POLITICAL EPHEMERA

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The paper looks at several rhetorical and speculative projects, conceived as small-scale architecture carrying a political charge, and seeking change. If monumental architecture — the public space and built form of the solid, enduring and permanent — represents established political power, then ephemeral architecture is archetypally expressive of impulsive political demonstration for reform. Mikhail Bakhtin's writing on the "carnivalesque" supports the argument relating an ephemeral architecture to a voicing of political views. An analogy can be drawn between the "parodic" discourse of Bakhtin and the light, portable architecture of the circus — the tent, the canvas, the hoarding — spontaneous architecture of the crowd, the seething masses. In Bakhtin's discussion of Goethe's text on the Roman Fire Festival, or *moccoli*, from his *Italian Journey*, it is not so much revolutionary aspects that come to the fore, but rather the continuous presence of an abiding and powerful folk tradition of critique of power in place. Bakhtin makes a series of points using Goethe's observations about the socio-political function of the crowd gathering in the street and public arena, writing:

> Goethe stresses the suspension of all hierarchic differences, of all ranks and status; carnivalesque revelry is marked by absolute familiarity. [...] The heart of the matter is not in the subjective awareness but in the collective consciousness of their eternity, of their earthly, historic immortality as a people and of the continual renewal and growth. [...] the peculiar festive character without any piousness, complete liberation from seriousness, the atmosphere of equality, freedom, and familiarity ... The carnivalesque crowd in the marketplace or in the streets is not merely a crowd. It is the people as a whole, but organized in their own way, the way of the people. It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization, which is suspended for the time of the festivity. [...]

A similar sense of unity was brought to the people by all the forms an images of medieval popular-festive life. But the unity did not have such a simple geometric character. It was more complex and differentiated; most important of
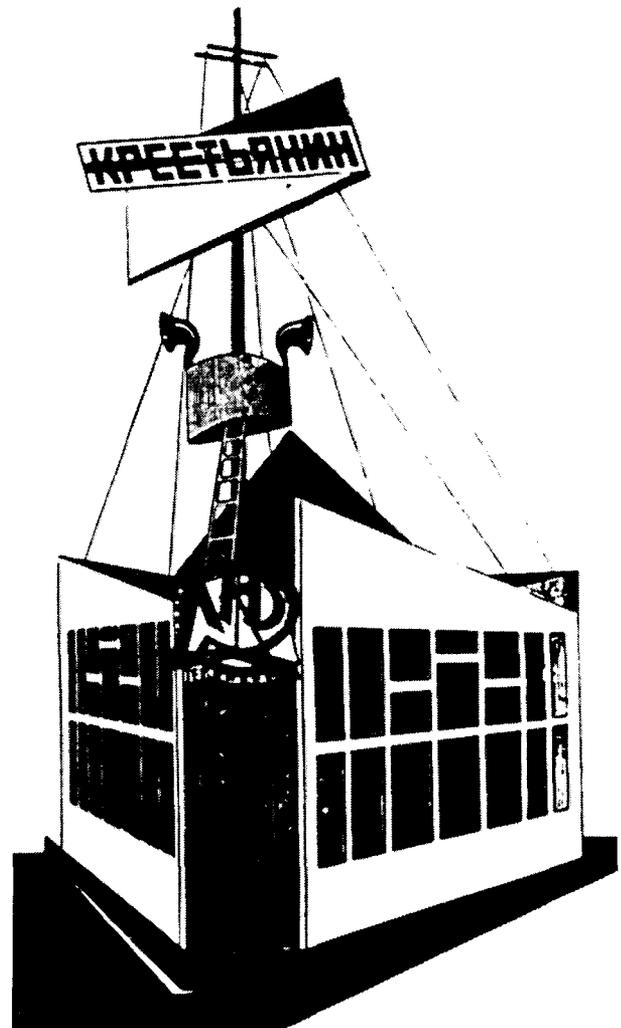

Fig. 1. Alexi Gan, kiosk design, 1923.

all, it had an historic nature. The body of the people on carnival square is first of all aware of its unity in time; it is conscious of its uninterrupted continuity within time, of its relative historic immortality.[1]

Fig. 2. Automatic government services machine, prototype, 1996.

