

Pirandellian - Brechtian Intervention for the "Grove" in Boise, Idaho

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INTRODUCTION

Boise was founded in *le bois* along a river which sliced through a sagebrush desert valley wilderness in southern Idaho. Gold discoveries in 1862 provided an economic foundation for the start of this community. The grid of the city began parallel to this wooded river which flows south-east to northwest. It is in this area that Boise was founded, where the State Capitol was located, and where the Central Business District was developed. In following years, new growth began on a grid which was based on the compass and spread outward into the desert valley. Boise today is an urban center located within an expanse of rural countryside.

The site for this intervention is called "the Grove," the center of which was the intersection of Eighth and Grove Streets: the heart of which once was Boise's Chinatown. The Chinese settled here in 1869 after the completion of the Central Pacific railway. By 1886 there was a major Western effort to drive out all Chinese residents, and yet the Chinese were able to hang on to their community until the early 1970's when Chinatown was at last razed to make way for a proposed regional shopping center which was never built.

The Grove is presently an empty wasteland: its center marked by thin concentric rings of trees around a central fountain which is within the plane of the plain. The unbuilt plans of Boise's Urban Renewal have left the Grove in its wake: a large center where no longer is there a center.'

ARIADNE'S VEIL

The railway transforms the world into a commodity. . . The railway which knows only of departure and arrival points, turns cities into points, connected to the diagrammatical network that is now the territory. This notion of space has nothing to do with that of space as an enclosure within certain limits, a notion which the Greeks bequeathed to us along with the agora. It is a space that recognizes only points and directions, not the void and that which surrounds it, a space that does not know of limits but relations.

- Beatriz Colomina²

Boise is a node within the limitless landscape of the plain which is bounded in the distance by the Owyhee Mountains. The Grove in downtown is an intersection, a point within Boise's network of streets; and as a point is a space defined by a system of relations or network. The Grove is a space left in the wake of modern development as a result of the endless flux of urbanization and commodification. It is a universal and homogeneous space located at the crossing of two streets which could be *any* two streets.

The public realm of the ancient city was representational. Not only did activities of a public and collective nature occur there, but the public realm itself also symbolized those activities. During the first half of the twentieth century, larger and larger parcels of land were taken over for commercial development organized by those who were interested in the profitability of urban land and not in its representational function. Due to the resultant lack of representational value, these large parcels of land have never been able to acquire the status of a metaphor.³ The Grove is a by-product of Boise's own consumption: the laying to waste of an historically and culturally relevant section of the city to make way for an absolute paradigm of consumption: the shopping mall which was never built. The Grove's present metaphorical status is one of representing a consumptive postmodern society gradually consuming itself.

The universal civilization and homogeneous culture we find ourselves in today is a result of a global commodification which was forecast by Walter Benjamin early in this century when he wrote that the "world exhibitions glorify the exchange value of commodities. They create a framework in which commodities' intrinsic value is eclipsed."⁴ Paul Ricoeur has described this situation as one in which mankind is approaching *en masse* a basic consumer culture where everywhere "one finds the same bad movie, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminum atrocities, the same twisting of language by propaganda, etc."⁵ Globalization and unification of commodities has created a society which has lost the object of its desire. The object no longer has value in itself as an object inasmuch as its value is dependent upon something intangible such as the control, power, or prestige

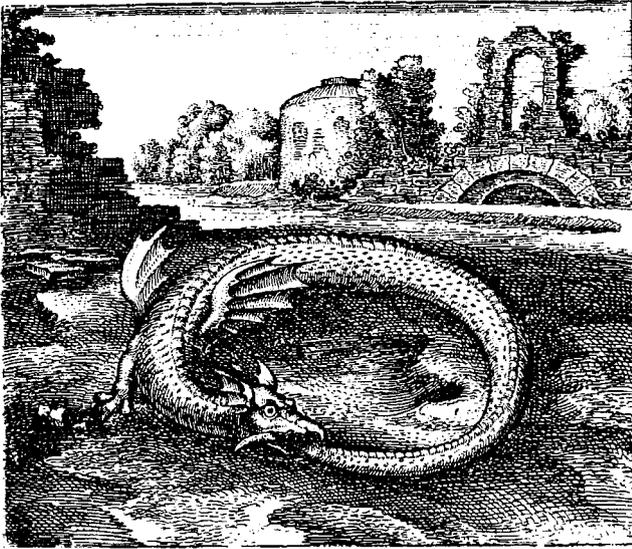


Figure 1. Michael Maier, *Scrutinium chymicum*, Frankfurt 1867, "The Dragon devouring his tail"

