billboards or information screen, but every surface whose appearance, color or finish, denotes an impalpable order. Our look is reflected by sign-surfaces into the immaterial dimension of the signified - an environment of floating images and representations, over which we have no hold, being simple receivers. Of course, signification, precisely this articulation between a material signifier and an ideal signified, is inherent to any form of language. But many things change when the architectural language that traditionally took place in urban space is replaced by the language of sign-surfaces. Once exceeded the critical density of a constant presence in the field of view, sign-surfaces take it in turns to guarantee the persistence of the signified environment. Distracting us from volumes and matter, they tend to inhibit our consciousness of space ; floating around images, we wouldn't know what to do with our body.

Sign-surfaces work as an interface, to the immaterial dimension of nowadays stakes in society - just like *screens* do. These two figures can be looked at in a single perspective, converging in the marginalization of any direct hold on our body, on others body, on space and time.

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## EXTENSIONS / AMPUTATIONS

“During the mechanical ages we have extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both time and space as far as our planet is concerned.”

McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964

The resonance is striking between this “global embrace” and our actual communication network, especially Internet ; all the more since this excerpt was written three decades before their surge. Backed up by the course of history, the thinking of McLuhan, this controversial prophet, is still a precious asset to understand media, and their role in the radical transformation of our being-in-the-world.

*Medium is message.* The essential message conveyed by a medium is indeed the effect of this medium on its users, the changes of scale, rhythm or models that it provokes in human matters. Every medium is at once an “extension of man”, and a form of “self-amputation” - the wheel is an extension of the feet, while the recourse to the wheel leads to a deep inhibition of the feet in the moving process.

Not only does the quoted excerpt announce the abolition of space and time, but also that of the body and the senses - since these wouldn't play their crucial role anymore, that of metaphor (transformation/transmission) of the world to ourself. Although the image of the central nervous system projected out of our body is disconcerting, our present way of life generates comparable effects.

Electronic technology allows information to be transmitted at the speed of light : from a phenomenological point of view, the use of media based on this technology cancels the experience of distance and duration ; in this sense, it abolishes space and time. For our presence in a corner of the earth, electronic media substitute *ubiquity*. Their massive irruption in every moment of our daily-life transforms our existence in such a deep way that the self-amputation becomes total ; and our experience of the world is further reduced to a direct nervous reception, without interpretation. From telegraph to Internet, going through radio, audio systems, telephone,

television, GPS, such media erode our hold over space, time and body. What is more, each of these now come in portable version, reproducing their *screening* of our perception of the world, everywhere, all the time. Electronic media and urban environment now take it in turns to constantly detach us from matter and immerse us in a persistent representation. Such a convergence of the human frames toward a conditioning of perception can't be purely fortuitous. It might be useful to look at the coercion stakes it blends with.

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## DISCIPLINE / CONTROL

“The historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born, which was directed not only at the growth of its skills, nor at the intensification of its subjection, but at the formation of a relation that in the mechanism itself makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely. What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A “political anatomy”, which was also a “mechanics of power”, was being born ; [...]”

Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1975

“The disciplinary societies have two poles: the signature that designates the individual, and the number or administrative numeration that indicates his or her position within a mass. This is because the disciplines never saw any incompatibility between these two, and because at the same time power individualizes and masses together, that is, constitutes those over whom it exercises power into a body and molds the individuality of each member of that body. [...] In the societies of control, on the other hand, what is important is no longer either a signature or a number,

but a code: the code is a *password*, while on the other hand disciplinary societies are regulated by *watchwords* (as much from the point of view of integration as from that of resistance). The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. [...] We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “dividuals,” and masses, samples, data, markets, or “banks.” Perhaps it is money that expresses the distinction between the two societies best, since discipline always referred back to minted money that locks gold as numerical standard, while control relates to floating rates of exchange, modulated according to a rate established by a set of standard currencies.”

Deleuze, *Postscript on the societies of control*, 1991

The contrast between the disciplinary societies and the societies of control can also be discerned in their relation to the body, which becomes clearer when looking at the etymology of the two terms. *Discipline* comes from latin *discipulus*, “pupil”, “disciple” ; in the Middle Ages, the term describes by extension the corporal punishment of a clerk, or even the whip for flogging. On the other hand, *control* has no direct latin root, it results from the contraction of *contreroller* (circa 1300), which referred to a duplicated register used for checking accounts. While body is the mean by which discipline is instilled, it turns out to be futile for control, which operates in *re-presentation*.

