Geographic Object

Humankind cannot bear much reality. — T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

In his 1974 article titled "Architecture and Modesty," published in *Casabella*, Andre Branzi, one of the members of the Italian Archizoom group wrote: "With the development of the electronic media and mass-culture, architecture has become something of a minor art… Once considered the most complete and noble of the arts, architecture has lost its pre-eminence not only because of the external difficulties of a political and economic nature that it has always encountered, but because of a deep internal crisis now afflicting it as a result of modifications in the mechanisms of cultural production and of the urban function itself….Today the city is no longer a cultural 'place' but a *'condition'*…The quality that we ask of the city today has nothing to do with form or composition, but only with the quality of social services and the market."[1]

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For those who are familiar with Branzi's work and writings, this is not a surprise choice of words. Think of the *No-Stop City* project of Archizoom of 1969, which declares the demise of architecture and its classical rules of composition, and replaces it with the limitless horizontal carpet of the urban *condition*.

Not surprisingly, seeing urbanism as another kind of "condition" in the 1990s—this time *field conditions*—would bring the same kind of declaration. Developing as a reactionary response to the representational and symbolic aspects of postmodern architecture and shifting the focus to the fluidity of relational systems around the object, systems were promising in their liberation of the material and the performative attributes of the city and in bringing a more realist and instrumental role for architecture. An excerpt from Stan Allen's essay "Infrastructural Urbanism" (1999) would express the tone of the era perfectly::

> Postmodernism in architecture is usually associated with a rediscovery of architecture's past. However,…[p]ostmodernism responded not only a call to re-inscribe architecture into history, it also responded to a contemporary demand for meaning in architecture. History provided a ready-made catalog of "meaningful" forms, but in order for the past to be appropriated and utilized, it had to be detached from its original context and converted into a sign…Nevertheless, an architecture that works exclusively in

the semiotic register and defines its role as critique, commentary, or even "interrogation"...has in some fundamental way given up on the possibility of every intervening in that reality. Under the dominance of the representational model, architecture has surrendered its capacity to imagine, to propose, or to construct alternative realities.... Infrastructural urbanism marks a return to instrumentality and a move away from the representational imperative in architecture...Material practices (ecology and engineering for example)...do not work primarily with images or meaning, or even with objects, but with *performance*: energy inputs and outputs, the calibration of force and résistance. They are less concerned with what things look like and more concerned with what they can do.[2]

Standing as a precursor to contemporary conceptions of environmental performance and systemic thinking in architecture and related design fields, this shift in emphasis toward contingencies has been exemplified for the last two decades by explorations of landscape and ecological urbanism, a renewed interest in the politics of territory and infrastructure, as well as the omnipresence of mapping as a methodological tool for "design research." While this shift of focus on *conditions* has been important and necessary, in the context of our contemporary economic, political and environmental instabilities, we are experiencing a very particular emphasis on conditions and contingencies right now, presented mostly through measures of performance and efficiency as well as positivistic and prescriptive interpretations of systemic thinking. With the ubiquity of discussions on sustainability and climate change, the material and the performative focus on conditions have mutated into the positivistic and the managerial overtones highlighting efficiency measures to be met and maintained. Ranging from managerial metrics of environmental engineering to the hyper-realism of problem solving and un-biased data accumulation, systemic thinking reveals architecture's desire to engage with the realities of the world but limits its unique capacities to uncritical borrowings from environmental sciences and management.

Here, at this very juncture, the simple question is, what if reality is not completely real? In other words, rather than securely placed and fastened, what if reality is nothing more than an agglomeration of representations in themselves and "raw data" is already deemed as an oxymoron?[3] Correspondingly, rather than seeing environment as something merely systemic, and therefore needing to be managed and maintained, or as purely natural, needing to be preserved and protected, can we instead talk about an alternative kind of geographic imagination in architecture that projects environment as aesthetic and monumental, and thus offers a renewed and a more nuanced dialogue between the representational and the material? According to this formulation, instead of negating the representational for the sake of an emphasis on the material as it was in the '90s discussions, this particular kind of geographic imagination I am alluding to would suggest a new kind of materialism and realism in architecture that couple deep engagement with environmental contingencies with its seemingly opposing counterparts, such as representation, monumentality and composition.[4] Especially in the context of discussions on climate change, and the new geological epoch posited by the Anthropecene, can we imagine unfamiliar aesthetic couplings between the representational and the material, or between the real and the abstract, instead of limiting our agency simply to the managerial?