it might bestow on its possessor. This cultural change has created attitudes which "emphasize the impotence of an urbanized populace which has paradoxically lost the object of its urbanization."⁶ In so doing urban public space has transformed into "psuedo-public realms" defined by megastructures such as hotels and shopping malls which instead of opening the user to manifold experiences allow for the single experience of continuum: circulation.

Fredric Jameson attributes the emergence of postmodernism to the emergence of a multinational, consumer capitalism, the logic of which is replicated in postmodernism itself. There are two features of postmodernism described by Jameson which are relevant to this intervention project for Boise: the transformation of reality into images and the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents.⁸

The modern shopping mall has been described as an example of "hyperspace."⁹ As hyperspace, the shopping mall is not a true public space as in a "scene" which mirrors human activity, but is a continuum of space: a pseudo-public space of circulation, ventilation and ephemeral connections.¹⁰ Urban public space began to change when the status of the object as a mirror of its subject changed and took on a new dimension due to the effects of advertising and its visual medium. People no longer project themselves into their objects, but see them as potentialities for mastery, control and command. Advertising is no longer an ecstatic scenario of objects and consumption but the *effect* of an omnipresent visibility of enterprises and the social virtues of communication. Advertising organizes architecture into monuments such as the shopping mall which demonstrate the operations of culture, commodities, mass movement and social flux. What once was acted out or projected mentally and psychologically here on earth as a metaphorical scene, is now projected onto the screen of absolute reality, without

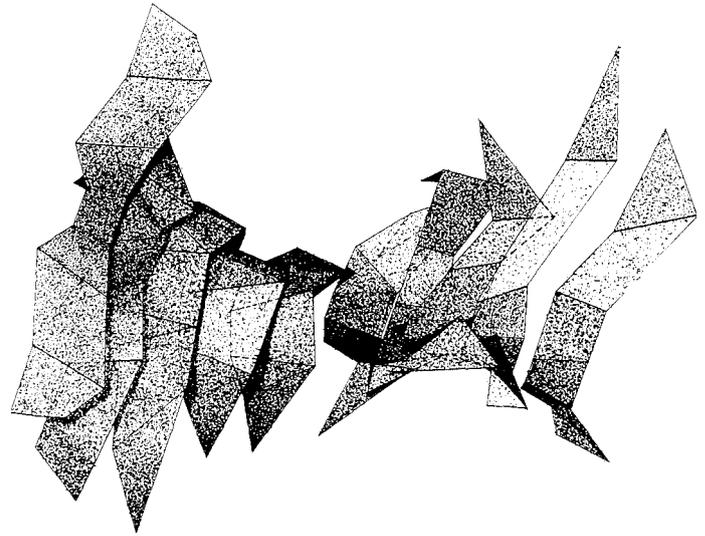


Figure 2. Steven Thomas, *Trace of the Projection of a Bird in Flight*, ARCH 354, 1994

any metaphor, as an image of reality which is also a simulation of reality."

Boise is a point left in the landscape by the railway bringing people west for the Gold Rush. The Grove is a point within Boise which derives its meaning from its relationship to the rest of the city at an intersection of a forgotten culture. The Grove is a point in a screen or network, and like the labyrinth which works as a net, every point is connected with every other point.¹² The Grove is symptomatic of a culture which has lost its way and has turned back on itself. Used to retrace one's steps in order to find one's way out, Ariadne's thread weaves a veil. The labyrinth itself is a drunken space: it is not a safe space, it is neither inside nor outside, it is the disoriented space of someone who has lost their way. The labyrinth cannot be described as an object but as a traversal: it is like the *trajectory described by a mobile*.¹³

CITY AS THEATRE

The comparison between the forms of play discovered and created by men, and the uninhibited movement of play exhibited by superabundant life, can teach us that precisely what is at issue in the play of art is not some substitute dream-world in which we can forget ourselves. On the contrary, the play of art is a mirror that through the centuries constantly arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar: what we are, what we might be, and what we are about.

- Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Play of Art"¹⁴

The postmodern city is a universal global village whose public realm can be experienced at a distance from the privacy of one's own living room via a network of televisions and word processors. In the traditional city, space was like a mirror or scene which derived its qualities from an imita-

tion of life through participation in the ritual of living. In ancient Greece, this "play" of life was reenacted through the ritual dance which took place in the *choros*, the orchestra of present-day theatre, and revealed through the performance of tragedy, the *order* of reality. In archaic times the space of architecture was the space of ritual and architecture was the "dance" which re-presented the order of the world. The *choros* and the labyrinth were both purportedly designed by the ancient architect Daedalus and are related because they both were places for the ritual dance through which an *order* was revealed in spite of an apparent *disorder*. At that time, the labyrinth was taken as a metaphor for human behavior: perpetual flux, growth and change. The labyrinth conveyed an impression of disorder due to the mysterious pathways between its only two certain points: entrance and center. Contained within the labyrinth was the *primordial idea* of architecture, a paradigm of order. When the ancient architect revealed the *idea* of the labyrinth, *disorder* was revealed as *order*. This *idea* of architectural order became the substance of buildings and cities such that the labyrinth became a symbol of the *order of the city* in Western tradition from ancient times through the Renaissance.¹⁵ Today, no longer a scene or mirror of life, the labyrinth symbolizes the city as a network of information and communication and as a screen upon which the play of life is projected.

The ritual dance struck a festive trajectory, the trace of

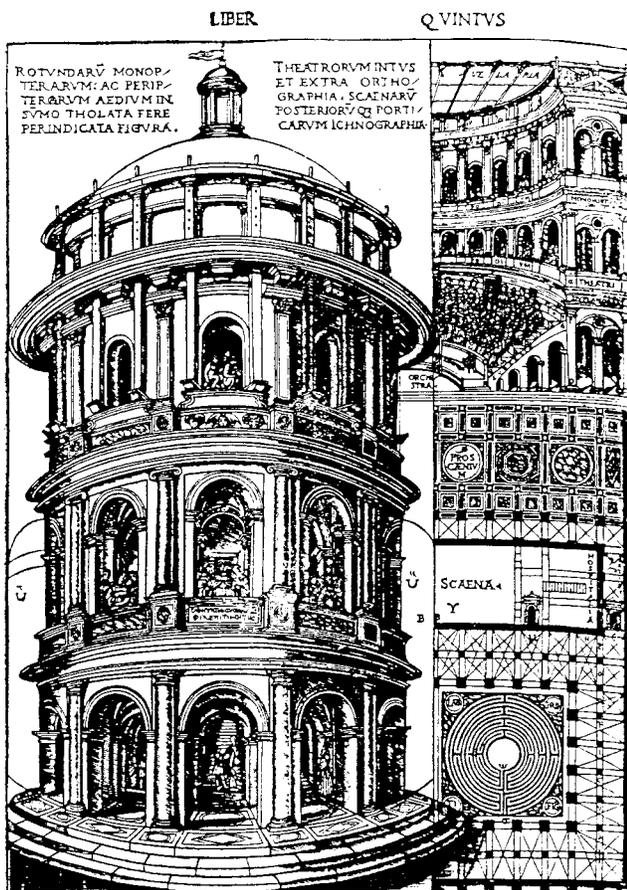


Figure 3. Cesariano, *Allegory of the Theatre and the City*, 1521

which left a labyrinthine path. The ritual dance had its origins in religion and the festival, and it is from this dance that theatre developed in ancient Greek culture. The uplifting experience of the festival is one which raises its participants out of everyday life and elevates them into a kind of universal communion. Participation in the festival is one of enactment, or re-presentation, in which time is suspended so that the past and present become one in an act of remembrance. This vital essence of the festival creates a transformed state of being which produces in the participant a dreamlike mirage of reality. The origin of theatre is in the streets of the city: where people gathered and were of equal significance to the actors, where the city's citizens were actors in the play of urban life. These theatrical festivities were part of a civic festival which involved the whole community.¹⁶

CAPTURING THE TRACE OF THE PROJECTION

The fact is, production of the new - and imagination - are only productions: by analogical connection and repetition, they bring to light what, without being there, will have been there. . . Imagination is what retraces, what produces as reproduction the lost object of perception. . .

