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"Change its name repeatedly. Burn it down": The Politics of Place as Impermanent in

Lisa Robertson's *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*

by

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ABSTRACT

In her 2003 book of essays *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, Vancouver poet Lisa Robertson poetically explores ideas of impermanence and change within the frame of a Vancouver that, in her words, is dissolving "in the fluid called money" (1). In my thesis, I think about the ways that Robertson examines impermanent architectural forms (scaffolds, shacks, furniture, gardens) as spatial forms with the ability to counter narratives that fix or make permanent both spatial and social relations, and how those impermanent or "soft" architectures can act as points of intervention or agency where individuals and groups can alter space in ways that suit them. Through this, Robertson argues for spaces that are not charged by a singularly perfected identity, but rather for spaces that are mutable and multivalent, spaces that are able to accommodate both difference and change.

(144 words)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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And yet, if everything is moving where is here?

Doreen Massey, *For Space*

Introduction

Change We Can Live In

> We were making sand castles. Now we swim in the sea that swept them away. (Office for Metropolitan Architecture, "What Ever Happened to Urbanism" 971)
>
> And we learned that as many we could more easily be solitary. (Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* 270)[1]

In the summer of 2008, I fell in love with a place that disappeared. Calgary artists Laura Leif and Eric Moschopedis opened *Imaginary Ordinary*, an art installation masquerading as a community center. *Imaginary Ordinary* was a converted storefront in the Tigerstedt Block on Centre Street, just north of downtown Calgary near the neighbourhoods of Crescent Heights, Regal Terrace, and Renfrew. The underkept building was (and still is) slated for demolition.[2] In a self-published catalogue for the project, Leif and Moschopedis describe *Imaginary Ordinary* as "a social networking site where different groups or individuals of all ages can meet and connect with one another" (n. pag.). In a kind of psychogeographical gesture, they invited community members to remap the spaces they live in, noting that, even though their communities were already mapped, "the maps that exist identify the location of sewers, internet subscribers, streets and avenues, business licenses, and property lines (boring!)" (n. pag.). This remapping asked community members to consider the "forgotten, discarded or marginal elements of

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations taken from Robertson's *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* will be from the first and second editions of the book, which have an identical layout and pagination.

[2] And, to be honest, the building was ready to fall down. I distinctly remember attending a rock show at *Imaginary Ordinary* where Leif needed to repeatedly ask audience members not to jump around out of fear that the floor would collapse.

the hood" (n. pag.), to form relationships with their neighbours, and to use the spaces

around them in ways that complicate the expected uses of those spaces. The mood around

the space was positive and celebratory and, in a sense evoked by the project's title, the

space was very much the *ordinary* situation that many, including myself, have *imagined*.

Imaginary Ordinary provided an interesting frame for community engagement not only

because of the ways it challenged its participants to think differently about where they

live, but also because of the way Leif and Moschopedis specifically designed the space to

disappear,[3] to leave a blaring absence in its wake, to be temporary rather than permanent.

The possibilities and community energy enabled by the appearance of this place was also

charged by a deep sadness, the kind that manifests when something like this vanishes.

Ultimately, for me, the possibilities opened by this spatial rupture, this temporary

emergence of a meaningful place, overwhelmed the disappointment left when the

community meeting place became another vacuum.[4] I felt a sense of pleasure in the

realization that these community spaces didn't need to institutionalize or become

permanent, but, instead, could stick around for only as long as they needed to, while other

spaces would appear out of the desire and investments and constructions of individuals in

their own specific space and time.

With this sense of pleasure and possibility in spatial impermanence, I come to

Vancouver poet Lisa Robertson's book *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the*

Office for Soft Architecture (2003, 2006, 2011), a project that explores ideas of space,

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[3] *Imaginary Ordinary* only existed for four months from May to August.
[4] And, in this case, the storefront literally became a vacuum store.

impermanence, and intervention through literary means. *Office for Soft Architecture*[5] is

one of seven trade books (and numerous chapbooks) published by Robertson since her

first notable publication, *The Apothecary* (1989), was published by Vancouver's Tsunami

Editions. *Office for Soft Architecture* has been published in three separate editions. The

first edition was published by Portland press Clear Cut in 2003. The second edition was

published by Toronto's Coach House Books in 2006 with a redesigned cover and revised

introduction that took into account Robertson's change in living conditions between

editions, since she had left Vancouver via Cambridge to live in France – she has

subsequently lived in Oakland, California before recently returning to Vancouver as the

writer-in-residence at Simon Fraser University (though that too might be temporary).

Also published by Coach House, the third edition, released in January 2011, features a

complete redesign that retypeset and changed the physical dimensions of the book,

making it larger. This 2011 edition returns to Robertson's introduction from the first

edition and adds an introduction by Dutch designer Petra Blaisse. In all three editions,

Office for Soft Architecture is a pocket-sized[6] book of essays that work across genre from

the manifesto to the research essay to the situationist *dérive.*

The book is broken into two major sections. The first, titled "Occasional Work,"

is a series of thirteen essays written in dialogue with different urban sites or artistic

works, often for an artist catalogue or special edition of a magazine. In an interview with

Edmonton writer Jay Smith, Robertson notes that the first essay, "Soft Architecture: A

Manifesto," triggered the rest of the project, as, after she wrote the essay for an issue of

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[5] Since the title of Robertson's book is quite long, I will refer to it by this shortened
version of the title.

[6] Both the first and second edition are small enough to fit in the back pocket of my jeans.
The third is slightly too big, but will fit in the front pockets of my coat.

Toronto's *Mix* magazine,[7] she realized the possibilities of the architectural discourse she had opened up as she left Vancouver for a residency at Cambridge. In her interview with Smith, Robertson describes the way that her project emerged as an invented architectural office that would respond to different requests for work:

> [My] decision to form a fictional architectural office, [was based on the fact] most architectural firms don't actually get any built work to do, [at first] they're just writing proposals. So their practice is actually a language-based rhetorical practice, describing architecture that doesn't actually exist. They're just proposing built sites that they would like to exist.
>
> So I figured that I could do that as well as an architect, and be a sort of virtual architect. (n. pag.)

Through the thirteen essays of "Occasional Works," rather than write proposals for sites she would like to see, Robertson writes examinations of sites that exist, but only temporarily. In her fourth essay, "The Fountain Transcript," she looks at Vancouver's fountains, which change as water bursts forth from their otherwise static construction. In her eighth essay, "*Rubus Armeniacus*: A Common Architectural Motif in the Temperate Mesophytic Region," she looks at the invasive blackberry plant and the way it weighs down "the ridgepoles of previously sturdy home garages and sheds into swaybacked grottoes" (127). The title "Occasional Work" points not only to each essay's status as a piece of "occasional work," published for a specific magazine or artist, but also to the "occasional" or *ephemeral* status of each of the architectures Robertson explores. Shorter

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[7] The essay was also published as a small catalogue by Vancouver's Artspeak gallery.

than "Occasional Work," the second section of the book, titled "Seven Walks," is literally

the poetic description of seven walks (titled "First Walk," "Second Walk," etc), where

Robertson and an unnamed guide explore parts of Vancouver. In her interview with

Smith, she notes that "[t]he walks had a bit different tone and approach but were parallel

to the more research-based pieces" (n. pag.).

Across these two sections, Robertson explores notions of spatial practice and

investment, focusing on her notion of "soft architecture." In contrast to what might be

thought of as "hard" architectures, that is, architectures looked upon as permanent and

unchangeable, "soft" architectures are impermanent and changeable and, because of this

changeability, make useful points of intervention into the physical structures of the city

and what they mean. *Office for Soft Architecture* includes essays on scaffolds, gardens,

and fountains. It includes arguments about how fabrics and clothing and ornaments and

furnishings can alter spaces and bodies, giving them different meanings. In *Office for Soft

Architecture*, Robertson views these "soft" architectures as points of interaction where we

can reconsider and revise our understandings of space. In other words, *soft* architectural

elements are where individuals can gain spatial agency. On the acknowledgements page

of the book, Robertson notes that "[i]n writing, I wanted to make alternative spaces and

contexts for the visual culture of this city, sites that could also provide a vigorously

idiosyncratic history of surfaces as they fluctuate" (n. pag.). For Robertson, a spatial

practice is connected to a writing practice. In other words, we understand spaces through

both our physical movements through those spaces and also the ways we think and speak

and write about space, the ways we assign a symbolic to space in order to understand it.

That said, how are spatial practice and poetic practice connected? In what ways does Robertson not just make alternative spaces, but *write them*?

In *Office for Soft Architecture*, Robertson explores the intersections of space and language, with an eye on how spatial and artistic practice might change spaces. How might writing "create" alternative spaces that, like *Imaginary Ordinary*, are temporary but extremely significant for those involved? In what ways is Robertson's book a knotting of spatial possibilities, of opportunities to ignore a utopian future (and a nostalgic past) in favor of a rethought present? At the tail end of "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto," Robertson wonders, "[w]hat if there is no 'space,' only a permanent, slow-motion mystic takeover" (17)? In a book so invested in spaces, this question needs to be taken seriously, though not in any sense that notions of space should be abandoned, but should be moved away from assumptions that space is permanent. How does Robertson's *Office* explore the city in ways that resist the permanent mapping of space, considering the "forgotten, discarded, or marginal elements" of Vancouver? In what ways does Robertson demolish, not the city itself, but the idea of the unified and fixed city, so that she (and we as readers) can sift through the rubble to make new connections and relationships?

Dissolving Places, Dissolving Ourselves

> Where money is not itself the community, it must dissolve the community. (Marx 224)

In "Spatial Synthetics: A Theory," the sixth section of "Occasional Work," Robertson asks how space might be "synthesized." How can space be thrown together? How can it be produced by human (or non human) labour? Robertson suggests that "a

pavilion is good" and, going a little further, "a synthetic pavilion is really very good"

(77). What is it about the synthetically-assembled pavilion, itself a temporary structure,

that Robertson views in such a positive light? Robertson turns the question of a

"synthetics of space" over and over. A synthetics of space is "irreducible and contingent"

(77). It "improvises unthought shape" (79).·When Robertson asks "[w]hat is the structure

of freedom," she answers that "[i]t is entirely synthetic" (78). The pavilion, a space

carrying the possibility of being constructed *anywhere,* is proposed by Robertson as "a

theoretical device that amplifies the cognition of thresholds" (79). It adds an excess to the

body, what Robertson calls the "vertiginously unthinkable" (79). She argues that

"[s]patial synthetics irreparably exceed their own structure" (78), connecting this

excessiveness with gesture, with the movement of bodies in space:

> For example: Looking west, looking west, looking east by northeast,
>
> looking northwest, looking northeast, looking west, loading wool, looking
>
> west, looking north, looking east, looking west, looking north, looking
>
> northeast, looking northeast, looking west, looking west, looking west,
>
> tracks are oldest, looking south, looking north, looking north, looking east,
>
> looking west, looking west by southwest; thus, space. And not by means
>
> other than the gestural. Pretty eyes. Winds. (78)

The gaze here shifts from the center of a map's compass, spinning around to make a

space associated with a dizziness or vertigo. There are glimpses of things in excess of the

looking – "loading wool" or "tracks are oldest" (78) – forming the core of a kind of

attentiveness, an attention paid to the details of the landscape without fixing the details *in*

place, as even the letters of the words cannot stay fixed – "looking" becomes "loading"

and "west" becomes "wool." So, when Robertson argues that "[t]he problem is not how to stop the flow of items and surfaces in order to stabilize space, but how to articulate the politics of their passage" (78), how might this politics of passage be articulated? .

Robertson recognizes these tensions between flow and stoppage, between fluctuating and stable spaces, in *Office for Soft Architecture*'s acknowledgements, where she describes the way that, in the period of growth "bracketed by the sale of the Expo '86 site by the provincial government and the 2003 acquisition by the province of the 2010 Winter Olympics," she notices that "much of what I loved about this city seemed to be disappearing" (n. pag.). Robertson's response was to "document the physical transitions I was witnessing in my daily life, and in this way question my own nostalgia for the minor, the local, the ruinous; for decay" (n. pag.). One role of a soft architect then is to document transition. Disappearance and *dissolving* are key notions in *Office for Soft Architecture*, as, in the introduction to all three editions of the book, Robertson frames the emergence of the Office against a vanishing Vancouver, noting that "[t]he Office for Soft Architecture came into being as I watched the city of Vancouver dissolve in the fluid called money" (1). In the second edition, Robertson expanded her introduction to reflect on her own leaving of Vancouver. Wondering why the city is different than the one she left, Robertson speculates that "[p]erhaps it is I who has dissolved," leaving behind part of her body as "this book and the room around it" (1). How might we read this double dissolution as the city melts around Robertson (even as she recognizes her own complicitity in this dissolution as she "became money" [1]) and as she dissolves from Vancouver when she leaves it? Many things can dissolve. We can dissolve salt or sugar into water. We can dissolve parliament. We can dissolve from one scene to another in a

film. When we dissolve something, we reduce it to its constituent parts. We relax it. We enfeeble it. We loosen it. We cause it to vanish. We disperse it. We free it.

Dissolving, then, could be tied to a lack of permanence in structures or organizations. Soft architecture is invested in the ways that space can change, shift, fold, or dissolve. Soft architecture is invested in the ways that space is socially produced but not fixed. In his book *The Production of Space* (1991),[8] French philosopher Henri Lefebvre discusses the ways space is produced through the interactions of different agents. Lefebvre cautions against thinking of space as a kind of container. "Vis-à-vis lived experience," he argues, "space is neither a mere 'frame,' after the fashion of the frame of a painting, nor, a form or container of a virtually neutral kind, designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it" (93-94). Instead, space is complex and multiple: "[s]ocial spaces interpenetrate one another and/or superimpose themselves upon one another" (86). This notion of "social space," which Lefebvre opposes to abstract and absolute space,[9] is formed through "encounter, assembly, simultaneity" (101). For Lefebvre, producing social space involves assembling not only human trajectories, but "everything that is there *in space*, everything that is produced by either nature or by society, either through their co-operation or through their conflicts," including "living beings, things, objects, works, signs and symbols" (101).

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[8] Lefebvre's *Production de L'Espace* was originally published in French in 1974. The English translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith was not published until 1991.

