# Anonymity and the Making of a Non-relational Architecture

When there's no one else in sight in the crowded lonely night, well I wait so long for my love vibration and I'm dancing with myself...  Well there's nothing to lose and there's nothing to prove, I'll be dancing with myself...  If I looked all over the world and there's every type of girl, but your empty eyes seem to pass me by, leave me dancing with myself.

— Billy Idol

**FROM AESTHETIC SENSATIONS TO ANESTHETIC EFFECTS**

In 2008, Marcelo Spina and Georgina Huljich curated an exhibition titled, Matters of Sensation, at the Artists Space in New York. The show revolved around relationships between new media and materiality in architecture with an emphasis on sensation and affect. In Spina and Huljich's words, the aim of the show was to explore "a means of creating diverse sensations in a space, focusing on the effects produced by the materials' textures and surfaces."[1] Enabled by advancing sets of computational, material and fabrication technologies the work "attempt[ed] to answer no questions, solve no problems, and broach no oppositions. It [was], rather, about a fascination with architectural forms that induce sensation - about fantasy, intimacy, and sci-fi, and above all, about experiencing pleasure."[2] This work was a continuation of a long line of experimental architecture stemming from the problems outlined by both Rossi and Eisenman. The works all demonstrate a kind of "complicity with anonymous materials"[3] made possible through radical experiments with form. In many ways this describes a contemporary positivism for architectural design – and one that represents some of the most advanced and important work presently being undertaken. But a full-fledged investment in the recognizable and sense-able in design also calls for an alternative line of investigation into its speculative opposite: anesthetic effects.

While the architects involved all employed extraordinarily rigorous design methodologies and procedural techniques to generate the displayed objects, they invariably also exploited a kind of sublime brilliance that hides the objects themselves. Timothy Morton describes this brilliance as "the withdrawnness of the object, its total inaccessibility"[4] that might otherwise be understood as a contradiction in terms from the stated objectives of the curators. And while anonymity certainly services the pursuit of sensation aesthetic affects both in contemporary architectural spheres as well as referencing its historical successes is art such as the works termed post-minimalist, this paper argues that architecture has

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an obligation to also investigate the specificities of anonymity as an anesthetic material effect. This is a questioning of the ways in which sensations between things are suppressed; investigating mechanisms that allow effects to operate across certain scales and economies while remaining completely undetected between others.The paper proposes that architecture begins to experiment in a way that radicalizes lack of recognition starting at the liminal edge of our senses and beyond – but no closer. The purpose of pursuing anonymity becomes an effective means of accelerating particular economies of information between increasingly technological urban artifacts.

## AN INCOMPLETE HISTORY OF DEBATE REGARDING THE NON-RELATIONAL
Architecture over the past century has broadly been framed as a discipline concerned with and accountable for the production of certainty, authorship, authority and autonomy. For much longer than that however, an alternative but not necessarily opposite agenda has been developing in the shadows - precisely at or beyond the limits of human perception and orientation. By privileging the former and ignoring the latter, a crisis has manifest over the existence of critical distance and the delineation of effective boundaries that architecture has historically claimed as its sovereign disciplinary territory. Ecological crisis and endless technological development occupy the forefront of the discussion surrounding this condition. However, beneath the knowable and sensible surfaces of architecture, the contours of a dark matter are taking shape where the new, the alien and the speculative operate.

For the past several decades, the argument over distinguishing between an architecture *for us* and an architecture *in itself* has been waged in purely relational terms focusing on the limits of human understanding and perception; the *for us* camp typically emphasizing usefulness (utilitas) and criticality while the *in itself* camp preferring to stress beauty (venustas) and sensory aesthetics. To this day, each camp continues to accuse the other of their futility and inefficacy through an infinite number of permutations and evolving arguments. Alas neither camp is able to escape what Quentin Meillassoux terms the *correlationist circle*[5] thus failing to demonstrate the presence of autonomy. Consequently neither is able to substantiate an architecture *in itself* whether they want to or not. It is my hope that this paper formulates a non-relational alternative to these lines of argumentation by identifying a specific lineage of architectural thought and argumentation. Perhaps the most radical proposition lies in the rejection of aesthetics in speculative practice in favor of an anesthetic mode of experimentation.

By arguing that architecture may have largely ignored or forgotten the very thing that makes an architecture in itself possible: anonymity, the paper attempts to both contextualize anonymity within a history of architectural theory while describing a value of sorts for generating an architecture without relation.