- Jacques Derrida¹⁷

The Grove is presently an empty wasteland. The regeneration of any blighted urban area can only take place through accretion: *an increase by the imperceptible action of natural forces*. Boise's problems today cannot be fixed by a massive urban redevelopment plan any more so than they were able to be solved before. The revitalization of any urban area takes time. It is achieved through small changes in the urban fabric which encourage the return of people to the city.

The program for this design studio project was an Urban Intervention which could bring the Grove back the the ancient idea of labyrinth: a place in the city for festivity; an urban theatre of the streets where the citizens could become participants in the festival celebration of urban life; a place where the random order and chaos of city living could be celebrated in a communal gathering; a place which could order the puzzling relationships of the traces left by the trajectory of humans in the endless flux of city living; a place in the city which could mirror human activity.

This Urban Intervention was a response to the postmodern city and was preceded by a simultaneous series of exercises whose roots are both in the origins of the moving picture, or cinematography, and the montage aspects of postmodernism itself. First, the students investigated Étienne Jules-Marey's studies of motion in order to study the space defined by movement. Birds in motion were used as a vehicle for a transformation through drawing in which the trace of the projection of the bird was captured, this trace was then projected into an axonometric, and then the space defined by the trace of the projection was captured yet again.

The second set of exercises investigated structures themselves which could move. The work of Vladimir Tatlin was

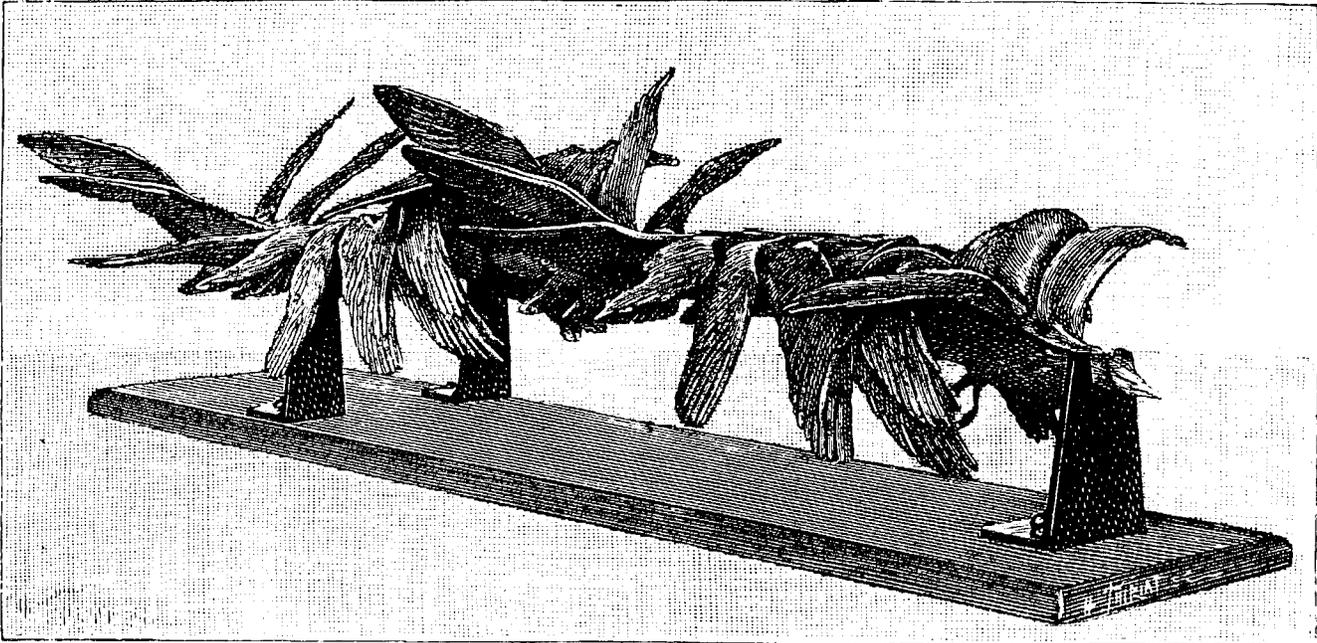


Figure 4. Étienne Jules-Marey, *bronze sculpture of the flight of the seagull, 1887*