Disciplinary societies and societies of control can although be looked at in a single perspective, that of a grip on the body, active or inhibited. The first proceeded to a disarticulation and a recomposition of the body, in order to conform each individual to the established system - whose technology and structures were mechanic. The coercive core of this process lied in the molding of the body - as the ultimate frame of reference for reality - with a view to a perfect mounting on the machinery that surrounds it : no creaking, no reason to rise up.

The passage from gears to electrons goes with an update of the coercive model. From a structural point of view, electronic technology is closer to the nervous system - as a network of fulgurant circulating information - than to the body of flesh and its organic constitution. Societies raised upon this technology “explore” deeper than the body, and tend to represent themselves to men through a direct *plug-in* to their central nervous

system - or, in McLuhan’s words, they push us to project it out of our body. Becoming obsolete to the new conditions of our being-in-the-world, the body dissipates and hence takes away any possible reference to reality. The representation orchestrated on the scale of society can then follow its fluctuant course, freed from the demand of justifying itself in the material conditions of the world.

Coercion power is effectively boosted : while man was first constrained in its interpretation of reality - through a conditioning of its essential tool for interpretation - now it’s this very tool that tends to be took away from him, transforming him in a simple receiver. The “disappearance of reality” (Baudrillard) tallies with the fading of every frame of reference which allowed to define it : for money, gold ; for the world, the body.

The disengagement of the body from our being-in-the-world, the vanishing of space and time that follows from it, can be rephrased in these terms : on the one hand, an environment of representation is taking place, structured by the binary alternation of “0” and “1”, which we invest everyday more actively through electronic media ; on the other hand, we assist to the coverage of concrete space by signs, whose density guarantees our permanent immersion in a signified realm, where there’s no room for the body. In this process, architecture’s *raw materials* (body, space and time) are dissipating, thus architecture itself is losing its meaning.

If ones decides to resist against it, targets and means remain to be set. Counter-information, counter-representation and deconstruction strategies are already in progress on the *platforms* of the represented environment. However, the *depth* of our field, that of architecture and space in general, forces us to look for a specific ground for action. The problem is now inverted : if architecture depends on the vividness of its raw materials to exist, can it now deploy with a view to ensure them ?

The second half of this study won’t pretend to answer this vast question, but to back it up as an actual, urgent problem. While the assertion of the human body has been a central issue for art for more than forty years, architecture seems to despise its stakes. Or is it that architecture is now so firmly anchored in society structures, that it has become insensitive to the crumbling of its own foundations, and it now thrashes about to make its *facade* seem real ?

“There’s a horizontal and vertical expansion of the city, in the image of the economic system itself. Political economy, however, has a third dimension where all sociality is invested, covered and dismantled by signs. Neither architecture nor urbanism can do anything about this, since they themselves result from this new turn taken by the general economy of the system : they are its operational semiology.”

Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1976

## Resistance

### — INCARNATION

“Artists are the antennae of the race.”

Pound, *How to read*, 1929

From the very first symptoms of the huge social changes previously mentioned, several artists seem to sense the obsolescence to which the body is exposed, and engage what can be looked at today as a form of resistance through incarnation.

“In the United States, the human body was reintroduced in visual arts through performance-art and body-art, during orchestrations where, most of the time, the artist engaged his own body - in real-time practices of which only photographic or filmed traces are left, as a recording of an occasional action. In 1961, Robert Morris exposes himself in a box for standing (“*Untitled, Box For Standing*”). The same artist presents his portrait (“*Portrait*”, 1963) in the form of monochrome bottles, well arranged in a frame ; these bottles actually contain his corporal humours (blood, sweat, sperm, saliva, tears, urine, faeces). [...]