[9] According to Lefebvre, abstract space "erases distinctions, as much as those which derive from nature and (historical) time as those which originate in the body (age, sex, ethnicity" (49). Abstract space is the space of (capitalist and patriarchal) power, aimed at the reproduction of social relations. In contrast, absolute space is "religious and political in character" (48), invested with specific (and often sacred) historical meaning. Lefebvre notes that absolute space "embodies the simple, regulated and methodical principle or coherent stability," and it "assumes material form in monuments" (238).

This idea of intersecting trajectories forming social space runs parallel to what many human geographers call "place." In his book *Place: A Short Introduction*, English geographer Tim Cresswell notes that Lefebvre provides a sophisticated account of space where "he distinguishes between more abstract kinds of space (absolute space) and lived and meaningful spaces (social space)" (12). Cresswell connects Lefebvre's "social space" to notions of "place." but the difficulty in this shift is that many definitions of place are invested with ideas of permanence. What are the differences between space and place? Cresswell argues that the difference can be framed in terms of investment:[10]

> Space, then, has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without
>
> meaning – as a 'fact of life' which, like time, produces the basic
>
> coordinates for human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of
>
> space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such
>
> way) it becomes a place. (10)

For Cresswell, space is an abstract quantity whereas place is invested in and produced by human actions. In contrast, French theorist Michel de Certeau defines the relationship between space and place through practice and movement – "space is a practiced place" (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 117). Place, de Certeau notes, "implies an indication of stability" (117).

The definitions of space and place are fraught with ambiguity, but this notion of stability, particularly as it provides a sense of permanence, seems important. In his book *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, British geographer David Harvey discusses the ways stability and permanence are attached to ideas of place. Directly

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[10] I feel the need to quietly gesture toward the tension in the word "investment," which can refer to both financial investment and libidinal investment.

referring to de Certeau,[11] Harvey notes that "[p]lace is, then, the site of the inert body, reducible to the 'being there' of something permanent, in contrast to the instabilities of motions creating space" (262). Places must be looked at as the intersection points of a number of things – "as the locus of 'imaginaries,' as 'institutionalizations,' as configurations of 'social relations,' as 'material practices,' as forms of 'power,' and as elements in 'discourse'" (294). Though places are the accretions of a kind of spatial permanence, they are drawn from a myriad of sources. For Harvey though, de Certeau configures place within a power matrix, as the achievement of permanence (even if it is only a relative permanence) "alters the calculus of action in so far as they become 'subjects of will and power'" (262), suggesting that these permanent, institutional sites become seats of power. Place is not simply the accretion of space, but is also related to social power:

> The assignment of *place* within some socio-spatial structure indicates
>
> distinctive roles, capacities for action and access to power. Locating things
>
> (both physically and metaphorically) is fundamental to activities of
>
> valuing as well as identification. *Placing and the making of places* are
>
> essential to social development, social control and empowerment in any
>
> social order. (Harvey 265)

Through making a place, communities fix themselves to identity and social habit. Fixing space allows for social development, since those in the community don't need to rediscover and redefine their space constantly, but risks social control and different

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[11] De Certeau argues for two determinations between place and space. Harvey is referring to the first, which is related to "a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the *being-there* of something dead, the law of a 'place'" (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 118).

accesses to power structures. Within an ossified space, capacities for action are diminished, because "permanent" spaces are difficult to change without great resources. This doesn't mean that places are monolithic. Harvey argues that places, even if they are "a distinctive product of institutionalized social and political-economic power," are also "constructed and experienced as material ecological artifacts, and intricate networks of social relations" (316). For Harvey, places are complex and partly defined by our spatial practices, but are also fraught with an underlying dynamic that serves to construct places operating in the interests of money.

So, when Robertson watches Vancouver dissolve "in the fluid called money" (1), is this an admission of the ability of those with enough economic power to dismantle the city? Robertson's decision to "document" the process of the gentrifying force of money causes her to become "multiple" and to become "money" (1), allowing her the opportunity to slip into the clothing of architectural discourse. Robertson shifts the position, the "place," of her speaking through the adoption of the persona, the costuming, of the Office for Soft Architecture, a title reminiscent of Dutch architectural firm the Office for Metropolitan Architecture,[12] a move which puts her at risk of complicity with power, but also gives her a kind of *agency*. The ability to remake and redesign space and place – the role of the architect – is key to Robertson's project, but perhaps requires a move that considers place more a site of possibility than a site of power (without ignoring the role of power in these structures). Like good soft architects, we need to think about

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[12] An influence on Robertson's work, the Office for Metropolitan Architecture is headed by architect Rem Koolhaas. Critic Paul Stephens notes that the name of Robertson's Office is a "détournement on the name of [Koolhaas'] company" ("Dystopia of the Obsolete" 18), going on to compare *Office for Soft Architecture* to Koolhaas' examination of Manhattan in *Delirious New York* (1978).

the ways that place changes rather than stands still. In her book *For Space* (2005), British

geographer Doreen Massey proposes a configuration of place that considers place not as

permanent and unchangeable, but, rather, as the temporary spatial and temporal

connections that bind humans (and nonhumans and objects and spatial structures)

together. For Massey, space is tied to narrative lines of flight and place is where these

lines gather or tangle. She argues that "[i]f space is rather a simultaneity of stories-so-far,

then places are collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power

geometries of space" (130). Places act as knots or entanglements in lines of flight, sites of

increased social investment. Dissolution from a place, from a tough knot of spatial

understanding, requires the lines of flight to disentangle, to fly off or be destroyed.

A complication with this reading of place (and space) is the seemingly permanent

nature of structures that do not move on their own (hills or mountains, for example),

cutting an easy path to a reading of space as a container to be filled. Massey complicates

even these natural permanences through the use of continental drift theory. She begins

with a discussion based out of Keswick, a town in the northern Lake District of northwest

England. She notes the presence of Skiddaw, a mountain just outside the town:

> But outside the town looms Skiddaw, a massive block of a mountain, over
>
> 3000 feet high, grey and stony; not pretty, but impressive; immovable,
>
> timeless. It was impossible not to consider its relationship to this place.
>
> Through all that history, it seemed, it had presided. (131)

Massey sets Skiddaw up as a permanent natural fixture – a thing that, though human

culture buzzes around it in a relative state of flux, is this immovable object defying

change. Yet, almost immediately, Massey complicates this view by changing temporal

scales from recorded human history to geological time, a move that allows a view of mountains like Skiddaw not as timeless or permanent, but instead just as tentatively placed as humans across the landscape. As the scale is shifted outward, suddenly the rise of mountains and the shifting of continents is visible. Massey argues that "the rocks of Skiddaw are immigrant rocks, just passing through here, like my sister and me only rather more slowly, and changing all the while" (137). It follows that if mountains, these symbols of permanence, are also moving and changing, how can place be simply space made permanent? Place is not space that stands still, but, rather, space that means something to us.

Massey argues for "[p]laces as heterogeneous associations" (137). Places as sites of relational investments, as intersection points of different moving trajectories, as spatial knots. Massey does not want to diminish the investments people hold with regard to places, though she is clear that "what is special about place is not some romance of a pre-given collective identity or of the eternity of the hills" (140). Robertson similarly suggests in "Spatial Synthetics: A Theory" that "[t]he popular isn't pre-existent," that "[i]t's not etiquette" (77). Places aren't containers which we conform to. Instead, renewals of spatial investment are what make places important. "What is special about place," Massey argues, "is precisely that throwntogethernesss, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here and now (itself drawing on a history and geography of thens and theres); and a negotiation which must take place between both the human and the nonhuman" (140). Robertson's engagement with Vancouver is precisely this negotiation with the here-and-now (with the then-and-there in mind). Perhaps, when she leaves the city, this is why she feels as if she has dissolved, her trajectory disengaging with the

spatial knot of Vancouver, part of her body left behind to become "this book and the room around it" (1). Negotiating space into place is, as Massey suggests, a continual and repeated process. While, after she leaves, Robertson is not present for the negotiation of Vancouver as a place, her book is left behind to participate in that work, to dialogue with readers attempting to negotiate the city for themselves.

If Massey complicates the permanence of place by calling into question the eternalness of mountains, Robertson instead considers the weather, one of the shiftier elements of a natural space. Weather patterns can change the timbre of a space from day to day or week to week.[13] Her book *The Weather* (2001) is an effort to write a site-specific work during her stay at Cambridge where she "embarked on an intense yet eccentric research in the rhetorical structure of English meteorological description" (80). Tipped into *The Weather* and included as the fifth essay of "Occasional Work," Robertson's essay "Introduction to *The Weather*" looks at the idea of "passage." Robertson notes that "[t]he weather is a stretchy, elaborate, delicate trapeze, an abstract conveyance into the genuine future, which is also now" (68). For Robertson, the weather conveys us into the future, perhaps through the way it dramatizes time; "this weather," she gestures, "is the vestibule to something fountaining newly and crucially and yet indiscernibly beyond" (68). Unlike the static rock of Skiddaw, which takes far too long to shift, we can watch the weather shift and change. We feel it on the skin when the sun hides behind a cloud. "We think of the design and construction of weather description as important decorative work," Robertson notes, as if descriptions of the fountaining passage of the weather might provide a glimpse of a future utopia, not as a permanent and

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[13] Or, for those of us in Calgary, from hour to hour or minute to minute.

fixed point on the horizon, but as a temporary pavilion. As if by watching and describing

the ways the weather shifts, we might rehearse a version of our own spatial practice that

allows that kind of change. With this in mind, Robertson argues that "[w]ithin that

chiaroscuro we need to gently augment the fraught happiness of our temporary commons

by insisting on utopian delusion as a passage – like a wet pergola or a triumphal arch

against blue" (67). Robertson suggests that any commons is necessarily temporary, its

utopian possibility appearing and dissolving like a rainbow after a shower.

Wearing an Office

In "Spatial Synthetics: A Theory," the fourth essay of "Occasional Work,"

Robertson directly breaches the question of identity, suggesting that "[a]lthough some of

us love its common and at times accidental beauty, we're truly exhausted by identity"

(78). In the way it is attached to a kind of fixity or stability, Robertson's exhaustion in the

face of identity is unsurprising. Robertson's suggestion that she dissolves plays against a

double meaning of the word "dissolve." The first is literally attached to her leaving

Vancouver as she dissolves from the civic body. The second is attached to this exhaustion

of identity, whether that is a spatial identity or a personal one. In "The Fountain

Transcript," the fourth essay of "Occasional Work," Robertson plays with this idea of

identity and the ways it bounces between scales, from the city to the body. She begins by

asking "[w]hy are our fountains not truly bombastic," noting that, in Downtown

Vancouver, "each fountain's site is clandestinely scooped from the monetary grid, hidden

among corporations, rather than symbolically radiating a public logic of civic identity and

access as in Paris or Rome" (54-55). Despite this corporate attachment, Robertson argues

that these fountains are more than "corporate fantasies" because of the way they demonstrate a nostalgia for "unfashionable, minor happiness," flooding "the grid with its countertext" (55). The identity of the fountain, meant to be attached to "the atmosphere of the logo" (55), is instead excessive and gushing – "its rhetoric," Robertson notes, "always frivolously exceeds or overflow's identities names" (55). Robertson relates the minor happiness caused by the water's gushing, asking "[w]hy shouldn't we seek to describe happiness" and then answering that "if we do, we will find that although happiness is never merely private, often its occurrence relates to the scale of our body" (55).

As a spatial scale, the body is as much a site of inscription as the corporate grid of the city. In terms of gendered bodies, American critic Judith Butler famously complicates fixed gender identities in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), arguing that "[i]f the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (186). For Butler, the body is a surface to be performed upon – "[w]hat performance where," she asks, "will compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality" (189). In earlier books, Robertson foregrounds a certain kind of "genre drag" that relates to gender. In her poem "Nostalgia" from her book *XEclogue* (1993), Robertson notes that "[t]o be raised as a girl was a language," a language composed of "pungent greed and stiffened satin, dressed in scamming politics" (n. pag.). Pointing to this quote in his essay "'The frayed trope of rome': poetic architecture in Robert Duncan, Ronald Johnson, and Lisa Robertson" (2002), Vancouver critic Steve Collis suggests that, in texts like *XEclogue* and *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), "Robertson

opens classical genre and rhetoric to its ornamental use of gender (shepherdesses, Nature as feminine, rhetorical nostalgia and sincerity), revealing that, because they are decorative extras and surpluses, such gender constructions can be removed/altered/transformed (for they are not structurally integral to the genre's architecture)" (156). Collis forwards the way that Robertson uses genre to complicate gender representations by putting on and altering the clothing attached to the "scamming politics" of being raised as a girl. He suggests that "Robertson's speakers dream of slipping in and out of the fabrics that time weaves in architectures and rhetorics" (156-57). In an email discussion with Steve McCaffery for the Philly Talks[14] series, Robertson suggests something similar, arguing that "[w]hen capital marks women as the abject and monstrous ciphers of both reproduction and consumption, our choice can only be to choke out the project of renovation," meaning that "[w]e must become history's dystopic ghosts, inserting out inconsistencies, demands, misinterpretations and weedy appetites into the old bolstering narratives" (23). As an interpreter of genre, Robertson becomes a kind of excessive presence in the text, tearing a kind of liberty from the genre's deeply set taproot.

Could Robertson's work as the Office operate in a similar manner to her earlier work with genre, performing similar work in terms of space? Robertson certainly foregrounds genre throughout her oeuvre, often titling pieces in ways that make their connection to a genre explicit – from *Debbie: An Epic* to *The Men: A Lyric Book* (2006) to several of the essays in *Office for Soft Architecture* – though working in complex and

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[14] Philly Talks was a discussion series curated by poet and critic Louis Cabri at the University of Pennsylvania from 1997 to 2001.

conflicted ways with the conventions and history of the genre. In her essay "The Afterlife of the City: Reconsidering Urban Poetic Practice" (2009), Vancouver critic Maia Joseph specifically ties the work of the Office to a kind of costuming, recalling Robertson's statement in "Pure Surface," the second essay of "Occasional Work," that "[i]t suits us to write in this raw city" (25). Joseph proposes that Robertson's cultivation of the Office persona "foregrounds the work of the artist *as work*" and "allows us to read that 'suiting' as the assuming of a particular professional identity, even as we also read the statement as an articulation of a more personal, affective relation to the city" (157). Costuming becomes a way to alter the identity of the body as Robertson gains a sheen, however ironic, of authority with the adoption of the Office as a persona. With shades of Robertson's reading of the corporate fountain, Joseph suggests that "[i]f we can say that she playfully 'goes corporate' in cultivating her Office persona, she also returns the notion of the corporate to the scale of the body" (158). By dissolving into the persona of the Office, Robertson is able to remove, alter, and transform elements of the architectural genre that skew toward fixing the identity of the city and the identities of those who live there. The Office and the architectural discourse attached to it provide Robertson with a suit to wear as she describes the city and the way it might be changed.