SLIGHTLY UNFAMILIAR

In this discussion, a focus on the idea of the (un)familiar is pertinent precisely because of its very specific legacy within the history of realism in architecture. From the "de-familiarization" project of modernism to the re-appropriation of the familiar during the 1960s and 1970s—through discussions on reality-as-found, typology, the ordinary or the uncanny, seen, for instance, in the work of Mathias Ungers, Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo Rossi and Denis Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, and John Hejduk—various relationships between the familiar and the unfamiliar have defined architecture's framing of the world and its cultural

Figure 1: Lauren Marsolier, *Transition Series,* 2009-2013.

significance. It is in the constant redefinition of this relationship that we find the most provocative conflicts and the most promising reflections on the specificities of architecture as a discipline.

With this background in mind, the challenging yet equally thought-provoking relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar merits a closer attention when one considers its renewed relevance within contemporary architecture and urbanism. On the one hand, one can speculate on the relevance of unfamiliar interpretations of what is considered to be familiar—i.e. ordinary, banal—architectural conventions or qualities of the city. Here, an endless horizon of suburban tract homes, shotgun houses, the "typical plans," the cloudy curtain walls, and the atriums of office towers, big-box warehouses, parking lots, and other forms of commonplace or vernacular architectural production would come to mind. On the other hand, in an attempt to expand our disciplinary imaginary, one can speculate on employing familiar architectural strategies on what is considered to be unfamiliar within a disciplinary setting and bring them into architectural consciousness. Here, all that which belongs to the environment yet remains invisible would come to focus and gain a particular relevance perhaps in the same manner that Schinkel found beauty in the English factories, Gropius in the American grain silos, and Le Corbusier in the ocean liner. Accordingly, the lines of expanded infrastructures, the territorial geometries of agricultural and resource extraction fields would draw attention.

For both of the abovementioned iterations between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the true potential of such investigations would be in their capacity to offer unconventional relationships between the real and the abstract rather than resorting to naïve dualities. In other words, instead of promoting a project of hyper-realism (think: righteous scenario planning or environmental engineering of data and performance), hyper-surrealism (think: architectural sci-fi) or hyper-abstraction (think: white noise), one can speculate on an idea of the *slightly unfamiliar* as a form of strategic abstraction and an unexpected yet subtle disassociation from the real. Accordingly, rather than probing estrangement for its own sake or negating realism all together, one can position a project of slightly unfamiliar realism as an alternative for new relationships between the material (geographic) and the representational (aesthetic). Think of the near-plausibility suggested in: photographer Lauren Marsolier's slightly distorted realisms of everyday life through carefully calibrated digital collages in her *Transition Series* (figure 1), David Reed's marginally illusionistic paintings inserted anachronistically into the bedroom scene in Hitchcock's *Vertigo* or Roxy Paine's meticulous rendering of the banal in his scaled replication of the fast-food kitchen diorama produced entirely from birch and maple wood in his *Carcass*. What all of these works share in common is their deliberate tone of abstraction that reinforces reality by pushing back or trivial distortion. Likewise, the very potential of abstraction within the slightly unfamiliar architectural realism that I am suggesting here would not be so much in its promise for pure alienation but—quite the contrary—in its carefully calibrated degree of separation from the real in order to achieve a much deeper and nuanced engagement with reality.

MUSEUM OF LOST VOLUMES

Two projects, a speculative project and an installation, we recently worked on at NEMESTUDIO take these discussions as starting points. While dealing with the question of "raw" resource with respect to data and matter ("raw matter" in first project and "raw data" in the latter), both projects test the limits of a slightly unfamiliar realism. That is, while taking their cues from real events, facts and data in the world, their formal or representational modalities are slightly abstracted or de-familiarized in order to push the limits of imagination through speculative thinking.