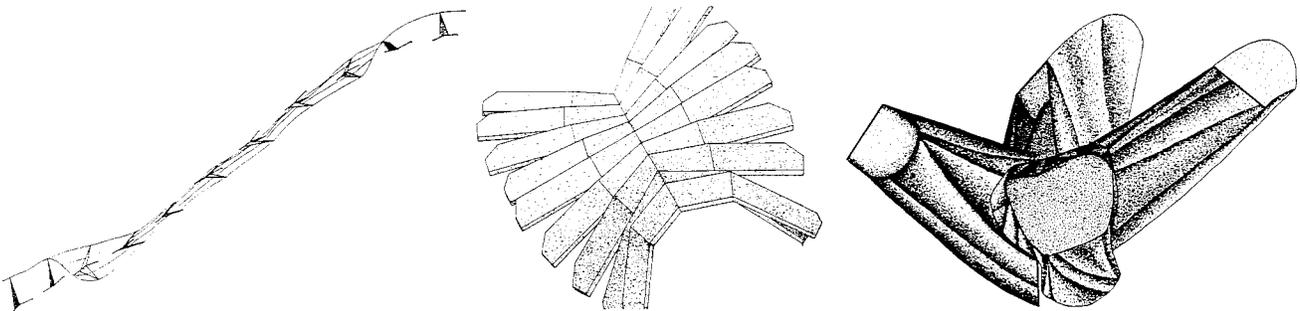


Figure 5. Tucker Anderson, *Trace of the Projection of a Bird in Flight Studies, 1994*

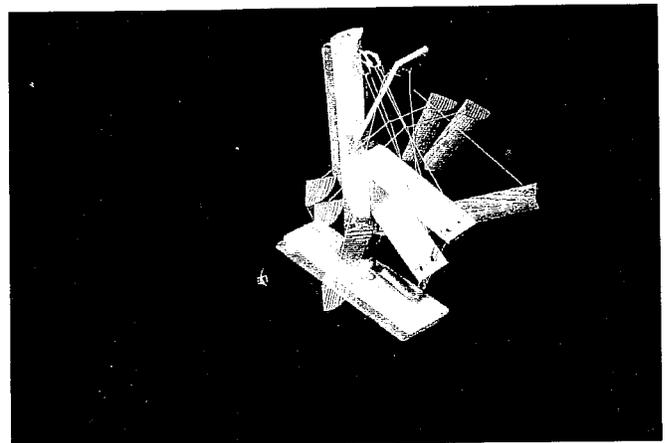
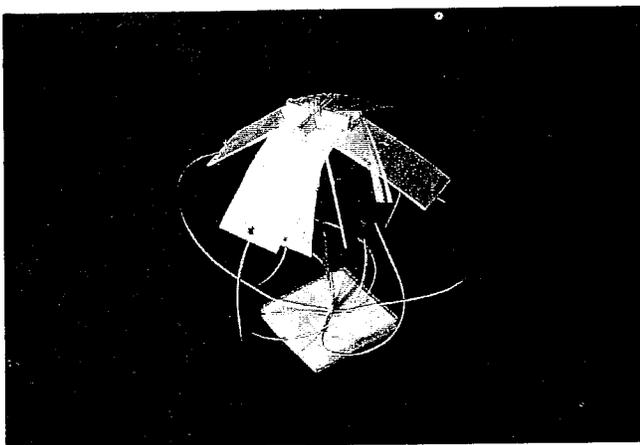


Figure 6. Tucker Anderson and Jevon Truex, *moving structure studies, 1994*

used as a vehicle for these studies. As has been cited in many discussions on the work of Russian artists during the first years of this century, Tatlin himself, among others, was strongly influenced by the effects of cinematography on life, culture and art.