In its temporary tenure, the Office for Soft Architecture is an active organization of one – a front for Robertson's interest in architectural discourse and the ways the city changes (or fails to change). In her email discussion with McCaffery, Robertson outlines the Office's practice parallel to architectural practice, noting that "in becoming an 'architect' I wanted to consider the rhetorical and descriptive practice of architecture – the history of the manifesto, the project proposal, site analysis, all that, as already an

architecture" (33). The clothing of the architectural genre allows Robertson the

opportunity to describe the city from inside the language of power in order to unfix the

permanences that have accreted around spatial and subjective identities. Along this line,

Robertson's work as the Office might be thought of as *tactical* rather than *strategic*, a

distinction made by de Certeau in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984).[15]

According to de Certeau, tactics "do not obey the law of the place, for they are not

defined or identified by it," whereas strategies "seek to create places in conformity with

abstract models" (29). "Strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose," de Certeau

argues, "whereas "tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert" (30). Operating as a kind

of *bricolage* or "making do" with the materials and discourses at hand, Robertson

interacts with the city *as it is*, considering all the real and imaginary valences of meaning

Vancouver might carry. In "The Value Village Lyric," the final essay of "Occasional

Work," Robertson brings this tactical approach to the scale of the body as she describes

walking the aisles of a Value Village thrift store that "occupies the window-walled shells

of abandoned Modern supermarkets, off peri-urban low rent strip malls" (216). "The

House of V," she notes, turning this bargain-bin paradise into haute couture, "is a

combinatory paradise ruled by pathos and grotesquerie" (216). For Robertson, the Value

Village is a site of tactical bricolage where previously-abandoned identities can be

rediscovered. When she declares that "[w]e want an impure image that contradicts fixity"

(213), she suggests that in the racks and racks of discarded clothing hangs the possibility

of change. By changing our clothing, we might also change our identity by trying on

these "lyric structures cast aside" (217).

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[15] The original French version of de Certeau's book was published in 1980. Steven
Rendall's English translation was first published in 1984.

Inside the Value Village, the act of shopping is the act of repurposing the abandoned, as opposed to shopping in a mall or box store, where one consumes the newly produced. For Robertson, the secondhand clothes give off the fragrance of the past in the present – "[w]e're wearing a metaphor, lightly emanating a stranger's scent" (217). Past their expiry date, Robertson argues that "the tactile[16] limits of garments mark out potential actions" (213). These secondhand clothes compose a "revolutionary costume" (214), whose timbre depends on the fabrics used:

> This is the revolutionary costume. This is the voluptuous eclipse of affect. Our address is superfluous. Then, there is the fluency of crêpe de chine, of fine batiste, of crumpled linen, of Dacron, Orlon, and defunct polyesters, of Lamex and Lurex, PVC, and good wool twist ... The fibrous layers build out and mould our soul. This textile thatching is our practice. This facing is our fabulous task. (214)

Out of a list of fabrics and their fluency comes Robertson's observation that "[t]his textile thatching is our practice," connecting practice to costuming to (temporary) identity. These discarded garments are shed skins we might readopt or repurpose as we move into the future. They are pavilions for our bodies. The practice of the Office (and perhaps Robertson's larger poetic practice) involves the putting on of different coats and hats with the aim of repeatedly adopting more tactically advantageous identities. Robertson wears the trappings of genre, dissolving in the costuming she chooses and hiding in the folds of it. Genre is what allows Robertson to dissolve, to "go phantom," knocking about the

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[16] I very nearly wrote "tactical" instead.

understandings of the genre (and the identity it inscribes) like a poltergeist banging the kitchen cupboards open and shut.

Who is We?: Toward Relationality

The thought that one might adopt a past identity by browsing the racks of abandoned clothing is a simple yet radically complex gesture. Not simple in the sense that it can be easily be reduced to a single master narrative, but simple in the sense that the bar is low for entry yet the number of permutations of identity that might be found in the aisles of the Value Village is great. The gestures I have made so far – the movement toward a spatial temporariness, the tactical adoption of varying identities – suggest a reading of Robertson's *Office for Soft Architecture* as a book invested in change, but the approaches and subjects that Robertson explores belies a focus on the minor, on the disempowered. Selecting from racks of used clothes to alter one's identity, building a shack out of the materials at hand, wandering through and describing a site: these are all spatial activities that people excluded from power can engage in. In many ways, Robertson's work as the Office is aimed *outward*, thinking in many ways about community and how individuals engage with the spaces they live in. With this in mind, Robertson's choice to write the Office as a "we," as a mass or group, is simultaneously charged by the sense of community it suggests and the power embedded in the pronoun – the way it constructs community by opposing it to a "they." Who is this "we" and how does Robertson use it to complicate community identity? Is Robertson's "we" bigger and more complex than it looks? Is it more than a part of the Office persona?

Noting in an interview with Robertson[17] that it seems to him that her work "is very much against a kind of solitary notion of writing, against a kind of Romantic notion of a solitary writer," writer Michael Nardone asks Robertson if she isn't "trying to create or address or locate a community through the work" (n. pag.). Robertson responds coyly:

> I would say I'm not trying to create a community – there are already people there. And everybody is already interesting and articulate and full of ideas and remarkable bodies of work that they are already in the midst of producing, and I am visiting studios, in conversations, and I would say my impetus is not to memorialize – I'm not interested in any sort of monument or any sort of master narrative – but just to make a record, to try to make texts that can trace some of that vibrancy and complexity that's around me. (n. pag.)

Robertson's resistance not to community, but to *creating* community, connects to a resistance to master narratives or monuments. Robertson configures community as something that is already there, waiting to be drifted into and engaged with. Much of *Office for Soft Architecture* is written out of a dialogue with other work. "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto" was commissioned by Vancouver's Artspeak Gallery and Montréal's Dazibao Gallery for "a catalogue of the work of artists Sharyn Yuen and Josée Bernard" (*Office for Soft Architecture* 4); "Site Report: New Brighton Park" and "Spatial Synthetics: A Theory" were each written for special issues of *Mix* magazine. Robertson tells Nardone that "[w]herever I go, I write something when somebody asks

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[17] Interview originally conducted as part of a public dialogue at Open Space, an artist-run centre in Victoria B.C. on November 27, 2010. Transcription posted on Sina Queyras' blog *Lemon Hound*: http://lemonhound.blogspot.com.

me to," suggesting further that she tries "to let what I'm hearing or experiencing and researching in my immediate environment enter my work as fully as possible" (n. pag.). While Robertson may not be creating or addressing a community, she is certainly, through her engagement and attentiveness toward the social, *locating* a community as *Office for Soft Architecture* is a kind of textual map of Robertson's social interactions as they relate to space.

In this sense, it is interesting that Robertson's Office shares some DNA with the work of Guy Debord and the Situationists. In his essay "Toward a Situationist International" (1957), Debord begins with the argument that the Situationists' "central purpose is the construction of situations, i.e. the concrete construction of temporary settings of life and their transformation into a higher passionate nature" (94). Debord ties a number of radical spatial practices to this purpose, most notably psychogeography (the study of the effects of geography on "the affective comportment of individuals" ["Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography" 59]) and the *dérive* (a wandering through the city, what Debord calls "a technique of swift passage through varied environments" ["Theory of the *Dérive*" 78], with the aim of disorientation). With its dual focus on its status as "a passionate uprooting through the hurried change of environments" and its other role as "a means of studying psychogeography and Situationist psychology" ("Toward a Situationist International" 96), the *dérive* in particular is important to Robertson's project because of the way it combines the flux of the city with a kind of civic intervention, eyeing change through a consideration of the ephemeral and temporary. "Our situations will be without a future," Debord argues, "they will be places where people are constantly coming and going" (97). Within this context,

the situation proposed by Debord is a place like the kind evoked by Massey, a deliberate entanglement of trajectories that is nevertheless open to chance. The Situationist impulse is interventionist, seeking new ways that people might view the city.

Might Robertson's work in *Office for Soft Architecture* share this interventionist bent, creating textual situations for the recreation of the city? *Office for Soft Architecture*'s status as a book, primarily seen as a private object rather than a physical practice in public space, affects the ways it can interact with "passers-by." Instead, an open-minded reader of Robertson's book might find him or herself gently pushed out into a larger field of discourse about spatial and architectural practice. The Office's practice is situated within a frame of reference as each essay in "Occasional Works" is followed by a list of sources or footnotes that Robertson includes "in part to recognize influences and borrowings, but also to hopefully tempt a reader away from this book and toward the stacks" (*Office for Soft Architecture* n. pag.). In acknowledging (though not restricting) the artistic and intellectual communities around her book, Robertson locates a certain kind of community with which a reader might choose to align their trajectory, entangling themselves in the same discourses as the Office, albeit in different cities and settings. In his essay "Theory of the Dérive," Debord notes the ways that different atmospheres and habitations are marked by "more or less extensive bordering edges," arguing that "[t]he most general change that *dérive* leads to proposing is the constant reduction of these bordering edges, until their complete suppression. Perhaps something similar might be proposed for the Office's practice, where the borders between different texts and spaces are complicated, perhaps not until they are suppressed, but until they fail to be permanent. By directing her reader away toward the stacks and ultimately the streets of

the city, Robertson sets her reader up for a kind of intertextual *dérive*, where ideas of space and place become contingent and ephemeral, recombined in ways that best suit a continually changing present.

But what about this question of the Office's "we"? Who is included and excluded? Where is the border drawn? Perhaps the best place to start is with the curious difference between the two sections of *Office for Soft Architecture* in the way that Robertson uses the pronoun. Where the "we" in "Occasional Work" seems to refer to the Office as an institution, the "we" in "Seven Walks" is much smaller, referencing only Robertson and her unnamed guide. There is a slipperiness between the two we's, as, in the "Seventh Walk," Robertson and her guide transform into a "we" that seems larger than just the two of them. "We began to imagine," she notes, "that we were several, even many" (269). This newly larger "we" becomes a mass of "solitaries" documenting the movements of the city – the "we" becomes *multiple*. Robertson sets up a series of "ones" that each follow a different trajectory: "One of us was famished for colour"; "One of us would take eight days to write a letter describing the superb greyhound of the Marchesa Casati"; "One of us wanted only to repeat certain words: diamond, tree, vegetable"; "This one remembered flight"; "This one remembered each lie, each blemish, each soft little tear in the worn cottons of the shirts" (270-71). This series of diverging "ones," each following an unsystematic path, might be read as a manifestation of Robertson's assertion in her introduction that, through the practice of the Office, she "became multiple" (1).

But what if through this expansion of her "we" past a simple unified identity of "The Office" or "Lisa Robertson and her unnamed guide," Robertson is instead providing a cue that her book could be taken as a *relational* artwork. This notion of relationality is

fraught. Lefebvre argues, drawing from Marx, that space is defined by social and economic relationships similar to the ways that a commodity is charged by the conditions of its production. "When we contemplate a field of maize," Lefebvre suggests, "we are well aware that the furrows, the pattern of sowing, and the boundaries, be they hedges or wire fences, designate relations of production and property" (83). Space is in part produced from these relations, but is also produced according to the active and critical engagement and play of individuals and groups in those spaces as they form relationships that are rooted and site-specific. In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational art as "an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interaction and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space" (14). A relational artwork forwards the idea of social exchange, and, in this sense, a piece like Leif and Moschpedis' *Imaginary Ordinary* fits the bill. According to Bourriaud, within this relational sphere, "[a]rt is a state of encounter" (17). "Encounter" in *Office for Soft Architecture* is a strange consideration. Robertson walks with only her guide to keep her company as she carefully considers the elements of the landscape, describing them even as they change and mobilizing elements of the past from the archive to help her read the present. As readers, we sit removed in our chairs or beds, encountering Robertson and her Vancouver through these descriptions. If the book is a site of encounter, it is much different than the situations proposed by Debord or the relational artworks proposed by Bourriaud. It is a valid question to ask whether a finished book can even be relational, but perhaps the question we need to pose is where the project of the Office for Soft Architecture ends. If the project ends with the publication of the book, *Office for Soft Architecture*, then we

leave the book as a private object waiting to be purchased and consumed. However, for a

reader tempted out into the city by Robertson's prose, the book becomes a kind of guide

– a reading suggested by the size and shape of the book itself, since it is small enough to

carry around in a back pocket, walking through the parks and pavilions of the city.

It seems that Robertson's work straddles a line between the relational and the

private, presenting a social interstice that nevertheless can be consumed and considered

privately. For Bourriaud, a social interstice is "a space in social relations which fits more

or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading

possibilities than those in effect within this system" (16). Within a relational frame, it

might be useful to cross Bourriaud's idea of the relational with Massey's spatial knot. As

Office for Soft Architecture enters the hands of an active and engaged reader and as that

reader begins to consider the city, the book, the words, the reader, and the physical and

imaginary contingencies of the city begin to tangle in ways other than those expected. In

collaboration with the streets of the city themselves, *Office for Soft Architecture* is a

social interstice where social relations are mediated by language, by texts, by objects, by

architectures. This suggestion of relationality opens up the Office's "we" so that it is not

an institutional gesture but a genuinely open "we," where readers can include themselves

if they choose.[18] With this, the "we" of the Office becomes a kind of revolutionary

costume – a serious hand-me-down that allows a reader to go into their city armed with a

mess of discourses that they can employ and expand. My thesis predicates itself on both a

double understanding of spatial relationality: both Robertson's negotiation of the social

relations of Vancouver and the relational nature of Robertson's text after she dissolves,

[18] The antagonistic "they" that defines the "we" becomes those who don't choose to include themselves. The route of the Office, it appears, is self-selecting.

leaving in her wake an eruption of connections that extend past the limits of one city into the cities of others.