In 1968, Nauman goes through different filmed experiences, exploring various parts of his body (hands, arms, testicles, thighs, knees, feet), that will lead him to a series of performances on the distortion of his lips, collected in the “*First Hologram Series : Making Faces*” (1968), holograms projected on glass. Like Morris, Nauman works on measurement, length, print, and any mark left by the body. In “*Drifts*” (1970), Vito Acconci photographs traces left on the sand. Other works, in between the

photograph and the movie, like the “Trademarks” (a 20 min. color super-8 film, 1970), show the mark of his teeth printed on his own skin after biting himself. In the series of “Conversions” (a 24 min. black & white super-8 film, 1971), Acconci stands up naked in front of the camera, making his genital parts disappear between his legs. Through this changing of attributes, he tries to recreate an hermaphrodite body. Once his body has become a smooth surface, inscriptions can be marked, engraved, drawn and erased upon it. [...]

At the heart of this carnal art, we discover a teared to pieces, devastated, discharged body, of which one of the best example is the (semi-voluntary) performance from Chris Burden, “Shoot”, that was given at the “F space” in Santa Ana, California, november 19th 1971. The fact that the artist took a bullet in the arm is only an accidental, and somehow, anecdotic aspect of the story. What really is on stage here, is the body itself as the ultimate ground for experimentation. In his work called “Shelf” (1984), Charles Ray presents himself frontally, his naked body leaning against the gallery wall, with an horizontal shelf passing through his neck, so that his head, painted in grey, merges with the other objects put upon it, they too painted in grey. The breaking up of the body is also central in the work of Gary Hill, whose installation “As It Is Always-Already Taking Place” (1990), shows in real-time different images of his own body, on sixteen video screens of various dimensions. In what could evoke a curious inversion of the mirror stage, the body is first decomposed in partial objects, then recomposed by the images - cut-out and framing offering a simulation of the fetish object, now unaccessible. [...]

From Hermann Nitsche (member of the Viennese Actionism) to Dan Graham, Gordon Matta-Clark, Charles Ray, Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Sophie Calle, Andrea Blum, Andrea Zittel, Jana Sterbak, Vanessa Beecroft, et Dinos & Jake Chapman, Stelarc, the Atelier van Lieshout, Bernard Lallemand, the body becomes a place for criticizing the disciplinary machinery of society, but even more a place for an embodiment - or incarnation - process, which can be tested and pushed to the limit of disincarnation. The limit consists of the vulnerability of the body itself.”<sup>2</sup>

This vulnerability, intrinsically linked to the sensibility of the body of flesh, is put on stage as the human condition of our being-in-the-world. Against

the current of our society’s trends to cancel it - from the *cult of youth* to the *futile medical cares* - these artists call us to reinvest our own body and to reconsider its vulnerability, which makes up the last bastion of defense against the replacement of the subjective body for a *body simulacrum* (standard-image or consensual representation).

In a more specific way, the performance currents make a stand against the distance involved by representation through any medium. In a performance work, a *here* and a *now* are claimed by the co-presence of the bodies of the artist and the witnesses. Its expressive intensity stands precisely in the enactment of a corporal experience of space and time. In the context of our societies, calling for such an experience is a matter of resistance. If the resistant assertion of the body by artists can be so distinctly perceived, it’s because the artistic field grants an almost total freedom of action. And this freedom is still ensured only because, on society scale, as popular as an art form can be, its public is deliberate, hence limited. By reason of its incomparable extent of diffusion and its transversal impact on men, the architectural field is constrained by many codes, conditioning the realization of its production. Everything is possible, as much as the society structures are not called into question.

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## DIVERSION OF THE CODE

“The production of buildings has become so defined by codes – financial codes, building codes, life and safety codes, computer codes, codes of appearance and behavior—that architecture has very little to do with the way they finally appear. [...] We need an architecture that questions reality.”

Betsky, Manifesto for the 11th Architecture Biennale in Venice, 2008

These were the terms in which Aaron Betsky called worldwide architects to “experiment” for the Biennale entitled *Out There : Architecture Beyond Building*. A mouth-watering theme, as much as ambiguous : while *in there*,

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<sup>2</sup> This part largely borrows its content to the article of Georges Teyssot, «L’architecture au corps», published in *Les Cahiers de la recherche architecturale et urbaine n°17*, october 2005.

in the hushed frame of the venetian Arsenale, architectural experimentation is accessible and complacent, it's much less easy to engage out there, where the implacable order of the urban environment reigns. From Coop Himmelb(l)au to Frank Gehry, from Philippe Rahm to Herzog & Demeuron, the installations were fertile, sometimes harrowing, but they freed themselves from the real problem which deserved to be posed - namely, how can architecture proceed to the questioning of reality *where this reality takes place*, at the heart of men's inhabited spaces and territories, not only in rare international exhibitions.