The Grove presently is a placeless space comprised of an expanse of concrete with a circumference and a center which offers little to experience between the two. It is a modern-day labyrinth whose sole purpose is to be a node in a network of an endless flux of circulation, information and communica-

tion. Lacking the experiential, it is a placeless space to pass through on the way to somewhere else.

In order for the Grove to become viable as a public urban space and in order for it to truly become part of the public realm, its architecture would have to become a space of ritual which encouraged the dance of urban life. The transforma-



Figure 7. Vladimir Tatlin, wing of *Letatlin* in the Novodevichii Monastery, Moscow, 1932

tion of the Grove would necessarily be gradual, intervention would slowly occur until the Grove itself became a viable urban place. An Urban Intervention would need to be designed to respond to the endless flux of the city. Its intention would be to facilitate the movement of the ritual dance by being a structure which in itself moves and allows for the endless permutations of human activity. The successful intervention would transform the Grove into a festive theatre where the city's citizens can become actors in the play of urban life. The intervention would return the Grove to the labyrinth of the legendary Daedalus: a labyrinth which symbolized the order of the city through capturing the trace of the ritual dance. This is the same Daedalus who crafted the famous wings which allowed he and his son, Icarus, to flee Crete. These wings of wax and feathers melted when Icarus in his desire to solve the mysteries of the sun, flew too close and plunged to his death in the Mediterranean Sea. So, too, with the labyrinthine dance of life: there can be no final solution to the mysteries of life; when all has been explained, one has reached the end and movement ceases.

RITUAL AND MASK

. . . Ka flew through the blue of the sky as a golden cloud. Among the crimson-colored mountain's insistently flapping wings, lost in a flock of red cranes that resembled at that early morning hour the red ash of a fire-breathing mountain, Ka was red like them and united with the flaming dawn by red threads, whirlwinds and filaments. . .

Ka folded his wings and, spangled from head to foot with the morning dew, landed on the ground. Each of his feathers was studded with a pearl of dew, black and coarse. No one noticed that he had landed somewhere near the sources of the Blue Nile. Ka shook himself and, like a moonlit swan, beat the air three times with his wings. There was no returning to the past. Friends, fame, exploits--all lay ahead. Ka mounted a vicious, savage, gold-striped steed never before insulted by the weight of a rider and he permitted the steed to bite his spectral, but nonetheless beautiful, knees as he galloped over hill and dale.

- Velimir Khlebnikov, *Ka*, 1916"

Daedalus' famous wings inspired Tatlin to create some of his own: *Letatlin*, his glider which was a response to his memory of the tireless seagulls which followed his ship during his days as a sailor. Its name is a verbal punning inspired by the neologisms of Velimir Khlebnikov: *letat*, to fly, plus *Tatlin* yields *Letatlin*. Tatlin and Khlebnikov collaborated and at times their work seemed intertwined due to similarities in their uses of montage and other devices which affect perceptions of motion and time.¹⁹ Khlebnikov's contributions to modern literature involved the use of devices which examined rational thought processes by departing from them through techniques such as "free association," use of dream symbols, linkage of seemingly disparate events with no

regard for causality and direct tampering with the time sense.²⁰ These techniques are generally used in cinematography through montage to evoke a perception of movement through time. In his writings, Khlebnikov effects a simultaneity of action through analogous procedures which lead to a poetic displacement of space without movement in time or causal sequence. At first blush, his writings seem to be fragmented, chaotic or disordered, however, through a careful reading one can discern an order like an architectural plan which unites the fragments into one cohesive whole. His writings are very much like the "unpredictable operations of the human imagination."²¹

The cinematographic technique of montage which has been handed-down to our postmodern culture is a tendency toward a construction on the basis of finished, ready-made components²² or "found objects" which may be as diverse as texts, images, objects, etc. Montage as such is standard with many architectural projects which involve designing with existing conditions, fragments of which must remain with the final solution: renovation, adaptive re-use or restoration of an existing building, an existing site with certain constraints, and so forth.