## ANTHROPOCENTRIC OR RELATIONAL ANONYMITY
The Ancient Greeks first developed the concept of anonymity as a kind of placeholder for things thought to exist but without identification. Its root, anónymos, is constructed from an- (without) and –ōnym (word or name); translating into a class of unknowable things that operate outside of language and by extension understanding. In accordance with the Aristotlean substance, a lack of distinction necessarily precluded the existence of a thing. But Aristotle did trust his senses enough to give perceived effects a designated place in advance of language within the space of anonymity for further observation and development.

Figure 1. *Klex 1* by Ruy Klein in Matters of Sensation

The ascribing of anonymity as a substantive term plays out on a number of levels. First, it reveals a cultural and intellectual desire to draw these otherwise nameless things back into the fold of perception even if only at its edges via the synthetic mechanisms of language as a form of positive law. Second, it securely chains the classical model of anonymity to the anthropocentric mechanism of liminal sensory perception. This second point must be emphasized in that classical anonymity is an anonymity from us and thus inherently relational so long as human sensation is held in a singular position of privilege.

Relational anthropocentric anonymity is also linear; working in a single, irreversible direction – a precursor to identification – a proto-material. By declaring a thing anonymous in these terms, it is granted a status that draws attention to an ambiguous set of effects or an unexpected lack thereof. This awareness serves as an incremental step toward the exhaustion of anonymity. Once a thing has revealed enough to be described in an explicit way, it no longer retains the property and is posited into the class of known things. This form of anonymity as an exhaustible property is relational on two levels; first as a given placeholder and then as a consumed thing replaced with yet another anthropocentric mechanism of rationalization and understanding. This process continues to define mainstream architectural practice in the image of Laugier's Primitive Hut whereby man makes and ideally improves his place in the world by ordering the otherwise unfamiliar world that surrounds him.

**FORMULATING THE NON-RELATIONAL IN ARCHITECTURE**
Throughout the course of architectural history, there have been a series of experimental projects and texts that have engaged a very different form of anonymity than the one described above. Rather than relying on human understanding and sensation, these projects excise the human from the architectural project both in advance of and through its production - avoiding relationism by simply eliminating the human constant in the relational equation. In other words, a non-relational anonymity is by effect an architecture that is non-relational to us.

The question for speculative architecture lies in the possibility of exploiting radical contingency toward a kind of flattened or universal relativism. This excising of the human is well expressed in what Levi Bryant calls the 'ontic principle.' Beginning with the premise that *to be* is to make or produce difference, the ontic principle asks the question, "How could difference be difference if it did not make a difference?"[6] In order to avoid the relational, Bryant notes that not all differences are important to us, but rather that simply because something does not make a difference for us does not mean that something does not make a difference at all or could not exist. This is the challenge presented to a historically anthropocentric model of architecture: can it address or speculate upon things that do not make a difference for us both through reason and sensation – and if so, how? In order for architecture to maintain its disciplinary integrity while justifying such an endeavor, a lineage of thought on the subject must be retraced.

**RECONSIDERING AN ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY**
In order to establish a non-relational architecture, we must properly address the relationship between architecture and the city, for it is here where a foundational disciplinary distinction within relationism lies. In *Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi formulates the city itself as a complex aggregation of individual urban artifacts. These autonomous artifacts are also and at the same time partial,

incomplete, limited, and exist in relation to their own discrete set of other artifacts of the city. Each artifact reveals a particular history that is both a history of itself as well as the city that it is a part of; each artifact indicative of an irreducible autonomy. Much controversy (or rather confusion) has surrounded this formulation, but it is absolutely necessary to provide clarity at this point so we are not dragged back into misappropriated conventions of relationism later in the paper.

There have been two broad ways in which *Architecture of the City* has been interpreted – both subtracting the human figure in critically different ways. However, only one produces the possibility for a non-relational architecture. An anthropocentric approach assumes that Rossi does not include people in the set of artifacts that forms the city but then insists on reintroducing them as observers who are then only able to address the city that appears to them. But this would be a mistake that undoes the speculative contribution of Rossi.