Museum of Lost Volumes project, a geo-architectural fiction and a satire commentary on resource extraction, provides an alternative focus on the mining of Rare Earth minerals.

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As a museum built after the depletion of Rare Earth minerals in the world after their abundant use with "green technologies," it speculates on the preservation of geographic ruins that once belonged to the resource extraction of Rare Earth minerals mining. Since Rare Earth minerals are the backbone substance that is used in clean-energy technologies such as wind-turbines, electric batteries and solar panels, the project questions the idea of resource scarcity in the abundance of green technologies. It imagines a museum of ancient resource extraction ruins for a time when mining is an obsolete practice and treated similarly to an ancient monument or an extinct species to be housed in a museum. While rendering the geographic scale as a tangible entity, it aims to construct an alternative relationship between legibility and abstraction through the limits and potentials of design thinking. Juxtaposing an inquiry on matter and formlessness with monumentality and composition, the project is comprised of five drawings, which all depict specific aspects of this imaginary museum. (Figure 2).

In his book *Romantic Rocks,* literary theorist Noah Heringman shows how the development of the discipline of geology in the Romantic era created a very specific material and aesthetic appreciation toward rocks, as they embodied formlessness in their composition and dramatized the recalcitrance of raw matter.[5] In the context of the new geological epoch posited by the Anthropocene, *Museum of Lost Volumes* aims to instigate new aesthetic sensibilities between the representational and the material. By juxtapositng the *finished* and the typologically simplified archetypical monuments with the vulgar *rawness* and formlessness of the naked landmasses, the project calls attention to the under-conceptualized space in between. In his book *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s*, art historian James Nisbet shows us how land art attempted to address monumentality and objectness within holistic ecosystems and planetary thinking rather than a mere displacement of art out from the gallery space to the environment.[6] Similarly, what if geography was not yet another version of an environmental context for architecture, but was an object?

Figure 2: NEMESTUDIO, *Museum of Lost Volumes*, 2015.

STRAIT

Our recent *STRAIT* installation tackles this question directly. By presenting a geographical feature as a withdrawn monolith, it exploits similar contestations between the geographic and the architectural through the experience of an installation object. By framing the geographic scale as an architectural condition, the project aims to open up a range of aesthetic and political concerns for architectural imagination and the broader public. (The installation was view at the SALT gallery in Istanbul during May–August, 2015).

In March 1994, a dramatic accident occurred in the Bosphorus Strait. Nassia, a 100,000-ton tanker carrying crude oil from Russia, collided with a cargo ship at the northern exit of the Strait. The cargo ship exploded and ran aground, while the Nassia immediately caught fire and released more than 13,000 tons of oil into the sea. The fire continued for weeks, causing a devastating environmental disaster. The accident marked a delicate moment in the history of the Bosphorus Strait. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of the Caspian oil reserves in the 1990s, the Strait became one of the six busiest oil-shipping choke points in the world, along with the Suez Canal, the Straits of Malacca, Bab el-Mandab, the Strait of Hormuz and the Straits of Dover.

Compared to the other trade routes, however, the Bosphorus Strait is unique as one of the narrowest and most urbanized, as it passes through the heart of Istanbul, a city of fourteen million citizens. To complicate matters even further, the geographic form of the Strait, with its sharp and narrow turns, makes it one of the most risky and difficult channels to navigate in the world. To do so, vessels must change their course at least twelve times with turning angles reaching to 80 degrees at times. Four of these turns are blind corners, which means approaching vessels cannot be seen until it is too late.

Despite the seriousness of the risk, contemporary environmental concerns regarding the transit of colossal oil tankers through this navigational route have been conflicted with the

Figure 3: NEMESTUDIO, *STRAIT* Installation, 2015.