The chapters that follow explore Robertson's interest in the impermanent aspects of the city and how they provide cracks in the illusion of permanence and stability, with an eye on alternative, yet temporary, spaces. In my first chapter, "Situations of Doubt: Robertson on the Manifesto and the Scaffold," I explore the ways that Robertson points us toward doubt as a possible remedy to illusions of spatial and ideological permanence, particularly the ways that permanent spaces cripple any attempts to change things simply because things do not look like they will change. In the next chapter, "House, Room, Shack, Nest: Complicating Intimate Space," I look at the intersection of private and public spaces and how, for Robertson, structures like the shack provide a tentativeness and permeability that prevents the fixed and static nature of spaces like the house, with its Oedipal attachments, from acting like a prison. In chapter three, "'The city is here for you to use': On Multivalent Readings of Space," I explore Robertson's resistance to the erase-and-rebuild logics of contemporary capitalist space, considering her mobilization of sites like the archive to reconsider and reread space in ways that differ from official narratives.

Chapter One

Situations of Doubt: Robertson on the Manifesto and the Scaffold

> All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable
> prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become
> antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is
> holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his
> real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.
> (Marx and Engels 23)

Holding a physical copy of *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* in my hands, I am simultaneously seduced and confounded. It is small enough to fit in the back pocket of a pair of jeans, giving the impression that it is designed to be carried around as a kind of field guide. Yet reading Robertson's book is a confounding experience. Manifestos intermingle with historical descriptions with walks through Vancouver. Robertson's book is deliberately *messy*, resisting attempts to boil it down to an easy description through tonal shifts that range from simple academic prose to densely metaphorical turns that might be considered poetry. This reflects Robertson's desire that *Office for Soft Architecture* not be a monolithic source of information, but rather a textual site from where the reader can move. This shift toward a text that actively dialogues with the world suggests Bourriaud's argument that "the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist" (*Relational Aesthetics* 13). Bourriaud suggests that in order to assess the relationality of an artwork, a viewer or reader might ask, "[d]oes this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?" (109). This is an important pair of questions for Robertson's work. Certainly, Robertson wishes her readers to move

from the book toward the library stacks and into the city streets, but who or what is this reader dialoguing with? What conversations and dialogues does *Office for Soft Architecture* provoke? How might a reader exist in the shifting spaces Robertson defines? These questions about how we, as readers, engage with Robertson's text parallel the ways that she considers the seemingly permanent structures of the city, not assuming the city as fixed, but rather seeing the possibilities inherent in structures that are not fixed. None of the essays in *Office for Soft Archtiecture* instruct in the ways of the city, but instead provide models for possible exploration. They set up possible situations where we can glimpse a kind of *doubt* in the physical and ideological structures of our own spaces, a doubt that Robertson ties to the structure of the scaffold in her "Occasional Work" essay "Doubt and the History of Scaffolding," a doubt that is necessary to even conceive of spaces being able to change.

A Teetering Manifesto for the End Times

Let's begin with two vanished architectures, both quite different in timbre. The first is the destruction of the World Trade Center buildings in 2001, the trauma of which stemmed from a combination of factors: the massive loss of life, the way it seemed to come out of nowhere, the inexplicable motivation of those flying the planes, and the startling disappearance of buildings that had become so tied to the skyline of New York City, arguably the most recognizable skyline in the world. In a series of articles written for *The Nation* and reprinted in the collection *A Just Response: The Nation on Terrorism, Democracy, and September 11, 2001* (2001), American journalist Jonathan Schell describes the buildings' destruction in terms of disappearance: "On Tuesday morning, a

piece was torn out of our world. A patch of blue sky that should not have been there opened up in the New York skyline" (2). Schell argues that the destruction of the World Trade Center triggered a fear in the American subconscious of being destroyed by a force outside the nations borders, a force that would not only kill more people, but would literally cause the American empire's collapse into ruin. For Schell, the towers' destruction "was a taste of annihilation, a small piece of the end of the world" (18). The response to the annihilation of such a symbolic piece of architecture speaks to a desire for permanence, for the spaces we invest in to remain solid and for there to be a sense of continuity to them.

The second disappeared architecture resulted less from a catastrophic disappearance than an aesthetic sleight of hand. For two weeks in the summer of 1995, American artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude wrapped the German Reichstag with a fabric coated in aluminum,[19] simultaneously erasing and calling attention to the building. "Fabric, like clothing or skin, is fragile," they argue, "it translates the unique quality of impermanence" ("Wrapped Reichstag" n. pag.). In his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, American critic Andreas Huyssen ties Christo and Jeanne-Claude's textile revision of such a key piece of Berlin architecture to the concept of monumental invisibility, that is, the idea that building a monument to history actually renders history *less* visible. Recalling a remark he paraphrases from Austrian novelist Robert Musil that "there is nothing as invisible as a monument," Huyssen argues

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[19] Christo and Jeanne-Claude more fully describe the materials on their website: "100,000 square meters (1,076,000 square feet) of thick woven polypropylene fabric with an aluminum surface and 15,600 meters (51,181 feet) of blue polypropylene rope, diameter 3.2 cm (1.25?), were used for the wrapping of the Reichstag. The façades, the towers and the roof were covered by 70 tailor-made fabric panels, twice as much fabric as the surface of the building" (n. pag.).

that "Berlin – and with it all of memorial-crazed Germany – is opting for invisibility," since "[t]he more monuments there are, the more the past becomes invisible, and the easier it is to forget" (32).

In contrast to this impulse to make history invisible by codifying it, Christo and Jeanne-Claude make history tangible by making it invisible. Huyssen argues that "Christo's veiling [of the Reichstag] did function as a strategy to make visible, to unveil, to reveal what was hidden when it was visible" (36). By veiling the monumental architecture of the Reichstag, Huyssen argues that Christo and Jeanne-Claude open a space for contemplation and dialogue:

> Conceptually, the veiling of he Reichstag had another salutary effect: it muted the voice of politics as usual, the memory of speeches from its windows, of the raising of German or Soviet flags on its roof and of the official political rhetoric inside. Thus it opened up a space for reflection and contemplation as well as for memory. The transitoriness of the event itself – the artists refused to prolong the show upon popular demand – was such that it highlighted the temporality and historicity of built space, the tenuous relationship between remembering and forgetting. (36)

The tensions that Huyssen acknowledges between memory and presence, between imagined and built structures, in the fabric surface of the Reichstag are also present in the vanished surfaces of the World Trade Center, though in reverse as a permanent memorial for the event is currently under construction.[20] With this question of how space might be altered to change memories or perceptions, at the beginning of her "Soft Architecture: A

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[20] http://www.national911memorial.org

Manifesto," Robertson evokes fabric as a source of spatial shift, as a way that seemingly "hard" architectures might change their identity without being destroyed or gutted or gentrified. For Robertson, "[t]he holy modernism of the white room is draped and lined in its newness by labile counter-structures of moving silk, fur, leather, onyx, velvet" (14). Much like an outfit drawn from the racks of the Value Village alters the identity of the wearer, adorning a room or building with fabric changes the meaning of that surface and the memories attached to it. "There are curious histories of shrouds," she argues, but "[t]hat is not all. Memory's architecture is neither palatial nor theatrical but soft" (13).

Robertson's theorization of a soft architecture lies within this matrix of tensions – the permanent and the impermanent, the subtle dissolve and the augmented surface, the remembered and the easily forgettable. Robertson's manifesto on soft architecture is an attempt to theorize ways of affecting space without either marking it as permanent or bulldozing (or bombing)[21] it in favour of something else. But why a manifesto? Isn't a manifesto a text interested in rupture, in change, in provoking others to act? In "The Poetics of the Manifesto: Nowness and Newness," the introduction to her *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (2001), American critic Mary Ann Caws argues that "[t]he manifesto was from the beginning, and has remained, a deliberate manipulation of the public view," that seeks to set out "the terms of the faith toward which the listening public is to be swayed, it is a document of an ideology, crafted to convince and convert" (xix). To use Caws' language, a manifesto can be "loud," "peculiar and angry," "quirky," or "deliberately macho-male" (xix-xx). The outreach of the manifesto "demands extravagant

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[21] Despite their differing intention, don't the actions of the bulldozing land developer and the terrorist end up with the same result – a pile of rubble. Isn't the loss of memory associated with the loss of a specific place why land developers occasionally appear as movie villains?

self-assurance" (xx). Despite, or perhaps because of this driven sureness about how things ought to be done that is inherent in the manifesto, Robertson is interested in the form because of the possibilities it provides. In an interview with writer and critic Kate Eichhorn in the anthology *Prismatic Publics: Innovative Canadian Women's Poetry and Poetics*, Robertson remarks that she is drawn to the manifesto form because of the potential space marked out by its ambitiousness: "I think that these astoundingly ambitious – ambitious in their openness, their desire to actually create new politics – the ambitious manifestos have made space for us to work in" (378). Rather than look at the manifesto as a masculine declaration of what ought to happen, Robertson views the manifesto as a site of possibility, a textual space where a nascent politics can be articulated. For Robertson, the manifesto is a quicker route to expressing political insight than poetry, noting, "I felt that all at once I had this flash of insight about how I wanted to represent what globalism was doing to urban politics" and "[w]riting that Soft Architecture manifesto was a way to get it out there" (378-79).

This interest in opening textual spaces of possibility, rather than replacing one closed space with a differently closed space, helps define Robertson's take on the soft. But how might we begin to read this desire for the new political space opened by the manifesto against the capitalist willingness to gentrify and modernize spaces, to destroy, dissolve, or augment them in favour of the new? Take a structure like the Woodward's building in the downtown eastside of Vancouver, a building politically charged by a 92-day occupation of the site by a group of squatters in 2002,[22] which has recently been redeveloped into the "Woodward's District," a residential/commercial complex that,

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[22] Texts related to the Woodwards Squat, or Woodsquat, have been collected by Vancouver poet and activist Aaron Vidaver in *West Coast Line* 37.2-3.

according to the developer's website,[23] "champions ideals of heritage revival, sustainable design, mixed-use planning and contemporary culture" (n. pag.). Invoking not the "elegant architectural expression" of the new Woodward's, Robertson presents a much softer city:

> Yet our city is persistently soft. We see it like a raw encampment at the edge of the rocks, a camp for a navy vying to return to a place that has disappeared. So the camp is a permanent transience, the buildings of shelters like tents – tents of steel, chipboard, stucco, glass, cement, paper, and various claddings – tents rising and falling in the glittering rhythm which is null rhythm, which is the flux of modern careers. (15)

As Robertson conceptually reconfigures the city as a site of flux or "permanent transience," are we faced with the dissolution of civic space as sites like the Woodward's building are not demolished but are caught in a strange kind of reterritorialization, a rewriting of the site's identity, by the "fluid called money" and the "flux of modern careers"? How much of the rise and fall of these glittering urban favelas is caused by the movements of capital and how much is caused by the movements of individuals? Can these two sources of spatial practice even be separated?

Interestingly, Robertson configures the city as a squat, the occupants constructing temporary dwellings – "tents" – that suggest the improvised favelas at the periphery of cities like Rio de Janeiro. Robertson wants us to view the city as soft, as continuously under negotiation rather than fixed in time. "But," she warns, "Soft Architecture expires invisibly as the mass rhetorics of structural permanence transmit: Who can say when the

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[23] http://www.woodwardsdistrict.com

astonishing complicities of the woven decay into rote" (14). As the spaces of the city are

negotiated and invested in, both culturally and monetarily, they begin to gain a

permanence. The city becomes codified. In this sense, space can be drawn in terms of

what French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their book *A Thousand*

Plateaus (1987)[24] call a tracing, a well-worn path defined by systems like linguistics or

psychoanalysis, to use the examples they use. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the object

of these systems "is an unconscious that is itself representative, crystallized into codified

complexes" with a goal of describing "a de facto state, to maintain balance in

intersubjective relations, or to explore an unconscious that is already there from the start"

(12). In these terms, the complex and shifting systems of the city have their meanings

fixed through this overinvestment and overcoding. The spaces of the city are made

abstract, aiming for the simple reproduction of capitalist narratives. This risk of

institutionalization is the threat facing soft architecture. The point at which these

"rhetorics of structural permanence" overcode previously provisional spaces is the point

at which soft architecture becomes hard.

It is within this context that Robertson wonders whether "there is no 'space,' only

a permanent, slow motion mystic takeover, an implausibly careening awning" (17).

Instead of a permanent accretion of space into a fixed place, Robertson imagines a space

that is permanently revised, a place subject to a changing and continual reinvestment. But

how does this revision happen? In his paper "The Dystopia of the Obsolete: Lisa

Robertson's Vancouver and the Poetics of Nostalgia" (2010), critic Paul Stephens argues

that, rather than become a revolutionary character against capital, Robertson instead

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[24] Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux* was originally published in French in 1980.
Brian Massumi's translation was published in 1987.

"makes herself an implicated character within the landscape" (18). For Stephens,

Robertson's tactic is to assimilate herself with capital:

> The old Vancouver may have been tragically dissolved in a rain of money,
>
> but that does not mean that the old Vancouver can be claimed through the
>
> removal of the corroding influence of money. On the contrary, to
>
> understand money's influence on the city, the author must become
>
> "money," so as to be able to think from the perspective of capital, rather
>
> than to simply dismiss capital's effects. (18)

Stephens argues that Robertson is *complicit* with capital, but complicit in a strangely

liberatory sense, arguing that she "reclaims the word 'complicity'" and noting further that

"[t]he accomplice is not a criminal but an agent in the creative process, a squatter in the

midst of wealth" (28). Stephens is right to decouple the complicit individual from a kind

of cronyism, since it is impossible to cut one's self out of the wider capitalist grid as

wishes to do so seem to point to an earlier, more pastoral time (ie. nostalgia) or a future

space outside (ie. utopia).