The classic modern precedents for an ephemeral, political architecture are the agit-prop constructions of the revolutionary Soviet period. The propaganda trains, kiosks, billboards and street theatre sets and props, graphic and three-dimensional vehicles for such work as El Lissitsky's posters, projects and proems, particularly Il'ia Chasnik and El Lissitsky's project for a tribune for a square in Smolensk of 1920 which became the Lenin Tribune project, Tatlin's sculpture, Gustav Klutsis's kiosk-machines, Alexei Gan's kiosk-agitational stand, Rodchenko's photography and designs for Maiakovsky's poetry and plays, remain prototypes for socially engaged architecture.

Many of the visionary projects were impossible to build in the turmoil of the revolutionary era, although projects such as Gan's Kiosk of 1923 had quite specific programmatic intent: Anatole Kopp described it as an "agitational stand selling the latest technical publications to peasants, and acting as a contact point in the
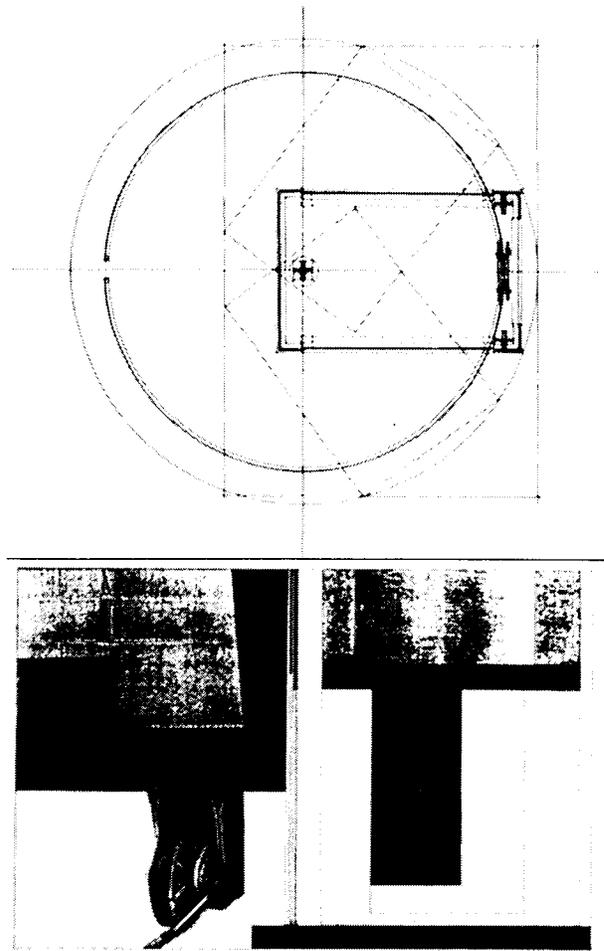

Fig. 3. Melancholy newsstand, Branda, Ross, Macdonald, 1989.

'Sovietization of the countryside.'"[2] While Tatlin's famous sculpture, the Monument to the Third International, was not practically realizable at the time of its proposal, it did take on an agit-prop role in street celebrations, as in a photograph circa 1927, where a simplified scale model appears in a street demonstration in Moscow.

In the contemporary examples cited, there is emphasis on architectonic construction advocating ad-hoc reform as opposed to ideologically extreme political platforms. This corresponds to contemporary circumstances of overproduction and constant technological revolution, as the range of new materials and products available, especially recent synthetic textiles and innovative durable adhesives and fasteners such as Velcro, render ephemeral architecture very easy to construct. For example, an adaptable, flexible addition to urban streets has been the lowly plastic milk crate. As "free" urban furniture, it has become a by-product of its original purpose, a micro-building block shaping mercantile space, a basic constructional element for instant street vending.

An ambiguous example is found in Yoko Ono's "Dispensing Machines" of the late 1960s. Proposed as amusing, visionary objects to be imagined in the urban landscape in the era of instant gratification, they can be