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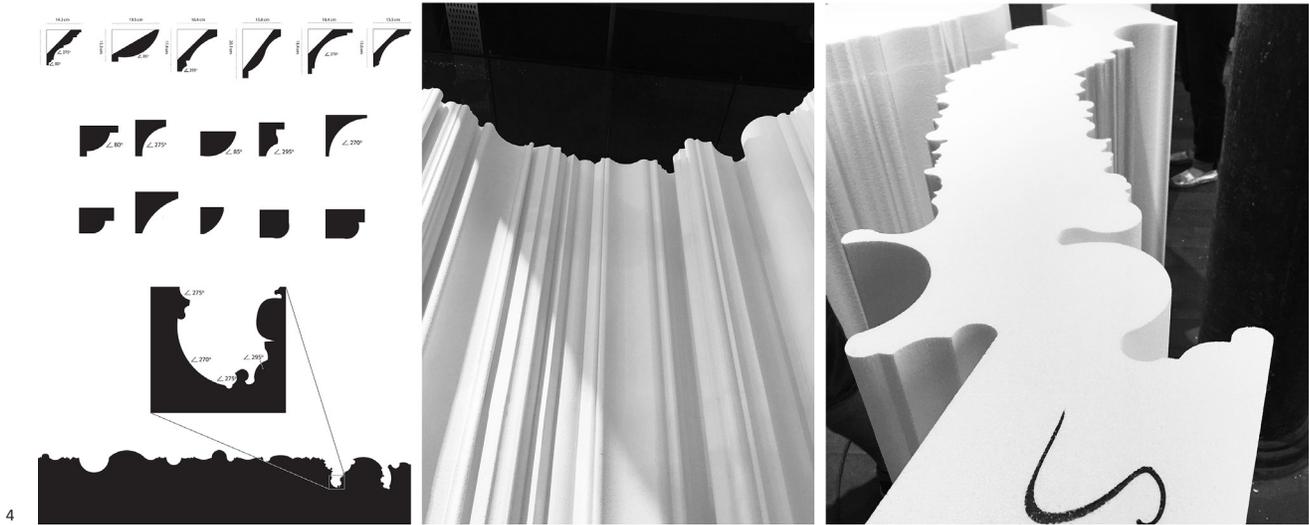
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controversies around transnational energy pipelines and various other large-scale infra-structural and urban transformation projects in Istanbul such as the promotion of the transnational Bakü-Tblis-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline as an alternative route to the transit of the Caspian oil through the Bosphorus Strait in the 1990s. And more recently, the risk associated with the tanker passage through the Strait is used as a pretext for the construction of the controversial Kanal Istanbul project, a massive thirty-mile-long canal that will act as an alternative route between the Black Sea and the Marmara Sea.

The *STRAIT* installation brings this framework to architectural and urban imaginaries by manifesting the narrow Strait through the tangible experience of an installation object. (Figure 3). Invading the entrance floor of the gallery as an "out-of-scale" monolith, the installation introduces the idea of the "Geographic Object," as an extrusion of the Bosphorus Strait shoreline to the height of the gallery ceiling without articulating its actual topography. The visitor's pathway through the installation evokes the narrowness of the Bosphorus Strait within the language of architecture. The object is scaled so the tightest point in the Strait measures 90 centimeters, the minimum dimension for a door opening. In this way, the object renders the Bosphorus as a constricted experiential condition.

Instead of treating geographic information merely as "raw data," *STRAIT* re-enacts objectification and the role of spatial demarcation as an alternative conception of environment to articulate a more nuanced interaction between aesthetics and geography. As an abstraction of geographic information as a para-empirical phenomenon, the object renders the Bosphorus simultaneously more tangible and more abstract.