However the risk of this complicity is the risk of becoming something akin to

what Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek calls a "Fukuyamean," that is, someone who accepts

American philosopher Francis Fukuyama's 1989 thesis[25] that, with liberal democracy and

its capitalist economic counterpart, we have reached the end of history, since there is no

viable alternative to our current system. Targeting not only Fukuyama but also his critics,

Žižek argues that "[i]t is easy to make fun of Fukuyama's notion of the 'End of History,'

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[25] Fukuyama first published his thesis in an essay titled "The End of History?" in *The National Interest* and expanded it into a book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

but most people today *are* Fukuyamean, accepting liberal-democratic capitalism as the finally found formula of the best possible society, such that all one can do is to try to make it more just, more tolerant, and so on" (*First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* 88). Within this framework, complicity becomes a given, so how might an activist politics approach questions of how to affect the change it wants in a system that welcomes change as long as it is attached to money? Stephens points us to a comment made by Robertson in her Philly Talks discussion with Steve McCaffery, where she relates her complicity to what she calls "delusional space":

> Every suspension of this totalizing structure is delusion. Therefore the necessity to shape or describe delusional space. There are traces of unbuildable or unbuilt architectures folded into the texture of the city and our bodies are already moving among them. Therefore the exploitation of complicity as a critical trope, an economy of scale. My outlook is not liberatory except by the most minor means, but these tiny, flickering inflections are the only agency I believe – the inflections complicating the crux of a complicity. More and more poetry is becoming for me the urgent description of complicity and delusional space. The description squats within a grammar because there is no other site. Therefore the need for the urgent and incommensurate hopes of accomplices. (38)

By reducing her point of critique to the scale of the individual, Robertson is able to complicate the textures of the city and place the agency for change in the hands of those willing and able to put under scrutiny their own complicity with the totalizing narratives that describe the city (the body, the nation, the globe). The difficulty in this passage

however is in the liberatory potential of delusional space, a space that Stephens argues "must remain counter-normative within larger shared visions" (28).

The possibility inherent in these delusional spaces – these spaces made up of unbuilt or unbuildable or imaginary architectures, these "implausibly careening awnings" (*Office for Soft Architecture* 17)[26] – pushes Robertson to devise a tactic that takes advantage of these gaps in the unified narratives that define space. As the Office for Soft Architecture, Robertson seeks to rearticulate space, arguing that "[t]he truly utopian act is to manifest current conditions and dialects" (16). To this end, she advises her reader to "[p]ractice description," since "[d]escription is mystical. It is afterlife because it is life's reflection of reverse" (16). The idea of description as afterlife carries a double meaning. The association of the afterlife with death allows Robertson to recognize the ways that description can threaten to fix things in place, to ossify them, to make the perceptions of a space permanent even if, in practice, those spaces are in flux. The association of the afterlife with the spectral, with *ghosts*, allows for description to be incorporeal – description without a single, unifying body. "The work of the SA,"[27] Robertson argues, "makes new descriptions on the warp of former events" (17). But what if these new descriptions are not discourses meant to replace former descriptions, but rather are meant to complicate those discourses? And what if in her search for "the urgent and incommensurate hopes of accomplices," she finds an army of what she calls "solitaries,"[28] who hesitantly and carefully describe the movements of the city as they

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[26] An awning can be, of course, a temporary shelter from the rain, perhaps even from "a rain of money" (Stephens 18).

[27] "SA" likely stands for "Soft Architect."

[28] This notion of "solitaries" comes from a quote in Robertson's "Seventh Walk": "And we learned that as many we could more easily be solitary. As solitaries, this is what we

explore it, providing description as part of a decentered and multiple practice, so that a space does not get a description but *descriptions*. Robertson notes that "[b]y descriptions, we mean moistly critical dreams, morphological thefts, authentic registers of pleasant customs, accidents posing as intentions" (17). Within this definition, description is not a single-sourced and simple overcoding of space with an easily digested narrative, but is instead a process filled with doubt and tentativeness. In short, at the core of soft architecture is doubt.

Doubt and the Scaffolding of History

In "Soft Architecture: A Manifesto," Robertson presents a series of possibilities, each foregrounded with the use of the word "perhaps":

> We recommenders of present action have learned to say "perhaps" our
>
> bodies produce space; "perhaps" our words make a bunting canopy;
>
> "perhaps" the hand-struck, palpable wall is an anti-discipline; "perhaps"
>
> by the term "everyday life" we also mean the potential. (16)

How should we read Robertson's use of quotation marks around each "perhaps"? Are we meant to handle the word as toxic material? Should we keep a distance, weighing each word down with cynical shrugs? Doing this would discount the potential raised by the word's use in the first place. By drawing our attention to the multiple appearances of "perhaps," Robertson simultaneously gives her propositions a tentativeness *and* places

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would do. We would silently practice the duplicitous emotion known as anarchy or scorn. We would closely observe strangers to study how, in a manner, or in a touch, we might invent the dream of the congress of strange shapes. We would make use of their resistance; it showed us our own content. We were not at all pleasant. As I said, our intentions were documentary" (*Office for Soft Architecture* 270)

them in the realm of possibility. Each "perhaps" allows for things to happen that may previously have been unthinkable – words can become building material, walls can fail to be constraining. Robertson speaks to possibilities like these in her essay "My Eighteenth Century: Draft towards a Cabinet,"[29] where she attempts to "defend a use for irony that constructs ambiguities as speculative follies, doubled economies whose blatant inutility shows a potentiality, a threshold of counter-hegemonic agency, or play, more simply put" (395). Robertson is interested in the ways irony allows for movement "against the grain of cultural intention, by doubling spaces and foundations, naming as it negates, yet refusing the stasis of names and pathologies, and translating the anxiety of power to the erotics of doubt" (396). Robertson is interested in the ways irony refuses stasis and creates doubles, complicating spaces and ideas by making visible the *scaffolding* that supports them. In this sense, her use of "perhaps" creates the same kind of speculative doubling, creating possibilities out of a kind of doubt that things are as they seem.

Robertson conceptualizes irony as one method among many that can open up what she calls a "political imaginary," that is, "a symbolic figuration which motivates and underwrites the production of public meaning" (390). Robertson suggests that the methods used to construct a political imaginary need to be multiple and flexible. She argues that "[t]he assumption that social change can only proceed from the cohesion of a defended, guarded method, finally entrenches certain identity pictures in deeply confining oppositional ideologies" (396). In other words, without an openness of method that follows the logic of the tactic, of the "perhaps," even the most oppositional of methods can ossify into an inflexible institution, unable to do anything other than give off a sheen

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[29] This essay is collected by Romana Huk in the book *Assembling Alternatives: Reading Postmodern Poetries Transnationally* (2003).

of oppositionality. Instead of fixed and institutionalized, Robertson suggests that a

political imaginary should be open, arguing that "[t]he political imaginary needs to

present itself as irreparably multiple, mobile, simultaneous to both doubt and pleasure"

(396).

It is with this doubt-filled openness that Robertson approaches the sculptural work

of Vancouver artist Elspeth Pratt with the absent history of scaffolding. Written for a

catalogue of Pratt's work produced to coincide with a 2002 exhibition titled *Doubt*,

Robertson's "Doubt and the History of Scaffolding" proposes to "replace the missing

record" (152) of scaffolding's history. She opens with a quote from modernist poet Laura

Riding, who describes the world built for a child upon birth: "A scaffolding is set up for

it, an altar to ephemerality – a permanent altar. This altar is the Myth. The object of the

Myth is to give happiness: to help the baby pretend that what is ephemeral is permanent"

(qtd. in Robertson 161). Within this context, scaffolding helps establish the permanence

of a site. In this sense, the scaffold is not unlike the Lacanian symbolic, overcoding the

Real in order that the world makes sense, unified by a narrative, by Myth. However,

physical scaffolds are removed from buildings as soon as they are "completed," thereby

removing the doubt that the building will not stand. The scaffold is seen as useful but is

ultimately something to be erased. Whether it is visible or not, scaffolding is meant to

reassure us like it does the infant. Whether physical or incorporeal, composed of boards

or words, scaffolding keeps us from believing that a tower could fall with enough impact.

If we look hard enough, we can see Robertson scaffolding her own ideas from draft to

draft. In the earlier version of the essay published in the catalogue of Pratt's work,

Robertson suggests that "[w]e really do live on this temporary framework of platforms

and poles" (19). In the *Office for Soft Architecture* version, the words "really do" are cut, as if, between the two drafts, Robertson needed to scaffold herself into a simple belief from one that needed a little extra reassurance. Those scaffolds *really are there* and we *really do live on them*, but out of a desire for perfect or seamless spaces, we forget them.

It is this exploration of the desire for seamlessness that ties Robertson's text to Pratt's sculpture. In a short note describing *Doubt*, Vancouver artist and curator Lorna Brown writes that "[t]he wry humour in *Doubt* leans upon a critique of the seamless aims of our built environment and the fetish of the custom finish" ("Doubt" 15). Pratt repurposes building supplies to suggest architectural details, complicating both by removing them from their original context. For example, Pratt's "Escape to Paradise" uses countertop laminate to evoke, as Brown suggests, "a kidney-shaped pool or a sheltered tropical cove, yet also suggests an abstracted logo or sign in a play of heft and surface" (14). Pratt's repurposing of the laminate, presenting it in such a widely interpretable context, throws the single-use material into crisis, since, removed from expectation, it is able to suggest things other than what it is. Like Pratt's sculpture, Robertson sets scaffolding within this economy of suggestion, as the scaffold becomes an embodiment of the "perhaps," as the scaffold "explains what a wall is without being a wall" (163). Scaffolding opens up a site to the possibility of change and movement.

For Robertson, the scaffold demonstrates change. She suggests that the scaffold is a nomadic site that "wanders among solidities, a mobile currency that accretes and shifts according to the secret rhythms of the city's renaissance and decay" (165). The scaffold is situated *between* sites – it is an architecture *between* architectures. In the way it moves and is moveable, watching the motions of the scaffold, Robertson might suggest, gives us

a foothold in the shifting of urban capitalist space and how we might affect change across those surfaces:

> The scaffold works as a filter of exchange and inscription that localizes
> and differentiates the huge vibratory currents swathing the earth. It
> rhythmically expresses the vulnerability of the surface by subtracting
> solidity from form to make something temporarily animate. It shows us
> how to inhabit a surface as that surface fluctuates. Whatever change is
> looks something like this – a *leaning*, a consciousness *towards*, a showing
> *to*. (164)

Robertson is interested here in the way the physical motions of the scaffold – the way it sways back and forth – translates into a more general economy of impermanence. Standing on a scaffold provides a vertigo that standing on a building doesn't, since the building in its immobility suggests a permanence. Standing on a scaffold allows a body to experience the way a structure can move if enough force is applied. The scaffold can facilitate change because of its nomadic and *rhizomatic* character, whereas the firmly-rooted building gives off the stink of permanence. This recalls Deleuze and Guattari's drawing of the arborescent and rhizomatic forms of organization where the arborescent corresponds to single-rooted and fixed organizations and the rhizomatic corresponds to multiply-sourced and mobile organizations. Deleuze and Guattari caution against a view that separates the arborescent and rhizomatic, a view that would split them into separate paradigms or the opposite ends of a binary where the rhizome is good and the taproot is bad. Instead, Deleuze and Guattari argue for a "model" that encompasses shifts between root and rhizome, a model "that is perpetually in construction or collapsing, and of a

process that is perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting again" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 20). The issue spatially then is the same issue that would erase the scaffold in the name of seamlessness or in order to produce a myth of unchangeability. The rhizomatic, nomadic force of the scaffold is removed from the striated, gridded system of buildings and with it goes volition. For Robertson, the scaffold is a "structure of volition," an architecture where we can see the will to change things in the same way we can witness the possibility of change in the movement of the weather or money.

At core, Robertson's attachment to the scaffold comes out of this relation of space and architecture to the body of the individual. For Robertson, the scaffold becomes one possible model for our bodies:

> A scaffold sketches a body letting go of proprietary expectation, or habit, in order to be questioned by change. A scaffold is almost a catastrophe. Its topography cathects with the desire to release identity and dissolve into material, which is the style of resistance we prefer. (165)

In its attempt to "subtract solidity from form" (164), the openness and flexibility necessary to change also creates the risk of dissolving. In other words, in order to change, we must dissolve or risk dissolving our identities – not only our personal identities, but also our civic identities or national identities, our gender or class identities. Like the possibility of changing identity by refurnishing the body with various pieces of clothing, the scaffold allows for this kind of identity shift on spatial scale larger than the body. Robertson draws language into this equation as a form of scaffolding, seeing traces of the letters "X" and "T" in the false work. By equating language with the scaffold, Robertson allies her prose with the nomadic flux of the scaffold, decoupling language from myth

and unified narrative. "We use the alphabet as a ladder," Robertson suggests, giving language an ability to facilitate change. To this end, Robertson's proposal to the reader that they "[p]ractice description" (16) is a radical gesture because of the ways that language and ideology can prop up the permanence of space as well as any scaffold. The trick is to be aware of language's role here, finding other descriptions to prop up space – descriptions that are tentative and temporary.

In Robertson's "Sixth Walk," she describes a bridge that shifts in composition and context until it resembles a scaffold. "When I started off towards my guide," Robertson describes, "the bridge seemed to be made of astonishingly tawdry materials" (261). The bridge begins as an improvised bricolage of *stuff*[30] crossing "rivers of motor traffic hissing on a black highway," changing to "a cradle of slung planks, their wrist-wide gapes admitting blue-black silence of a forest" (262). The convergence of quite different sites and the dramatization of a kind of delusional space allows Robertson to explore, in a more explicit way, the idea of a site of passage or transition by presenting a site under drastic and unbuildable change. On the bridge/scaffold, Robertson comments that "[t]here was a sensation of cushioning, of safety, which at the same time was not different from chaos – as if unknowable varieties of experience would be held gently, suspended in an elastic breeze" (262). The bridge/scaffold becomes a support for unknown or unknowable experiences, the kind of experiences that provide the possibility of change, that might allow for an unfolding of the city in a way that provides a glimpse of the unbuilt and

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[30] Robertson's list of bridge materials, which resembles a bird's nest built to larger specifications, is comically detailed. For a quick sample, here is the beginning of the list: "Branches, twine, tiny mirrors, smashed crockery, wire, bundled grasses, living fronds, pelt-like strips, discarded kitchen chairs of wood their rungs missing, sagging ladders, bits of thread-bare carpet" (261).

unbuildable architectures Robertson mentions in her PhillyTalks discussion with

McCaffery. Connected to soft architecture is this interest in the unknowable, as if any

hope for positive change in the world cannot come from something we already know, but

must come from a glimpse of the unknown.