While architects agree to recognize a disturbing problem in the diktat of codes, muzzling their field of action, they tend to react by *diverting their production from the codes* - or to be more precise, from the situations where the codes operate their strictest authority - and not by *diverting the codes through their production*. The historical project of architecture - allowing men to inhabit the world through a dialogue between their body and space - is nowadays banned by the urban codes : too permissive, too *edifying*. It now only takes place in singular corners of the world, within preserved landscapes, far from the pressures exerted on spaces where men actually concentrate themselves. Regarding its global construction, architects are deserting urban space - or they become in it simple building agents.

In its moment of crisis, architecture has often drawn his revival from sources that looked very far from its customary field - like modernists inspiration from factories and liners. With a view to engage an architectural resistance against the replacement of urban space for urban environment, it might be useful to look at other forms of action in the city.

“In the spring of 1972 in New York a spate of graffiti broke out which, starting with ghetto walls and fences, finally overcame subways and buses, lorries and elevators, corridors and monuments, completely covering them in graphics ranging from the rudimentary to the sophisticated, whose content was neither political nor pornographic. They're nothing but names, surnames [...].

Today this movement has stopped, or at least is no longer so extraordinarily violent. [...] A new type of intervention in the city, no longer as a site of economic and political power, but as a space-time of the terrorist power of the media, signs and the dominant culture.

The city is no longer the politico-industrial polygon that it was in the nineteenth century, it is the polygon of signs, the media and the code. [...] The monopoly of this code, circulating throughout the urban fabric, is the genuine form of social relations [...]

Whatever attacks contemporary semicracy, this new form of value, is therefore politically essential : graffiti for example.

[...] SUPERBEE SPIX COLA 139 KOOL GUY CRAZY CROSS 136 means nothing, they are not even proper names, but symbolic matriculations, whose function is to derail the common system of designations. [...] Invincible due to their own poverty, they resist every interpretation and every connotation, no longer denoting anyone or anything. In this way, with neither connotation nor denotation, they escape the principle of signification and, as *empty signifiers*, erupt into the sphere of the *full signs* of the city, dissolving it on contact.

[...] All media signs issue from this space without qualities, from this surface of inscription standing like a wall between producers and consumers, transmitters and receivers of signs. “Body without organs”, would say Deleuze, where channelled flows intersect. Graffiti themselves are a matter of territory. They territorialise decoded urban spaces - a particular street, wall or district comes to life through them, becoming a collective territory again. [...]

Despite appearances, the City Walls projected, the painted walls, have nothing to do with graffiti. Moreover they are prior to graffiti and will survive it. [...] Some of the painted walls may be beautiful, but that has nothing to do with it. They will find a place in the history of art for having been able to create space on the blind, bare walls, by means of line and color alone : the *trompe-l'oeils* are always the most beautiful, those painted walls that create an illusion of space and depth, those that “enhance architecture with imagination”, according to one of the artists' formula. But this is precisely where their limits lie. They *play at* architecture, without breaking the rules of the game [...].

So architecture and urbanism, even if they are transfigured by the imagination, cannot change anything, since they are mass-media themselves and, even in their most daring conception, they reproduce mass social relations, which is to say that collectively they allow people no response. All they can do is entertainment, participation, urban recycling, design in the largest sense. Namely, simulation of exchange and collective values, simulation of play and

non-functional spaces. Hence the adventure parks for the children, the green spaces, the houses of culture ; hence the City Walls and the protest walls, the green spaces of speech.

The graffiti themselves care little for architecture, they defile it, forget it, go through it. The mural artist respects the wall as he used to respect the limitations of his easel. Graffiti runs from one house to the next, from one wall of a building to the next, from the wall onto the window or the door, or windows on subway trains, or the pavements, it overlaps, throws up, superimposes (superimposition amounting to the abolition of the support as a *plane*, just as it is abolished as a *frame* when its limits are not respected). Its graphics resemble the child's polymorphous perversity, ignoring the boundaries between the sexes and the delimitation of erogenous zones. Curiously, moreover, graffiti turns the city's walls and corners, the subway cars and the buses, into a *body*, a body without beginning or end, made erotogenic in its entirety by writing, just as the body may be in the primitive inscription of tattooing. [...] By tattooing the walls, SUPERSEX and SUPERKOOL free them from architecture and turn them once again into living, social matter, into the moving body of the city before it has been branded with functions and institutions. [...]"

Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange and Death, 1976 <sup>3</sup>

The city of New York in the early seventies makes up the paradigmatic context of the graffiti movement : no other urban context has ever witnessed such an extensive invasion of its surface, such an impact in space.<sup>4</sup> The practice of graffiti is still extant, traces of it are present in every occidental urban context - but in a much lower amount.

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3 If I allow myself to quote such a long excerpt of «Kool Killer or the Insurrection of Signs», it's because it seems to me the wisest text that has ever been written about the graffiti movement. Insisting on the relevance of their form towards their content, as well as their relation to the city on its scale, it clears a bush of misunderstandings about the substance of this movement : primarily not artistic, nor political, nor social, but simply *spatial*.

4 Except perhaps the Sao Paulo agglomeration, for two decades and still. See the work of documentation and analysis of F. CHASTANET, *Pixação : Sao Paolo Signature*, XG Press, 2007.

Despite its spreading, it lost its insurrectional nature, since urban contexts made themselves impervious to its massive appearing. On the one hand, the various urban authorities resort to drastic measures to hold it back - specific repressive legislation, "securization" of the strategic targets like the subway system, and most of all, constant and immediate erasing of graffiti traces - which dampen its practitioners' turmoil. But the crumbling of the graffiti movement is also due to its mediatic and commercial hijacking. Once *empty signifiers*, graffiti writings have been assigned various arbitrary connotations ("crime", "ghetto", "hip hop", "street art"... ) which reintegrate them to the sphere of the *full signs* in urban space. Losing their surprise effect on the city dwellers, they lost most of their relevance. Somehow they're now part of the urban *folklore*.

Nevertheless, by investing and confusing the sign-surfaces in urban space, graffiti writings realized a vast and efficient diversion of the urban codes. If the graffiti movement itself isn't able to attack massively the sign-surfaces anymore, as essential structures of urban coercion, it still opens a trail, by pointing out an efficient strategy of resistance. As a practice of urban space by the body, which leaves traces of its gestures, it may have an architectural resonance.

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## FILM PROPOSAL

This whole study aspires to engage a research, for an architectural resistance against the dissipation of body, space and time. The textual part of it finds an echo in a film proposal.

It consists of filming the diversion of a sign-surface, by putting the accent on the body/space relation that is engaged through it. Overlooking the square of Porte de Clignancourt, in the 18th district of Paris, the gable wall of the building located at 35, boulevard Ney, will be the target of a graphic incursion : three thick letters will be painted on its upper part, from the roof of the building - by painting *upside down*.

Image and sound try to explore the spatial experience that is involved by this action - direct confrontation of the body to the surface, scale relations between the gesture and the city... The tension between the urban panorama and the single body transforming one of its sign-surfaces, aspires

to convey a feeling : the switch, from a receiver condition in the city, to a symbolic face-to-face encounter, by which is assumed the right to talk in the urban megaphone. The gesture works as a metaphor : breaking the code that imposes unidirectional communication, taking place in the dialog with urban space.

Moreover, the film is the occasion for valuing the impact of this transformation of the urban landscape. Before its diversion, the surface of the gabble wall is covered with an off-white coating, whose neutrality is only apparent : it contributes to arrange a normalized environment of signs, by fading as much possible in order to highlight only the spatial channels that are integrated to urban dynamics. Once marked by a strong, striking sign (whose signified is not really relevant for our study, in regard to its signifier, namely *hand painted* letters), does it find itself reintegrated to the urban landscape ? Does the singular sign - trace of a gesture, measure of a body - articulate the observer's body, immersed in the normalized urban channels, to the *other space*, the roof of the building, from which the sign has been drawn ? In this sense, does the sign work as a symbolic hinge for being-in-the-city differently ? Through the changes it generates in the perception of the urban landscape, does it acquire an architectural dimension ?

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