To amplify the contestation between architectural and geographic scales, the installation reconstructs the crenelated shorelines of the Bosphorus with the geometric abstraction of the locally used crown moulding (kartonpiyer) section profiles, commonly used as interior ceiling ornamentation in Istanbul. By collapsing the vertical extrusion of geographic information (shorelines) with the horizontal extrusion of a vernacular ceiling profile, the shorelines become both more legible and more abstracted at an architectural scale. (Figure 4). While utilizing the elemental technique of geometric extrusion by way of juxtaposing a plan condition (shorelines) with a section profile (crown moulding), the project sets out a new dialog, as though Superstudio's horizontal extrusion New York profile from the *Continuous Monument* project (1969) suddenly started speaking with Mies van der Rohe's vertical charcoal extrusion of the plan at his *Glass Skyscraper* project (1922).

Figure 4: Abstracted crown-moulding profiles as extruded shorelines: Close-up views from the installation. NEMESTUDIO, *Museum of Lost Volumes,* 2015.

As part of the solo exhibition, the installation object is accompanied with the presenta-tion of "Geographic Fiction," a story illustrated through a series of speculative architec-tural drawings and presented in the form of a silent film. (Figure 5). The story depicts an instance in 2025, when *Oilella*, the biggest fictional oil tanker in the world gets stuck in the Bosphorus. This incident not only blocks the passageway forever but also causes the Bosphorus to be transformed into a new land of urban development. In the story, while some structures on the Bosphorus turn into touristic destinations depicting an archaeology of an oil-shipping landscape, new developments take advantage of this rapidly urbanizing land. For new construction, building codes get created by taking *Oilella* as a guideline for the most historical structure, and monuments get built to commemorate previous oil spills on the spots where they happened. Finally, the installation object of the *STRAIT* exhibition is presented as the lead character of this particular noir narrative.

CONCLUSION

Presented as an alternative to the managerial agendas dominating architecture and related design disciplines in relation to environmental contingency, the essay has attempted to argue for a more speculative stance in relation to architecture's agency. Calling for a renewed dialogue for the concepts of environment and object in architecture, I see the idea of the *Geographic Object* as an alternative framework that can provide original interpreta-tions within disciplinary and political levels.

That is, rather than seeing geography as a systemic or managerial phenomenon, *Geographic Object* aims to speculate on the domain of the object as a political, aesthetic, and mate-rial confrontation with the larger forces of the city. The aim is to project on a new kind of materialism for architecture that could set up renewed relationships between realism and abstraction. Proposing a slightly unfamiliar realism, *Geographic Object* negates the rele-vance of both super-autonomy and super-contingency.

In an era where humans are described as "geological agents," architecture is a measure against which the world might be read. Architecture has the power to represent the world back to itself while instigating radical and critical transformation. We have to be even more contingent and even more autonomous so that we can collide these forces against one another more radically and unexpectedly.[7] Rather than the passive diplomacy between autonomy and contingency, alternative worlds are hidden in the extremities, the nuances and the contradictions established in those kinds of collisions.

ENDNOTES

1. [Emphasis added] Andre Branzi, "Radical Notes 20: Architecture and Modesty," *Casabella 396* (December 1974): 8.

2. [Emphasis in original] Stan Allen: "Infrastructural Urbanism", *Points + Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City* (New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, pp. 49–53.

3. For the problematization of the idea of "raw data", see: Laura Kurgan, *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology and Politics* (New York: Zone Books, 2013). Also see Lisa Gitelman, ed., *Raw Data" is an Oxymoron* (Cambridge Mass., MIT Press: 2013).

4. For a more extensive discussion on this ques-tion, see: Neyran Turan, "How Do Geographic Objects Perform?" *ARPA Journal 03: Performance* (July 2015). Full article is available to view online at: http://www.arpajournal.net/how-do-geographic-objects-perform

5. Noah Heringman, *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004)..

6. James Nisbet, "Planetary Visions: Land Art, Minimalism, and the Whole Earth," in *Ecologies, Environments and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2014), 67-129.

7. For more on this point see: Neyran Turan, "New Commons: Between Aesthetics and Engagement," *Conditions* 13: I*ndependent Scandinavian Magazine on Architecture and Urbanism* (Spring 2014), 31-34.

Figure 5: Still from the Geographic Fic-tion. NEMESTUDIO, *STRAIT* installation*, 2015.