When Robertson asks us, then, to "[i]magine a very beautiful photograph whose

emulsion is lifting and peeling from the paper" she tells us that, to preserve it, we "must

absorb its insecurity" (264). The insecurity of architecture, of space, is something we

need to embody, something we need to absorb. We must submit to the insecurity of the

unknown. Robertson asks us to imagine sitting alone at the post-festal table, our face

"pulsing with the specific sadness of something you won't know" (264). The ambiguity

of "won't" haunts this passage; perhaps, sitting there alone, we are unable to know, but,

maybe more compellingly, we are also *unwilling to know*. This double sadness,

unfulfilled by the fulfilling of desire at the feast, suggests that what we need in a utopian

space is not the simple assembling of a fixed and perfect position, erasing all that came

before, but a continuous and careful refashioning of space to move toward what we want.

Robertson suggests that we "[i]magine a sound with no context. Only that emotion,"

declaring that this contextless emotion, attached to both an inability and unwillingness to

know, "is not called doubt" (264). For Robertson, at the core of soft architecture is doubt:

doubt that things will hold, doubt that narratives are complete, doubt that things will not

change.

Chapter Two

House, Room, Shack, Nest: Complicating Intimate Space

For our house is our corner of the world. (Bachelard 4)

In his essay "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," Guy Debord

describes a "Psychogeographic Game of the Week," one of "a host of proposals tending

to make of life an integral, thrilling game" (60), published in the first issue of *Potlatch*

magazine.[31] The game involves the establishing of a moment or situation carrying "the

aim of systematic provocation," producing, hopefully, "an uneasy atmosphere extremely

favorable for the introduction of a few new notions of pleasure" (60). The game in

question, however, is strikingly simple and might be confused with more conservative

desires (ie. buy a house in the suburbs, hide there), creating a tension between the

expected and actual experiences of space. The game is easily grasped. Build a house:

> Depending on what you are after, choose a region, a more or less
>
> populated system, a more or less lively street. Build a house. Furnish it.
>
> Make the most of its decoration and its surroundings. Choose the season
>
> and the time. Gather together the most fitting people, with suitable records
>
> and drinks. Lighting and conversation must, of course, be appropriate,
>
> along with the weather of your memories.
>
> If there has been no error in your calculations, you should find the
>
> outcome satisfying. (qtd. in Debord 60-61)

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[31] *Potlatch* was billed as "The Bulletin of Information of the French group of the Lettriste International" (Ford, *The Situationist International: A User's Guide* 33). The first issue was published June 22, 1954. The *Lettristes* were the precursor group to the Situationists.

The game then is to build a house that functions as a social space, a house that is carefully arranged and furnished with objects and people, but, if we are to believe Debord, a house that produces an "abrupt change of environment in a street, within the space of a few meters" (61).

But how? Isn't the house also the site of suburban hideaway? The space where individuals and families can fly to, the site built in the periphery of the city to avoid the core? The space that frames bodies, particularly women's bodies, inscribing upon them restricting, often Oedipal, narratives? Debord's game of the house lays bare our agency in producing the spaces we do inhabit, giving us permission to build the spaces we want and need rather than filling up the ones that are already there. In "Playing House: A Brief Account of the Idea of the Shack," the eleventh essay of "Occasional Work," Robertson considers both the house and the shack, framing differences between the two structures in terms of agency and *play* as she suggests that "[w]e play house in shacks" (179), as if, in the shack, we might act out our images and expectations and dreams about the house like children playing a game. In "Atget's Interiors," the twelfth section of "Occasional Work," she looks at the photographs of Parisian artist Eugène Atget and how the rooms he frames provide representational spaces we can imagine ourselves in. What are the tensions between these interior structures and how do they restrict or enable our bodies? For Robertson, the ways that these different spaces interact demonstrate the tensions between the public and private, between stability and danger, between stasis and exchange. What are the effects of pinning our bodies to positions on the map (as in *my* room, *my* house), identifying ourselves with fixed locations, and of framing our identities in specific spatial settings? Robertson looks at these internal spaces with an eye on

complicating them, since it is not a matter of abandoning space and becoming pure

nomads, but rather a matter of feigning permanence and of building *places* that are

tentative, that allow for private dreaming but are nonetheless open to dialogue with the

world.

Rooms as Frames

Outside of the Office, Robertson published a short creative essay for a catalogue

of the work of Canadian photographer and book artist Marlene MacCallum titled "Time

in the Codex,"[32] which, because of its interest in dialoguing with another artist and its

focus on space remind me of the work of the Office, though with a switch to a more

personal "I" rather than the Office's "we." Robertson's essay is placed side by side with

photographs from McCallum's *Townsite House*, a project, as described by art historian

and curator Gail Tuttle, where "MacCallum photographed five Townsite houses that are

the same architectural model as hers" (50). Photographs of the same rooms are presented

side by side, differing in their furnishings. Robertson's essay explores many of the same

issues as MacCallum, interrogating the ground between book/codex and house as internal

space, noting that she uses "the book as my imaginary house" (n. pag.). During this

discussion, Robertson suggests that, for some, the house is not a site of change and

possibility, but is instead a site of capture, a place to be trapped:

> In heavy and mortal houses I feel a mortal dismay. It gets harder and
>
> harder to be female in one's life in such houses. One is compelled by the
>
> sentence of the personal. What has commodiousness become in them?

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[32] "Time in the Codex" was republished in a 2011 issue of the journal *Open Letter* with newly-added footnotes.

Ideally the house lends some security to the body. One returns to the safety and stability of its site to test new affective situations and transformations. But maybe the house has too much symbolic and social value. Maybe it fixes rather than shelters some of us. (n. pag.)

Robertson lays out the benefits and risks of the house. It is secure, providing a space to experiment, but also is charged in a negative way by that security, a security that not only allows one to be stable, but *requires* it. Robertson admits the possibility inherent in the house that, in the attempt to take refuge, we might instead accidentally lock ourselves inside like a mollusk pinned into its shell by the beak of a hungry bird. The house can exceed its role as a safe space to become a kind of prison.

How is the house a prison? What "symbolic and social value" does it carry that threatens the possibilities of the house or the room, especially for women? In her book *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf argues that a personal space for writing is key to the production of literary work by women. "For it is a perennial puzzle," Woolf observes, "why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed was capable of a song or sonnet" (53). Woolf discusses being restricted from certain spaces, like the library of Oxbridge, and the unpleasantness of being locked out of these spaces, yet she wonders whether "it is worse perhaps to be locked in," thinking "of the safety and prosperity of the one sex and the poverty and insecurity of the other and the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition" (31). This tension between inside and outside, between the prosperity of men and the poverty of women, between restricted spaces and restrictive spaces leads both Woolf and Robertson to the question of houses and rooms as spaces fraught with interpretation and narrative. What any given room

"means" depends on the individual or group living there, projecting meaning and narrative onto its walls, but these projections are linked to power. Doreen Massey argues that "different social groups, and different individuals, are places in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections" ("A Global Sense of Place" 149). These flows and interconnections, the ways that individuals move and interact in time and space, operate as part of what Massey calls the "power-geometry" of a place. These power-geometries are manipulated by some and traced by others. Massey argues that "some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement; others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it" (149).

In terms of Robertson's work, it is important to consider the ways that these power-geometries work in terms of gender. In his book *The Poetics of Space* (1964),[33] French philosopher Gaston Bachelard acknowledges the possibilities of the house's stability, arguing that "[a] house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability" (17) and, because of this stability, the house "shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6). For Bachelard, the house is a site of peace and imagination, whereas, for Woolf, the house carries a dark underside. Woolf observes two sides to the room – imaginative work space vs. private prison – suggesting that, for women (and, arguably, others on the wrong side of Massey's power-geometries),[34] the room is always on an edge between these two types

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[33] Originally published in French in 1958 with Maria Jolas' English translation first appearing in 1964.

[34] In his *Walden*, a text important to Robertson's "Playing House," Henry David Thoreau suggests the fixing properties of the house but in terms of class rather than gender, arguing that "when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer

of space. For Woolf's own work in *A Room of One's Own*, the power of a room as a reflective space – a space where, to quote Bachelard, "the imagination is at work" (12) – is underlined by her own ability to leave the house, shifting between public and private space as the need arises. Looking for answers to questions she has about "Women and Fiction," Woolf sets out into the streets of London, headed for the British Museum "in the pursuit of truth" (33). Woolf juxtaposes her own search for truth with the descriptions of women she finds, arguing that "[w]omen have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of a man at twice its natural size" (45). Within this configuration, women become objects not unlike those that might populate rooms, items that define and populate a room rather than pass through it. This restriction of women's mobility reminds me of Luce Irigaray's comment in "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry" (1985)[35] that movement from one "house" to another is tied to desire for a man. Within a Freudian economy, Irigaray argues that woman "is crazy, disoriented, lost, if she fails to join this *first*[36] male desire" (33). The spatial metaphor that Irigaray chooses here (disorientation, being lost) is interesting when we consider the ways that the room and the house can become points of fixation rather than points of passage. Woolf is able to drift from house to library to restaurant to campus, whereas the movement Irigaray ascribes to the Oedipalized woman is a more fixed movement between two fixed points: "She leaves her family, her "house,"

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for it, and it be the house that has got him" (29). In a classical reference, Thoreau notes a "valid objection urged by Momus against the house which Minerva made, that she 'had not made it moveable, by which means a bad neighbourhood might be avoided'" (29).

[35] Original French published in 1974 with Gillian C. Gill's English translation first published in 1985.

[36] This "first male desire" is the abandonment of the mother in favour of the father within the Oedipal narrative.

her name – though admittedly it too is a patronymic – her family tree in favour of her husband's" (33).

In "The Value Village Lyric," Robertson herself, turning the notion of a fashion house, suggests a passage between houses[37] connected to the shifting winds of fashion, changing clothes to change positions or identities, exclaiming with almost a revolutionary zeal, "We are the market. We are the House. Garishly we turn to face you" (214). Robertson's turn to the pronoun "you," a rarity in Robertson's text, is interesting as it suggests a turning out, a facing outside of the frame of the text. The "you' suggests a viewer looking in. Any reader wishing to align him or herself with Robertson's project is caught in an exchange of gazes. There is a looking back that complicates Woolf's passive looking glass and rather than a body inscribed by the power-geometries of the gaze, Robertson shows a body with the agency to change its identity. Woolf suggests that this charge of women's agency is already present in rooms and houses. She notes that rooms have different meanings depending on who walks in – a room can be "hung with washing" or can be "alive with opals and silks" – but, she argues, "one has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face" (114). Woolf argues that rooms are charged by the investments or women:

> For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time

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[37] Robertson suggests a number of readings for the "House of V" other than the obvious "House of Value Village," some of which deviate from actual fashion houses: "House of Vitruvius, House of Venus, La Dolce Vita, House of Varda, House of Werther, House of Venturi, House of Vionnet, House of van Brugh, the Velvets, the Viletones, Versailles, Visconti, House of Vorticism, Vivienne Westwood, House of Verlaine, House of Van Noten, House of Vygotsky, House of Vico, House of Vishnu, House of Velasquez, House of Voysey, House of Vreeland, House of Viva, Luxe, Calme et Volupté, House of Wordsworth, House of Versace, the Blessed V, House of Valentino, House of Verdi, Violette Leduc" (214).

> the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so
>
> overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness
>
> itself to pens and brushes and business and politics. (114)

The "overcharged" nature of a room and the fact that it can exceed its role as container or prison allows for a space that returns to Bachelard's vision of the house as a site for dreaming. The challenge becomes the need for a reinvestment in restrictive spaces so that they can serve as private spaces of reflection for those caught on the wrong side of a set of power-geometries.

It is with this set of tensions around the room and the house that Robertson explores Eugène Atget's *Interieurs Parisiens*. In "Atget's Interiors," the twelfth essay in occasional work originally proposed for an issue of *Nest* magazine,[38] Robertson explores the ways that Atget's photographs play at a borderline between the fixed truth of documentary and a more pliant artistic practice. An album sold to several important Parisian archives,[39] Atget's *Interieurs Parisiens* contains photographs of the furnished rooms of a variety of types of Parisian (an actress, a collector, a stockbroker, etc.), with each photo captioned with the name and occupation of the occupant, but, as Robertson notes, Atget fakes a number of his shots, shooting imagined frames that might not be considered part of a documentary record. In his book *Looking at Atget*, art critic and curator Peter Barberie notes that Atget "photographed ten homes, his own and nine others" and "[f]rom those photographs he invented twelve 'interiors' for the public album

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[38] *Nest*, which was published from 1997-2004 by Joe Holtzman, billed itself as "a quarterly of interiors."

[39] According to Peter Barberie, "Atget made all the photographs in 1909 and 1910, and by 1911 he had sold his carefully composed arrangements of them to three institutions, all regular clients of his: the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, the *Musée Carnavalet*, and the *Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris*" (22).

– three of them fictional" (24). Why would Atget, ostensibly recording accurate documents of these spaces, produce such fakes? In her book *On Photography*, American writer Susan Sontag frames photography as a fraught art on the edge of documentary and fantasy:

> Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects – unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information. (69)

Atget's photographs trade on this tension, appearing to be "pellets of information" about the living situations of these various Parisians when they actually, at least in part, are invented "clouds of fantasy." Suggesting this tension, Robertson glimpses the agency in Atget's deception. "These rooms annotate tradition," she notes, but, acknowledging the possibility in Atget's spatial invention, "they also await change" (200).

Rather than act as an impartial documentarian, Robertson argues that Atget "acted as a stylist, fashioning the effects of domestic sincerity by altering, rearranging, decorating and misattributing the rooms he photographed" (199). Robertson is interested in what Atget's rooms can illuminate about living habits in "general," making it easier to imagine our bodies in each room and see the ways we move through the room without thinking because of habit:

> These photographs are not diaristic. They present the general boredom and ceremony of domestic economy rather than the private passions of hatred or sex or play. By "general," we mean that catalogue of habits invisible to

their devotees, habits received through familial, neighbourhood,

economic, and trade identifications, rather than traits acquired through

willful acts of personality. This ceremonial, and thus general, function of

rooms reveals itself in the disposition of furnishing. (199-200)

For Robertson, Atget's photographs provide a frame for invisible habits – habits attached

to negative and restricting ideological structures ("familial, neighbourhood, economic,

and trade identifications"). Atget lays bare the connections of space and the body in terms

of these controlling narratives. Each room is arranged in a way that seems to *suit* the

occupant, giving the room and its furnishing an identity that matches the person – for

example, in the room of "Monsieur B. Collector," a cabinet overflows with *bric-a-brac*

(figurines, vases, seashells, frames filled with butterflies). Atget's photographed rooms

are more immediately readable than a lived-in room, what Robertson observes in

describing Atget's actual lodgings as "a complex bricolage of disparate objects placed in

intimate profusion" (200).