The second way of subtracting the human from the equation is in fact not through subtraction at all, but rather through inclusion. In this second mode, people themselves – in fact all people – are included in the set of urban artifacts that constitute the city. This second interpretation removes the possibility of critical distance for anyone within the milieu of the city precisely because the human is but another partial, incomplete, and limited artifact of the city. Despite the ethical and legal debate that we will postpone for a separate discussion, a disciplinary conundrum for architecture emerges in that there are an infinite number of artifacts each with their own unique histories – architectural or not. This presents not only a problem for effectively managing these individuals, but also exposing the impossibility of a total and immediate interaction with one another. They exist precisely because they are able to remain distinct and withdrawn from one another. So how can architecture properly address this irreducible separation? In other words, can contemporary architecture deal with the inaccessibility of a multitude of arche-fossils?[7]

We can only hope despite his bias toward human perspectives, that Rossi's emphasis on the insufficiency of singular/reductive visions of the city in favor of incomplete aggregations, would have led him to argue that every artifact of the city is an arche-fossil to only a specific set of others. This would produce a kind of intermediate city within a more complex whole that any given artifact might not engage. Despite the sophistication in his stance against a singular conceptual model of the city, Rossi was careful to include a definition of architecture that complicates things significantly with respect to human perception itself. In citing Carlo Aymonino, Rossi states, "the task of modern architecture is to pinpoint a series of concepts and relationships which, if they have some fundamental laws in common from a technological and organizational standpoint, become verified in partial models, and are differentiated precisely through their resolution in a finished architectonic form which is specific and recognizable."[8] While the Rossi-Aymonino task for modern architecture is an elegant statement of the complexity of architecture as a technological discipline founded on the production of partial specificities, it is the last term, recognizable, that we will take issue with. The statement implies a recognizability to us that relies on human sense and perception rather than a more ambivalent recognizability that may in fact not be perceivable at all.

For Rossi, recognizability is used interchangeably with communication whereby the communication between artifacts serves as the engine for growth and

change within cities and artifacts themselves. The urban artifact acts back on the city through an indeterminate engagement with other promiscuous artifacts. The genius of Rossi's insight lies in addressing the complex interactions between things that lie outside the purview and control of any single artifact, even and especially the ones that are engaged in processes of transformation. And so the paper argues that it would be a mistake to evaluate recognizability through a human lens alone, if at all – because doing so might have the effect of precluding other forms of communication and thus transformation. We will call this a *flattened recognizability* that establishes a universal anonymity between urban artifacts as an animating agent for change in the city.
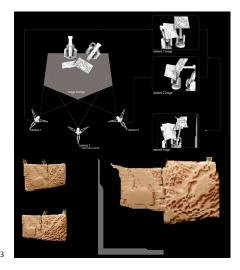
Compounding the complexity of a flattened recognizability is the increasing technological sophistication of and between artifacts. For Rossi and Aymonino, the task also included common technological and organizational laws as contingencies in the formation of architecture and the city. But this is a somewhat antiquated approach to technology in the context of the immediate and highly mediated exchange of information between artifacts at scales ranging from the microscopic to the cosmic. The city itself has expanded beyond its Westphalian boundaries - the city ino longer something that can be drawn as a 2-dimensional line around from above because their artifacts do not sense or recognize them. Technological laws have been replaced by an ideology of the city. Rossi's framework is useful for this task so long as the technological is not treated as a singularity but rather by acknowledging that it has become multiple. No longer a thing – Technology – but rather a teeming mass of all things technological that no single perspective, let alone a human one, could possibly access in its entirety. As technological objects continue to grow in number and intensify, anonymity itself constitutes a greater and greater percentage of the informational mass of the city. So while Rossi may have celebrated the complexity of the city, he may have also drastically underestimated it, not just in terms of its intensity but also in the threat that it would pose to the discipline of architecture itself.

**AN ARCHITECTURE OF ABSENCE AND NON-RELATIONAL ANONYMITY**
It may come as no surprise that Peter Eisenman was such a proponent of the positions advocated for by Rossi in *Architecture of the City*. Not only did he play a significant role in the publishing of the text in english, but he used it to address his own disciplinary arguments. For Eisenman, like Rossi, the irreducible element of architecture is its complete unknowability manifest through specific form. And while there was much in Rossi's work that Eisenman could strategically appropriate (a resolution to the Grey/White debate in particular), Rossi's agenda toward an "alternative to a functionalist conception" becomes the most significant when addressing an agenda toward anonymity in architecture. Rossi claimed that in order to move past a functionalist theory (in effect a theory of architecture *for us* in programmatic terms), that we must "recognize the importance of both form and the rational processes of architecture, seeing in form itself the capacity to embrace [multiplicities]."[9] But Eisenman in turn (and perhaps being the first openly post-human architect) removes the rational (anthropocentric) bias from Rossi while preserving the disciplinary emphasis on form through "structures of absences."[10]