Simultaneously with the various drawing and model exercises, the students wrote a short story using Khlebnikov as a model. The intent of the assignment was that if the students simultaneously wrote a story and began an architectural design, then the design and the story which began as separate and disparate elements might at the end of the

design merge into one. The student's stories were written to affect analogous procedures, similar to the metaphorical construction which allows for the entertaining of two different points of view at the same time. The metaphorical construction is a comparison function which allows the imagination to construct new possibilities from existing perceptions. This metaphoric construction is a more efficient form of thought than the abstract notion,²³ and is used to unlock the unpredictable operations of the student's mind. The story-writing began with the passing around of a sheet of paper for each student upon which everyone wrote one word. Each student, then, was left with a sheet of paper upon which were written fifteen "found" words from which to construct a 250-500 word short story. The story was re-written and refined successively to 60 words and then to a fifteen-word phrase which captured the essence of the story without using any of the fifteen original words. From these texts, the students created a graphic composition which became the base sheet or "existing condition" to be incorporated into their final design and drawing.

The various problems the students investigated led to the final design problem: a movable structure for an urban space based on the ideas of Pirandellian and Brechtian Theatre. These two early twentieth-century playwrights were chosen because they both challenged the traditional relationship between art and reality, play and audience. The main characteristics which distinguish Pirandellian theatre from Brechtian is that Pirandello's plays dissolve the distinction