Perhaps we should imagine two rooms. The first corresponds to the arranged

rooms of Atget's *Interieurs Parisiens*. The second corresponds to Atget's actual room,

and perhaps to our own rooms in lived space. What is the relationship between these two

rooms? Robertson suggests that "[w]e are furnished by our manners and habits. Yet we

can't see what they are" (197). Through the photograph, Atget can halt the changes of

each room, creating synchronic slices that, for Robertson, act as sites of study not

because they provide a true picture of the way a group of Parisians lived a century ago,

but because they invite connections between those Paris rooms and our own rooms in the

twenty-first century. By studying these photos, Robertson suggests, perhaps we might

finally catch a glimpse of our own manners and habits played out:

> These rooms continue to pose questions. We slide our eyes over their
>
> surfaces. testing and absorbing. We still search them for information about
>
> strangeness we can't yet name. We might recognize the shape of change.
>
> This is called research. It intuits absence among the materials. (198-99)

Atget's photographs are not texts whose meaning is easily sussed out, but are instead

sites where we consider our own rooms and how they identify us and how, according to

Robertson, our own spatial habits "tarry as a cadence in the body," visible in the way

"repeatedly we reach to lift the curtain, the dictionary, the cup" (197). We are quite

literally meant to imagine our own bodies negotiating Atget's rooms – in addition to

being archival documents, the photographs were composed as reference materials for

other artists. Barberie argues that "[t]he photographs' usefulness as backgrounds is surely

one reason for the open foregrounds in many of the compositions" (31). Robertson

suggests that "[t]he rooms themselves were dramatically composed for the lens in the

same way that sets are built" (199) as the photos share dimensions and objects,

suggesting a slipperiness between the rooms shared by the *Townsite House* photos of

MacCallum. The same room can house multiple people with differing jobs and identities,

suggesting to Robertson that the soft elements of spaces can be altered to change that

space.

Because of the ways that Atget is able to reproduce the spaces of different types

of people, Robertson argues that in his photographs "[p]eople's agency has not been

abstracted into the transparency of money or authority or function" (201). This personal

agency in the temporary arrangement of a room comes down to what Robertson calls a "politics of furnishing" (203). "What is to furnish" she asks, answering that it is "[t]o supply with the moveable parts of necessity and delight" (203). For Robertson, furnishing offers "frames for our mortality," it "describes our attitudes toward time," it "receives and inflects our passage" (203). Atget's photographs play at the tensions of fixed and changing space as the alteration of a room's furnishing dramatizes change whereas the photograph fixes space. In *For Space*, Massey argues for a link between space and time, noting that "[c]onceiving of space as a static slice through time, as representation, as a closed system and so forth are all ways of taming it" and "[i]f time is to be open to a future of the new, then space cannot be equated with the closures and horizontalities of representation" (58). For Robertson, Atget's rooms are far from closed representations of historical space, instead suggesting that in his photographs we can see the ways that a room "archives touch" (204). Rooms are sites where movement and habit are recorded over time – in combination with the movement of time, space is open to change. Furnishing, then, is far more than the static arrangement of items in a room and is even more than "the customary mobilia – bed, shelf, curtain, and so on" (204). Instead, Robertson argues, furnishing is also "the way a room and a person compose an image of time, through a process of mutual accretion, exchange, application, erasure, renovation, and decay" (204).

With this in mind, perhaps rooms (and houses) exceed a restricting role and instead are sites of passage, spaces where individuals come and go. If, as Robertson suggests, we cannot naturally see our own passage reflected in the furnishings of our own rooms, Atget's dramatized rooms provide a virtual space we might reflect upon,

imagining ourselves as actors in those spaces, placing our imagined steps in the negative

space of those rooms, and considering the ways we might otherwise inhabit space. Taken

individually, the composition of each of Atget's photographs is limited by the type and

class of person whose room is photographed, but, as Robertson argues, the differences in

the rooms, when combined with the opportunity to imagine ourselves in the frame,

provides an opportunity to imagine change in our own spaces:

> Yet by composing a set of comparative limits in the presentation of two
>
> aesthetics of class, Atget's images, in the space between, admit the
>
> wildness of random change. They admit the technical ability of intuition to
>
> elaborate futures. We look up at our own room to recognize the sociality
>
> of our habits. In the glimmer of recognition resides a transformative pulse.
>
> We see that we can change. (202-03)

Given that Atget's rooms are often photographed in the same space refurnished, the

possibility of change becomes apparent – individuals can rearrange and reconfigure their

spaces. Spaces can be open to change, though the possibility must be recognized. To this

end, Robertson asks that we step outside of the room and the house to look at the ways

that even these "containers" can be built and unbuilt and rebuilt elsewhere. The logic of

the shack is not unlike the logic of the refurnished room as both engage passage and

change instead of fixed and static position.

Bird Architectures

In a 2001 issue of *dANDelion* magazine, the Office for Soft Architecture provides

a slogan that opens the issue; a single sentence covering most of the page, the Office's

slogan reads "The Willed Recognition of Fragility is Resistance" (vii). Echoing this civic

slogan, Robertson recognizes the fragility of structure in the shack, a structure that

tentatively stands, providing a fragile private space against the elements. Robertson also

recognizes this fragility in seemingly permanent spaces like the house. In a 2002 artist's

catalogue for the work of Vancouver artist Allyson Clay, Robertson provides a poem

titled "A Modest Treatise: an essay on perspective for Allyson Clay"[40] that covers much

of the same ground as the Office (architecture, monuments, bodies, dissolution,

movement), but focuses on the intersection of public and private and the way that

distinction is a fragile one:

> It was pleasant to imagine their life.
>
> We[41] placed our body in relation to their mystical privacies.
>
> Nothing ever happened.
>
> We were invisible.
>
> Our architecture was also invisible and specific and vast and it faltered.
>
> (26)

Here, Robertson directly evokes Clay's interest in peering into private spaces by adopting

the perspective of someone peering into a window. In "Spatial Relations: Architectural

Fragments," her catalogue to Clay's work, curator Karen Henry frames much of Clay's

work in this way, arguing that as Clay "sits and paints the windows, or searches the

surfaces of buildings with her camera for the tiny scenarios they offer up, she is, in a way,

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[40] Robertson's "essay" is expanded in *Lisa Robertson's Magenta Soul Whip* (2009).

[41] The pronouns differ between this version and the version in *Magenta Soul Whip*. This version uses the plural "we," suggesting a kinship to the work of the Office (even though it is published as by Robertson), whereas the reprinted version adopts a more personal "I."

seeking private space, seeking banality, an affirmation of the very privacy she transgresses" (8). In her installation *Improper Perspectives*, a series of five cameras projecting video of windows (glimpsing through into the intimate spaces behind them) onto small pieces of frosted glass, Clay draws the viewer, in Henry's words, into "a silent pact with the quivering hands that hold the camera, revealing their insecurities" (6). In pieces like this, Henry argues that, in a world mediated by cameras and surveillance, Clay is attempting to demonstrate the value of private space by focusing on the frame where it is most visible, the window.

Henry notes the window as a point of fragility in the buildings of the city, which "determine territories of corporate privilege and domestic intimacy as well as the domain of the street with its beggars and addicts" (5). For Henry, exploring the various materials composing the city (concrete, marble, granite, steel), "[i]t is the glass that has the most potential" (5):

> It allows the light to pass through and the view – of the sky, the street, and the traffic moving through these corridors. The windows are fragile, vulnerable. They are where the structure has the potential for breakage. (5)

It is the fragility of the material that simultaneously allows for the passage of light and provides the risk of assault and the threat of the outside, not only through a set of eyes peering through unwanted but also physical destruction. One could be safer retreating back into interior rooms or basements or bomb shelters or panic rooms, but the joy created by something as simple as the sunlight passing through the glass occurs not despite but because of the vulnerability of the material. Bachelard broaches this idea of vulnerability or fragility in his discussion of nests, asking "[w]ould a bird build its nest if

it did not have its instinct for confidence in the world" (103). The precariousness of the nest suggests the fragility of the window and, as I'll discuss, the tentativeness of the shack. Taking the risk of being in the world and of being open to change requires the confidence of the bird. As Clay writes in the center panel of her three paneled painting "Danger," bordered above by a grainy image of an industrial dock and below by an image of a woman walking down a road, "I begin to enjoy the presence of danger" (19).

In "Playing House," Robertson discusses the shack as a form of shelter that resists fixity at the cost of security. The shack is open to the interactions of the outside. It is a permeable structure built out of the stuff at hand. Discussing the writings of eighteenth-century architectural theorist Marc-Antoine Laugier, Robertson notes that the development of architecture comes out of a desire for stability. According to Robertson, Laugier "described the primitive's trajectory – from repose on the idyllic lawn to the anxious retreat for cover, and ultimately to the organization of components of the landscape into architecture" (176). This progression is a retreat from the elements – "the scorching heat of the sun" (176) – into the more welcoming arms of shelter. The shack, for Robertson, is a way to solve this problem of shelter without fixing the body in a specific place. The shack is one of a kind. It is tied to its occupant in not only how it is furnished, but how it is built. In this sense, the shack is not unlike Bachelard's description of the nest. "A nest," he suggests, "is a bird's house" (95). Bachelard quotes nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet on nest-building, who notes that "a bird's tool is its own body, that is, its breast, with which it presses and tightens its materials until they have become absolutely pliant" (qtd. in Bachelard 100). Michelet's description of this

"bird architecture" is perhaps also a useful description of the shack,[42] built from the materials at hand with the tools at hand. "If we were to work at our dwelling-places the way Michelet dreams of his nest," Bachelard argues, "each one of us would have a personal house of his own, a nest for his body padded to his measure" (101).

"Playing House" was originally published as part of a catalogue of the work of Canadian artist Liz Magor. Several of Magor's pieces explore human interactions with wild spaces, specifically in terms of shelter. For example, her sculptures *Hollow* and *Burrow* take the form of sculpted hollowed-out logs[43] with sleeping bags inside them. Discussing Magor's photographic series *Deep Woods*, art critic Nancy Tousley notes that Magor's photographs juxtapose "animal burrows and hollows with abandoned homesteaders' and hippies' cabins and mysterious leantos glimpsed through the trees" ("Into the Woods" 26). For Tousley, Magor's photographs underline the "unnatural" status of the various shelters:

> Architecture of the most rudimentary kind stands out against the forest; animal lairs blend into the roots and the undergrowth. Nature might seem the ideal and authentic refuge but in the wilderness a built structure is unnatural, a human being completely exposed. (26)

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[42] For Michelet, the construction of the nest begins to resemble Robertson's notion of furnishing in Atget, though, for the birds, foraging and furnishing are specifically gendered acts: "The mother does not trust the male bird for all this; but she employs him as her purveyor. He goes in quest of the materials – grasses, mosses, roots, or branches. But when the ship is built, when the interior has to be arranged – the couch, the household furniture – the matter becomes more difficult" (*The Bird* 250)

[43] In a catalogue of Magor's work, Philip Monk notes that "the form is completely artificial, made of polymerized gypsum, lined with the speckled foam used to panel the interiors of crates with artworks sleep in storage" (64).

In the woods, the shack is an obvious construction, but Tousley's division of nature and culture is problematic. British geographer Sarah Whatmore cautions against this kind of separation, arguing that the geographical framing of the wild "renders the creatures that live 'there' inanimate figures in unpeopled landscapes, removing humans to the 'here' of a society from which all trace of animality has been expunged" (*Hybrid Geographies* 12). Perhaps the notion that built structures in the wild are unnatural speaks to a desire to view the wild as a certain type of space – a space meant for animals and plants, but not for humans (at least, as anything other than tourists). The human shack is *invasive* or out of place much like the blackberry plant that Robertson discusses in *"Rubus Armeniacus."* The shack is a human invasion into the wild much in the same way a bird's nest is invasive into the city – it provides a fold in space where a creature can find shelter, but it also shows that spaces are uneasily defined, subject to shifts across perceived borders.

In "Playing House," Robertson looks at two shacks: Henry David Thoreau's shack at Walden Pond and the shack Liz Magor builds as her art installation *Messenger*. In both, retreat from human society is a key motif. In *Walden*, Thoreau discusses his desire for the wholesomeness of solitude, opening himself to what he sees as a "more normal and natural society" (111). Robertson focuses on the scant furnishing of the two shacks. "Windows are never curtained and floors are not carpeted," she observes, suggesting that "[i]t is as if fabric would screen or muffle a shack's sincerity" (181). She notes Thoreau's refusal of a door mat as a gift, wondering aloud whether "it perhaps spell out WELCOME" (181), not out of a desire to chase away visitors, but, rather, to reduce the furnishings of his shack to their necessities. The furnishings of Magor's *Messenger* are perhaps more telling. In *Messenger*, Magor builds a shack as gallery installation,

displacing the structure a second time. Instead of a now-naturalized invasive structure in the wild, the shack is returned to an urban setting, allowing an audience to peer through the shack's windows, where, like Atget's photographs or Clay's artistic voyeurism, they might assemble a portrait of the shack's inhabitants. Robertson inventories the contents of both Thoreau and Magor's shacks, suggesting that *Messenger* is "a paranoid extrusion of it puritanical ancestor" (180), since the contents of Magor's shack reveals violent possibilities:

> Here is the list of the contents of a particular shack: *3 saucepans, skillet, kettle, cutting board, toaster, lightbulbs, wineskin, 3 plates, 2 mugs, a thermos flask, a bed made on storage boxes, a tarnished mirror, a toothbrush glass, a cooler, a stove, a desk lamp, a medieval visored helmet and axe, a contemporary military helmet, combat clothing in camoflage fabric, a thin nylon sleeping bag, an ammunition box, a kitchen grinder, two grenades.* (180)

While much of Magor's shack shares the pragmatism of Thoreau's, Magor includes a number of military items that lend the shack its paranoid character, as if the person living there is someone like Ted Kaczynsky,[44] as if the timbre of shacks has shifted from Thoreau's thoughtful solitude to this swelling of possible violence. We might imagine Magor's shack dweller as a militia man, defending his refuge. We might imagine someone who is preparing to deliver a violent message.