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Fig. 5. Cry Mercy inflatable, October Group, Toronto, Ontario, 1996.
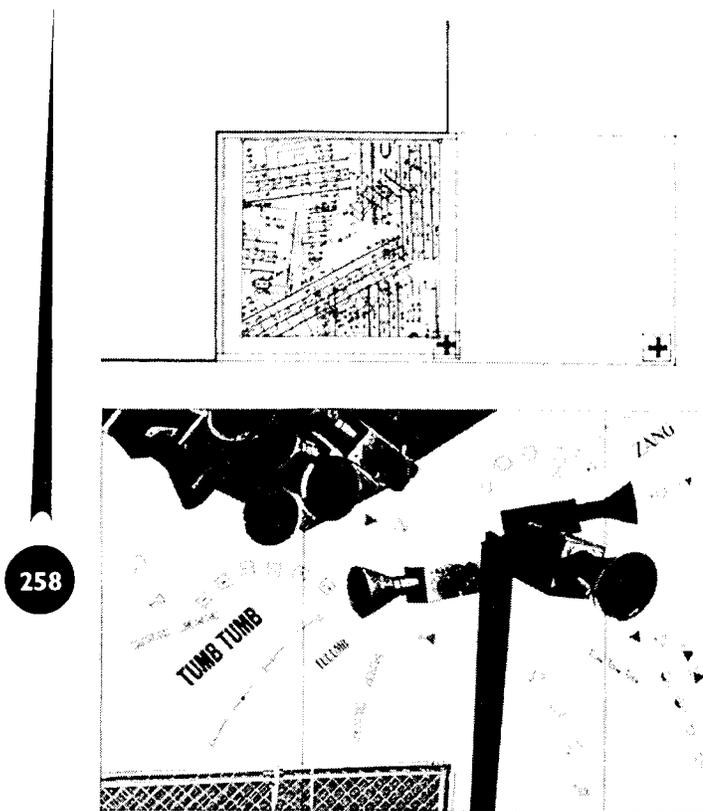
Fig.4. Annoying newsstand, Branda, Ross, Macdonald, 1989.

compared to the computerized automatons that populated streets by the late 1980s.

Urban furniture composed of vending machines dispensing money or messages are symptomatic of an era when banks downsize, replacing employees with Automated Banking Machines (ABMs). Even governments are proposing computerized machines to dispense public services. These replacements are not purely innocent transformations of city life. Their consequences may be interpreted as beneficial or disturbing, and must be related to new conditions of working life where the workplace is increasingly uncentered, temporary, and dematerialized, where workers are asked to be flexible.

A rhetorical project questioning the role of the kiosk in dehumanizing the city is the unsubmitted entry to a competition, the "Newsstand" series, produced by Ewan Branda, Susan Ross and Marie-Paule Macdonald in 1989. The project consisted of a set of architectural drawings that imagined new kiosks as small building-machines, tiny guignol-theatres embodying socio-spatial limits of the late 20th century metropolis. Several schematic prototypes interpreted a series of conditions of these limits, in a *reductio ad absurdem* exercise.

The Newsstands were conceived initially in 1989 in response to a competition to design prototypes for New York City newsstands. The brief included photos of typical newsstands and outlined a set of standards to conform to. In reaction, these newsstands criticized the competition's intent, for failing to recognize the qualities of vernacular newsstands. The project series transcended
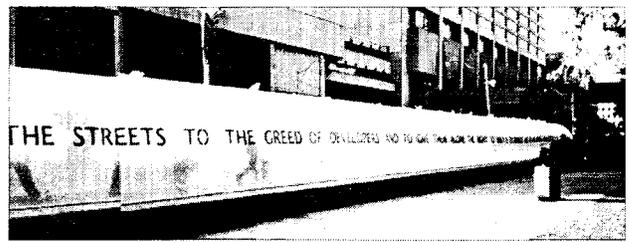
the brief, perceiving the phenomenon of the newsstand as an important and sensitive barometer of the pressure of collective social life. It could be seen as an instrument registering the intensity of political awareness in any given place.

The first scheme critiqued the conditions of producing newspapers in a great city, noting the deceptively numerous brands of newspapers, owned by a small number of corporate entities who have divided the market into popular, middlebrow and elite sectors and have staked out their turf thereon. The melancholic newsstand is as trapped in its economic conjuncture as the two hands of a clock, travelling in a finite circuit. It rolls to the end of its circular track, stops and rolls back. Like a cog in a mechanical works, its movement is harnessed. The melancholic newsstand repeats its motion with the mindlessness of the daily job that has been finitely defined by some distant and indifferent manager. Its reduced and repressed condition is a reminder of the boredom and limits of city routine.