Eisenman takes this on directly in Post-functionalism (1976) when he cites Live-Straus declaring, "Language, an unreflecting totalization, is human reason which has its reason and of which man knows nothing."[11]  This critique of modernism

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Figure 2. Google SIFT Images

Figure 3. *SIFT Materiality* by Matthew Parker

establishes architecture itself as something operating independently of authored intention. He goes on to echo Rossi when he describes architectural form as "a series of fragments – signs without meaning [to us] dependent upon, and without reference to, a more basic condition."[12] This demonstrates a significant departure from the Rossi-Aymonino task, in that not only was architectural form independent of rational understanding, but that the behavior of a "more basic condition" may not make itself evident to human perception at all. Stopping short of using the term, anonymity, Eisenman describes post-functionalism as a generic term of absence while alluding to a "larger theoretical structure [ ] for a new consciousness in architecture."

Given the explicit critique of both rationalism as a cultural construct and of an emphasis of architectural form as a territory through which an anterior can operate, one could argue that Eisenman was in fact describing not only a non-relational architecture, but one that was specifically ambivalent toward us – not just in a relational sense but ambivalent in the same way that a flattened recognizability demands: a possible ambivalence between all things. By extension, this produces an architecture that exists absolutely because it might be able to either generate anonymity for itself (the artifact) or between other things (making the city). Thus a speculative, non-relational architecture is charged with the task of experimenting with the production of anonymity, absent of reason and recognition for us while remaining insatiably curious toward 1.) unreason and non-recognition between all things beyond our perception and knowledge 2.) generic forms that produce anonymous specificities.

**ANONYMOUS APPLICATIONS**

So where is the architecture of anonymity and how might one experiment with it? These are the two basic questions that frame my entire body of research, teaching and practice. It leads me to investigate economies of information that we all know to exist, but somehow elude sensation by design. It includes the waste from architectural demolition as much as it involves computational swarms. It is interested in making architecture through subtraction. It involves a very serious investigation into the legal structure of sovereignty and architectural experimentation with autonomy. It relies on dark ecologies and radical ambivalence. It produces fictions born out of possible interactions between computation and physical materials. It is more concerned with making new things out of old stuff than making old stuff out of new things. It attempts to exploit The Stack (Bratton, Forthcoming) just the same as it attempts to exploit a history of architectural theory. These may seem an unlikely set of investigations, but at their core they are driven by the engine of anonymity. We will briefly examine a series of projects that attempt to produce and play with anonymity.

Scale invariant feature transformation algorithms (SIFT descriptors) are vector based software processes that that aggregate and stitch together Google Earth and Google Street View images together to produce a seamless, monolithic whole image of the earth. This synthetic image of the earth contains mutations and variations unseen to the naked eye, while producing an image in many ways more real than earth itself given the reification of Google's data as a foundational platform. SIFT Materiality explores the relationship between the physical and the digital through this lens By exploiting the vector translation and displacement employed by SIFT descriptors, a series of non-relational forms are produced in an attempt to manipulate their possible effects.

The Expanding Periphery and the Migrating Center

While initial results of the SIFT-related research are only now being generated, trans-scalar architectural projects have begun to develop. The most promising of these projects looks at playing with augmenting building envelopes in anticipation of SIFTed images generated through Google image capturing. This produces the possibility of anonymity at two scales.  First, the effect would be designed at a scale where no single street view perspective could possibly access the aggregate information and would likely not even recognize a difference in pattern within the urban environment at all.  Secondly, the scalar relationship yields a range of anonymous possibilities from the perspective of street and satellite imaging.  On one hand, an aggregate image might in fact trick the satellite into thinking its seeing something else.  On the other, a city could produce an image of itself that yields explicit and accurate information allowing for example real time demographics to communicate upwards while the general population on the surface might have no idea they are communicating anything at all (such as simple variation on brick patterning).  While this project is only in its infancy, it demonstrates a serious attempt to address and make use of anonymity as a material effect emerging from a lineage of non-relational architectural experimentation.
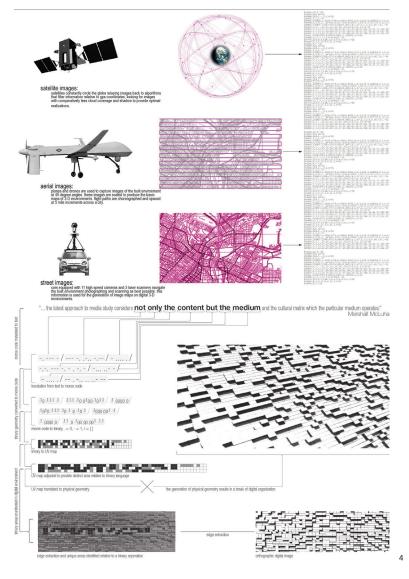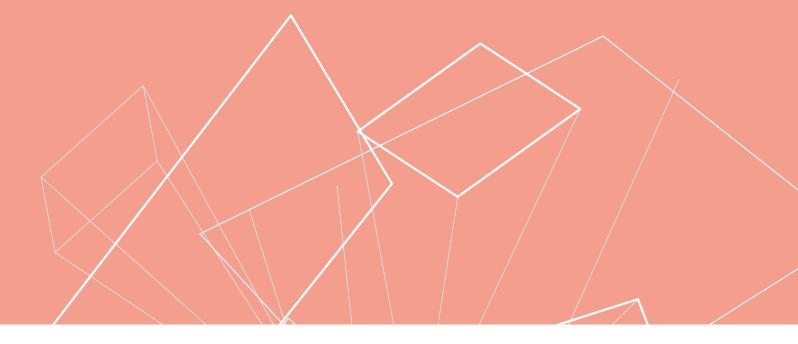