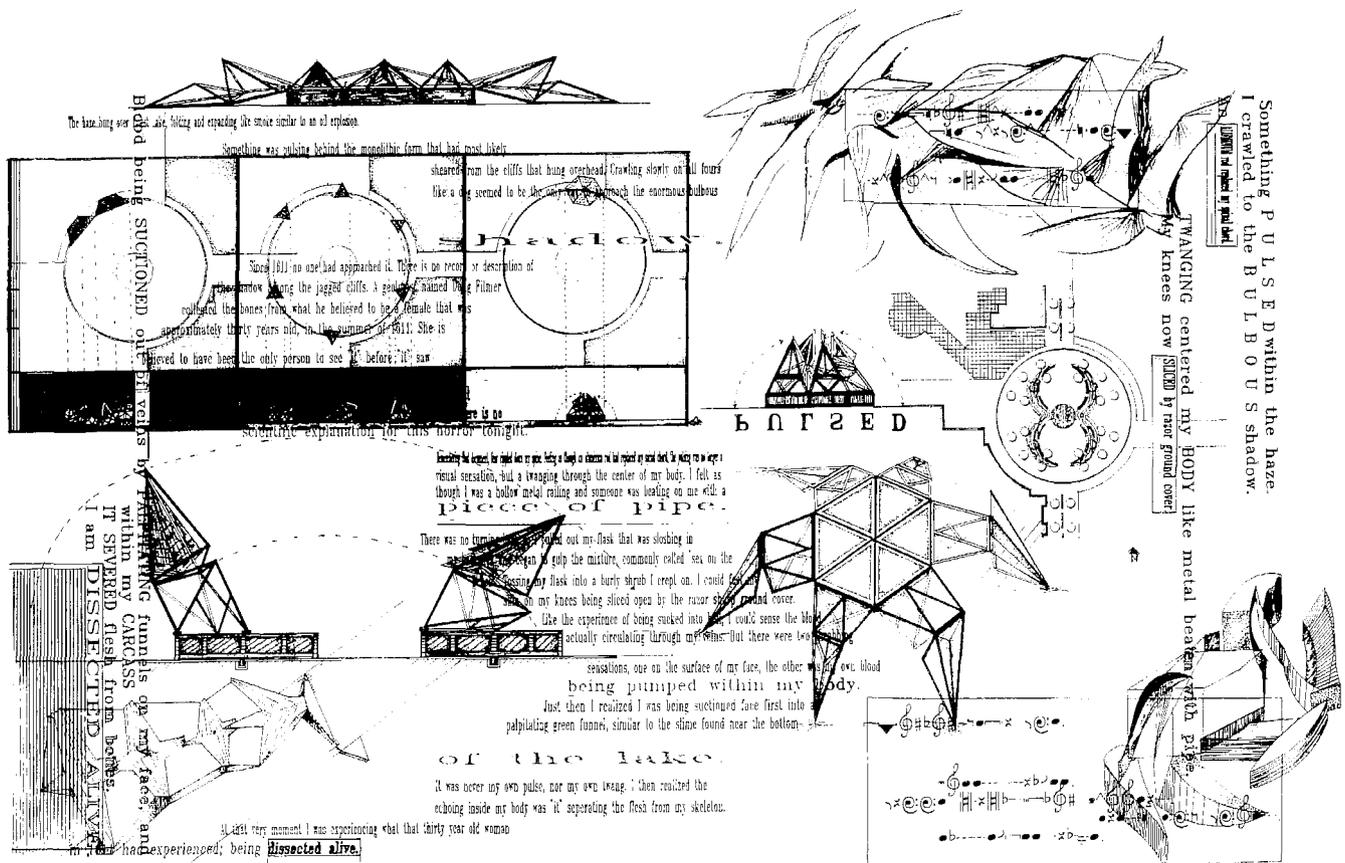


Figure 8. Nanette Manson, *Urban Intervention*, 1994

thought to be an art of illusion, and therefore a kind of imitation of a permanent architecture which treats the world as a stage. It is an architecture which defines a place to be appreciated not only by the eye, but to be interacted with over a period of time by the whole body.²⁵ Boise's Grove was approached as a place of civic festival where the intervention of a movable structure might be able to transform its surroundings into a space of ritual which encourages the dance of urban life. An example of a civic festival is Mardi Gras which takes place annually in New Orleans. There, a balcony above the street might be regarded as a Brechtian space where one watches the activities below as though sitting in an armchair watching television; whereas the street itself would be a Pirandellian space where one merges art and life by fusing with the masses. Through utilizing "Brechtian distancing," the student's project could be an object to view and/or a spatial construction to frame human activity, while simultaneously could be a "Pirandellian" space to engage the pedestrian. This Urban Intervention was designed to facilitate the idea of the City as Theatre with the notion that if the city became festive, then the people would return.

NOTES

- ¹ Merle Wells, *Boise: An Illustrated History* (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications Inc., 1982), 71-72, 121-2. See also Boise Redevelopment Agency, *History of Urban Renewal* (Public Information Report, December 4, 1981).
- ² Beatriz Colomina, "On Adolf Loos and Josef Hoffman: Architecture in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Raumplan versus Plan Libre*, ed. Max Risselada (Delft: Delft University Press, 1991), 69-70.
- ³ Alan Colquhoun, "The Superblock," *Essays in Architectural Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981), 83-102.
- ⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 151.
- ⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures" (1961), *History and Truth*, trans. Chas. A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 276.
- ⁶ Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 25.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 125.
- ⁹ The concept of hyperspace was first made known to the author at a seminar presentation by Rosalind E. Krauss at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall 1990.
- ¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 129.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 126-130.
- ¹² Marco Frascari, "A New Angel/Angle in Architectural Research: The Ideas of Demonstration," *JAE* 44/1 (November 1990): 13.
- ¹³ Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. by Betsey Wing (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 58-9.
- ¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Play of Art," *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 130.
- ¹⁵ Alberto Perez-Gomez, "The Myth of Daedalus," *AA Files* 10 (1985): 49-52.
- ¹⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Festive Character of the Theatre," *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 57-65.
- ¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous: Reading Condillac* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 71.
- ¹⁸ Velimir Khlebnikov, *Snake Train: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Gary Kern, trans. Richard Sheldon (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976), 171-172.
- ¹⁹ John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
- ²⁰ Edward J. Brown, "Introduction," *Snake Train*. 25.
- ²¹ Ibid., 18-19.
- ²² Gadamer, "The Festive Character of Theater," 58.
- ²³ The idea of the metaphorical construction relative to architectural design was inspired by the discussion of the use of myth in the narration of architecture by Marco Frascari in "The Particolareggiamento in the Narration of Architecture," *Journal of Architectural Education* 4311 (Fall 1989): 4-5.
- ²⁴ Silvio Gaggi, *Modern/Postmodern: A Study in Twentieth-Century Arts and Ideas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 25-55. For more on Pirandello, see Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 36-40. For more on Brecht see Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre?" *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968), 147-154.
- ²⁵ Alexander McClung, "A Place for Time: The Architecture of Festivals and Theatres," *Architecture and Its Image* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1989), 87-108.