The second scheme tended towards self parody. This newsstand mocked its own attempt to fully automate the sale of newspapers, proposing a sort of news vending machine that simultaneously broadcast news fragments as self-advertisement. The selling of news as a commodity approaches absurdity in the late 20th century. Corporate media giants are able to demonstrate with fake innocence and brazen confidence that silliness is more profitable than relevant reporting or truth. The little automated newsstand performs as it was intended, undaunted by the taylorism of its creators. Until it malfunctions, when the machine is likely to be left abandoned, forlornly irritating passersby as only a vending machine can.

The newsstand effort concluded with the standardized newsstand with four quasi-miesian columns. It reiterated an abstract standardized dimension and proportioning system, "standardizing" being somewhat obsolescent in an era when technologies of customizing objects and commodities constitute a recent wave of innovation. The roof presented a map of New York, a surrealist map, modified in the manner of the situationists. Since the roof of the stand is only readily visible from a building above, it avoided confusing any passer-by who might be frustrated to discover that it had been rendered useless by a reference to an obsolete art movement. The newsstands were thus melancholic, of not actually depressive, or obsessive, or voyeuristic, or autistic, and were left unjudged by a jury, for the entry was not sent out.

A recent successful example of an ephemeral construction expressive of political dissent in a public

Fig. 6. Cry Mercy inflatable, October Group, Toronto, Ontario, 1996.

Fig. 7. Cry Mercy'inflatable, October Group, Toronto, Ontario, 1996.

space was the "Cry Mercy" inflatable, a two-day project undertaken by a collective participating in a labor-organized demonstration, called "Days of Action," in Toronto in October 1996. The citizens, mostly architects and designers, devised a spontaneous air-supported structure, housing a temporary carnival space, to express their solidarity with the protest criticizing social funding cuts by the Ontario government. The inflatable used air propelled from the 150-foot long underground parking exhaust vent as air pressure source. The group taped together two rolls of clear polyethelene vapor barrier material to make a long, almost cylindrical plastic tube, and attached the plastic to the vent with common lumber two by fours. The cylindrical plastic tube, aerated with a series of airholes to release the extra pressure, made loud flapping noises while suspended over the air rushing

through the vent. The transparent tube created a temporary shelter for a slumber party; and for crash space at the square that night. The gesture responded to fears that more homeless people might perish that winter, casualties of an eroded social safety net. Slogans sprayed on the transparent walls, from a 1970s poem by Mike Heron, fused with another text fragment from Soviet revolutionary poet Velimir Khlebnikov read, "Have mercy I cry for the city, to entrust the streets to the greed of developers and to give them alone the right to build is to reduce life to no more than solitary confinement."

While the Days of Action organizers were not initially convinced that they needed a plastic bubble with slogans sprayed across it, a group of steel workers from Sault Ste. Marie decided that they liked it and picketed to make sure no one cut it down. So the inflatable stayed up for the

duration of the demonstration, and became a giant, noisy street toy, something to bicycle into, romp through and around. Kika Thorne, one of the inflatable's designers, made a short Super-8 film documenting the pneumatic public space's playfulness, before it was demolished by its creators at the end of the day.

The "Cry Mercy" plastic bubble worked as a beacon and a warning. Its location, in front of the modernist public open space of Toronto's City Hall, metaphorically underlined the threat of abrupt radical reductions in government services, set against a backdrop dating from an era when building public space was linked to an ambitious, expansive social vision.

In political contexts when the legitimacy of social and cultural public spending is increasingly contested, ephemeral architecture provides relief from some of the tensions associated with the weighty and costly decision-making process involved with monumental public architecture, and can be undertaken on an inexpensive,

ad-hoc basis. Low-cost, "jury-rigged" architecture can express dissent informally and has demonstrated a direct, popular channel for manifesting solidarity with public opinions critical of the political parties in power. Ephemeral constructions could further function as test cases and maquettes in a longer-term process that would include input from the public as test-users. In the difficult issues related to choosing programs for public buildings and spaces, the ease with which ephemeral architecture can now be assembled can be put to use by engaging the public of contemporary urban mass culture in making choices about collective space.

NOTES

[1] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World,* translated by Hélène Iswolsky. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965. 1968, 1984), pp. 246, 250, 254, 255.

[2] Anatole Kopp, *Constructivist Architecture in the USSR* (London: Academy Editions, 1985), p 19.