Figure 4. Trans-scalar envelope articulation

**ENDNOTES**

1.  http://artistsspace.org/exhibitions/matters-of-sensation

2.  Spina, M. and Huljich, G. (2009). On Matters of Sensatation. In Log 17. eds. Gage, M.F. and Pita, F. Anyone Corporation.

3.  Negarestani, R. (2011). Contingency and Complicity. In The Medium of Contingency. Robin Mackay. Urbanomic and Ridinghouse, London.

4.  Morton, T. (2011). Sublime Objects. In Speculations II. eds. Austin, M., Ennis, P.J., Gironi, F, and Gokey, T. pp 207-227. www. speculationsjournal.org

5.  Meillassoux, Q. (2008). After Finitude: An essay on the Necessity of Contingency. Continuum. New York.

6.  Bryant, L. (2011), The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-oriented Ontology. In The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism. eds. Bryant, L.R., Srnicek, N. and Harman, Re:Press.

7.  This is a term also outlined by Meillassoux in After Finitude.

8.  Rossi, A. (1982). The Architecture of the City. eds. Rossi, A and Eisenman, P. MIT Press, Cambridge.

9.  Ibid., 118.

10. Eisenman, P. (1984). The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End. In Perspecta 21, Summer, 166.

11. Eisenman, P. (1976). Post-functionalism. In Architecture Theory Since 1968, ed. K. M. Hays. The MIT Press. p. 238.

12. Ibid., 239.

13. Bratton, B.H. (forthcoming). The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty. MIT Press.

14. Most notably in *The Project of Autonomy: Politics and Architecture Within and Against Capitalism and The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture.*

## ON ANONYMITY AND AUTONOMY

The largest omission from this paper lies in a deeper examination of Carl Schmitt's form of sovereignty, a revisitation of Paul Virilio's accident, and Benjamin Bratton's speculations on their convergence through *The Stack.*[13] Pier Vittorio Aureli's research on experimental models of autonomy is also a likely source of insight into the problem of anonymity.[14] The formulations of both Rossi and Eisenman so closely mirror Schmitt's sovereign that in order to address architecture's involvement with governance, one must look at howarchitectural decisions are made within distributed models of control. Given the lack of origin or centralized decision-making figures in complex environments, the accident may now have a hierarchical advantage over sovereign force given the magnitude anonymity now enjoys within the polis. The technological apparatus that now orders the earth treats anonymity as its highest form of status. An inverse mapping of anonymity may actualize otherwise indistinct hierarchies of power within a *cloud polis*. Aureli provided the inspiration to look more deeply into anonymity in the first place. In his book, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture*, Aureli explores Rossi's identification of anonymity within Boullee's own work. So aside from obvious investigations into the Italian precedents found in his broader body of research (Piranesi, Archizoom, Superstudio, the Operaismo), Boullee looks to be an interesting source that might provide more insight into the mechanisms of production of anonymity. Future experimentation squarely lies in a series of interoperable agent-based models that attempt to produce anonymous morphologies through the real-time interaction between large sets of SIFTed parts. How an anonymous and non-relational architecture can be effectively communicated, discussed and integrated into the larger discourse remains an open question. The answer may lie in a kind of alien non-relational functionalism, the contours of which remain undefined.

# BEYOND THE FRINGE-
# RECONSIDERING ARCHITECTURAL CITIZENSHIP