Is there a way to think about the shack that acknowledges this possibility for violence without giving in to it? The shack is certainly tied to ideas of escape (from the

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[44] The Unabomber, who notorious lived in a cabin in the wilds of Montana.

elements, from society), but Robertson also ties it to a certain idea of freedom, remarking

that "[a] shack describes the relation of a minimum to freedom" (178). What is it about

the shack that frees us and what does it free us from? Recalling the Oedipal advances of

the house, Robertson frames the fixity of more permanent architectures in terms of

language and power (power-geometries, as it were), arguing that "architecture

inaugurates itself as social rhetoric by framing the family and symbolizing ownership

conflicts" (182). Within this frame, architecture is tied to economic power, that is, the

powerful are able to build their shacks and defend them. In this sense, architecture is a

power play, a driving down of a root to maintain position. The shack, then, is a fraught

architecure, allowing multiple interpretations. Robertson describes it as a "cellar,"

because of the way it "defends an idea of existence" and the way it "must defend and

protect the catalogue of necessity" (181). She describes it as a "bunker," which must be

defended. In contrast to these two representations, she also describes the shack as a *pliant*

site. According to Robertson, configuring architecture as power-oriented "social rhetoric"

is to imagine sociality in terms of capital and weakness in terms of lack" (182). Like the

fragility of the glass window as a border between public and private space, "weakness" is

not a weakness. The physical weakness of the shack, its inability to stand up to any and

all stress, is certainly the inability to stand firm against more powerful forces, but is also

the ability to fall apart, to disassemble, to dissolve.

When Robertson argues that "we experience weakness as pliancy, the structural

ability to welcome desire and change" (182), she wants us to consider the possibilities

inherent in the shack, that it provides a frame of shelter without disavowing the freedom

to change. Thus, when Robertson suggests that the shack "describes the relations of a

minimum to freedom," a politics of the shack emerges, tied to the careful and minimalist use of the material at hand in order to make the shack moveable, to make sure that our pockets are light enough to move around, to allow for change. Describing Thoreau's shack, Robertson recounts his purchase of a "shanty belonging to an Irish labouring family" (178), that he used as a base for his own shelter, by reusing and repurposing the materials of their shack for his own. Robertson argues that "[e]ach shack dweller is an economist who thrives in the currency of the minimum, the currency of detritus" (178). Similarly to the way the bird builds her nest, the shack is built from the things at hand, from found materials, from waste, rather than materials produced for the express purpose of building the shack. "This improvisatory ethos is modern," she argues, "[i]t is proportioned by the utopia of improvised necessity rather than by tradition" (178). Robertson sets this improvisational utopia against tradition with the hope that space can be reinvented.

For Robertson, the shack builder's bricolage is a political act. She argues that "[t]he layering or abutment of historically contingent economies frames a diction of pressure that is political, political in the sense that the shack dweller is never a pure product of the independent present" (177-78). The repurposing of material complicates the illusion of any single origin. Each piece of the shack has a past. The shack-dweller is surrounded by historically-charged materials. Robertson argues that what the shack dweller craves is not solitude, but is "the excellent series of origin dwindling on ahead into the future" (176). While Robertson is fascinated by the ways the shack acts as a kind of origin – "[t]he shack is an allegory of origin," she argues, "[w]e need only study the manner to discern the structure of beginning" (183) – she reframes this origin story as a

continual recrafting. The shack is serial. Like the furnishing of Atget's rooms, the shack "receives and inflects our passage," but, Robertson observes, "[w]e are not always able to discern whether our body's customs shape furnishing or if it is furnishing that shapes our bodies" (203). Can't it be both? A bird's nest is determined by both the materials scrounged and the shape of the bird's breast. The seriality of the shack is a marker of movement, of migration. The shack is built and rebuilt, each time attuned to the changes of the builder, of the architect, of the shack dweller. The shack and the room are both pliant sites, continually adjusting to the movements and changes of bodies.

For Robertson, this similarity of the shack and the room spills over onto the suburban house, which fails to remain static. The photographs in MacCallum's *Townsite House* demonstrate a kind of shifting seriality, replica houses that, because of their furnishings, shift with the occupant. This seriality, connected as it is to *passage*, allows for an understanding of the suburban house as *shack* – a connection that Robertson argues for:

> Literature tells us that we will remember the house of our childhood, with
> its nooks and garrets and stairs and passages and so on, as if this house
> were singular, but we were born in series. We were born in the suburbs, or
> our childhood was distributed across that serpentine landscape. Suburbs
> are recurrent dreams. Each house repeats the singular wilderness. (175)

It's strange, the realization that we could walk into another home in any neighbourhood and encounter shadows of our own home, thinking perhaps that by moving the furniture from one house to the next, a version of the first house could be reproduced. These new houses are haunted by the material traces of past tenants. No house is a *tabula rasa*, ready

to be rewritten. In both the suburban house and in Atget's rooms, the spaces can be reimagined, repurposed, because the space is open to change, but not without the historical charge of the space itself creating an excess of meaning. No shack can be purely reproduced.

Robertson argues that each suburban house is "a unit within a multiple and open series" ("Time in the Codex" n.pag.). In this architectural economy, there is no true origin – each house is a copy of the last – and the variations between these house-shaped shacks are due to the ways that people live in them. These domestic places are composed by the interactions of people and spaces and furnishings. The shack is, to use a word that Robertson favours, commodious. It clearly has room for us – Robertson wonders if "there exists a body the shack could not imagine" (183). The shack shifts with the movements of bodies like the nest shifts from the weight of the bird's breast. As a temporary site, the shack is a place where individuals or groups might imagine or dream a better future, furnishing the space to match that vision, and abandoning it when that vision is no longer adequate. For Robertson, the shack is a site where change can be imagined: "The shack is the pliant site that adds to our ideas new tropes, gestures learned from neighbours, creatures, moot economies, landscapes, and the vigour of our own language in recombination" (184).

For Robertson, the shack is the site we need in order to move outside into a larger consideration of the city. "We wish to reimagine the city through the image of the Vitruvian shack" (184). Robertson asks us to imagine the city as "the shack inside out" (185), where we might move nomadically across civic surfaces, reconfiguring the materials at hand. Civic space as inverted shack might provide opportunities for alteration

of not only the space we live in but also the ways we live in them. For Robertson, shacks "pose impossible questions. How can we change what we need? How can we fearlessly acknowledge weakness as an animate and constructive content of collectivity?" (185). These questions seem impossible only under the weight of capital and the way it pushes us to own property, fixing ourselves to one position and excluding others from that space. The "strength" that opposes the weakness of pliancy is a strength of fixed positions, of fortresses where we buttress what little power we hold. It is a strength based in exclusion: exclusion from the historical weight of the archive, exclusion from the privileged class of property owners, exclusion from the discourses of power. But Robertson's solution is not a hippie dream of inclusion, of getting back to the garden (or the woods), but of finding a model to enact change – not an impossible, revolutionary change that will lead us to some fictional utopia, but a model of constant and unceasing change that will help us avoid getting trapped in our own homes.

Chapter Three

"The city is here for you to use": On Multivalent Readings of the City

There is no space that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can "invoke" or not. (De Certeau 108)

In his book *Concrete Reveries* (2008), Toronto philosopher Mark Kingwell discusses the boundary of the home, arguing that "[t]he home, that most basic interior, is likewise protected as a distinct space, an ambit of privacy and comfort against the chaos and commerce of the outside" (174). The boundary of the household with the outside world, according to Kingwell, "is related to seemingly trivial but actually deep human feelings concerning, for example, food and garbage, health and contagion," and we, disgusted by the thought of the boundary being violated, "are ever on the outlook for evidence, or even just the bare possibility, of infiltration, contamination, pollution, corruption" (174-75). There is disgust or discomfort at the crossing of this boundary, since the home is a site where the *externalities* of the city are barred. Kingwell's reading of the household boundary lends even further tension to Robertson's urging in "Playing House" that the city be read as "the shack inside out" (*Office for Soft Architecture* 185), suggesting a desire to not only keep the inside of the house free of the poisons of the city, but also to sweep the streets clean like the inside of the suburban house. The "externalities" of the city are what make urban space simultaneously dangerous and interesting, rife with both negative and positive possibilities. In his essay "The City as Public Space" (2009), philosopher Patrick Turmel argues for these externalities as an essential part of public space. He suggests that "[a] city is full of externalities, noises and smells, congestion and pollution, loitering and littering, fear and excitement, the everyday

encounters with strangers and strange behaviours, the shared use of public space and the clash of activities" (151). For Turmel, public space is unavoidable because of the way "[c]ity life means never being able to retreat from the multiple effects of other people's action and behaviour" (151). Turmel argues that it is difficult is separate the negative externalities (noise, pollution, congestion) from the positive externalities (affordable housing, safer streets) and that, in the rush to clean up the streets, positive aspects of the city could be lost.

In "Site Report: New Brighton Park," the third essay of "Occasional Work," Robertson explores the tensions between the positive and negative externalities of a complex site that is defined as much by its diverse and slightly derelict present as by its transformational and historically-charged past. New Brighton Park (or Lot 26) is a site of changes, of drastic physical alterations. Robertson notes that "[t]he land here is largely fabricated" (37). At the end of her essay, she casts the repeated demolition and reconstruction of the site in a positive light, turning New Brighton Park into a site of possibility: "Soft Architects believe that this site demonstrates the best use of an urban origin: Change its name repeatedly. Burn it down. From the rubble confect a prosthetic pleasure ground; with fluent obliviousness, picnic there" (41). Why is this combination of shifting identity and unfixed constructions particularly potent for Robertson? In its appeal to seriality, Robertson's "best use of an urban origin" complicates the meaning of a site by embracing noise and treating seemingly negative externalities like the rubble of past sites as material to produce present spaces. Since New Brighton Park is a site where parts of the site's past are still physically present, it represents for Robertson a space where the ways space is read can be reflected upon, since the "mess" of the site, the remainder of

past human interactions, is not something to be cleaned up, but rather something to be reused in an active recomposition. In New Brighton Park, Robertson considers the ways these negative externalities (mess, noise, rubble) are resources that help us reread what public space can be.

Archival Intervention

As I've already mentioned in discussing *Office for Soft Architecture*'s relationship to genre, Paul Stephens begins with a recognition that the name of Robertson's Office is likely a *détournement* on the name of Dutch architectural firm The Office for Metropolitan Architecture in order to draw a parallel between Robertson's book and *Delirious New York* (1978) by OMA[45] architect Rem Koolhaas. Stephens wonders if *Office for Soft Architecture* might benefit from a comparison with Koolhaas' book, which is billed as a "retroactive manifesto," that is, a manifesto that looks backward into the evidence of the past in order to look forward – a definition that Koolhaas lays out at the beginning of his book:

> How to write a manifesto – on a form of urbanism for what remains of the 20th century – in an age disgusted by them? The fatal weakness of manifestos is their inherent lack of evidence.
>
> Manhattan's problem is the opposite: it is a mountain range of evidence without manifesto.
>
> This book was conceived at the intersection of these two observations: it is a *retroactive manifesto* for Manhattan. (9)

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[45] "OMA" is a generally accepted acronym for the Office of Metropolitan Architecture.

Over the course of *Delirious New York*, Koolhaas argues for a formation of Manhattan

coming out of a combination of the "Manhattan Grid," implemented in the nineteenth

century – an act, according to Koolhaas, whose "two-dimensional discipline also creates

undreamt-of freedom for three-dimensional anarchy" (20) – and the passing of the 1916

Zoning Law, which acted as a kind of accidental design project for Manhattan

simultaneously limiting the size of each building in Manhattan and providing a vision for

Manhattan where each block had the largest-allowable skyscraper. According to

Koolhaas, the architectural composition of Manhattan is not the result of a single plan,

but of a combination of acts like these that shaped the city.

Is, as Stephens suggests, *Office for Soft Architecture* a kind of retroactive

manifesto for Vancouver? Robertson's practice is certainly engaged with the

contingencies of the city, in evidence, as she explores the truant patches of New Brighton

Park or the aisles of Value Village, interacting with the material evidence of the city's

past. In her PhillyTalks discussion with Steve McCaffery, Robertson acknowledges a

debt to Koolhaas, particularly his piece, co-written with Bruce Mau and the Office for

Metropolitan Architecture, "What Ever Happened to Urbanism?" (1995), where she is

excited that "[d]esign for [Koolhaas] is the description of intensity flows" (32). In the

essay, Koolhaas describes a "new urbanism" that "will no longer aim for stable

configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that

refuse to be crystallized into definitive form" (696). For Koolhaas, Manhattan is an

enabling field because of its *congestion* and the cross-pollination made possible with

people and things so close together. For Robertson, Vancouver is enabling because of the

decay she sees in parts of the city and the ways it provides opportunities and materials for

the creation of new meanings through a kind of bricolage, a picking through the detritus of the city, whether physical or archival, to reshape the city. Koolhaas' text is important for Robertson because of the ways it provides an architectural touchstone that allows for instability. There is a sifting through the city's evidence in Robertson's work, but not to advance any kind of master narrative, instead attempting to flood space with stories.

Before thinking about the flood of narrative across a site like New Brighton Park, visible to Robertson through a number of material and historical traces, perhaps it might help to first think about memory and history in spatial terms. Andreas Huyssen writes about the modern anxiety of forgetting, suggesting that "[o]ne of modernity's permanent laments concerns the loss of a better past, the memory of living in a securely circumscribed place, with a sense of stable boundaries and a place-bound culture with its regular flow of time and a core of permanent relations" (*Present Pasts* 24). In contemporary pushes for archivization or musealization of the past, Huyssen observes what he calls a "culture of memory," an attempt to preserve the past before it is lost forever. The issue for this preservation, he argues, "is rather the attempt, as we face the very real processes of time-space compression, to secure some continuity within time, to provide some extension of lived space within which we can breathe and move" (24). In the crest of globalization, Huyssen suggests that one day there may be a global memory to tie all of us together (even if it is "prismatic and heterogeneous rather than holistic or universal"), but until then, we need to ask, "how should even local, regional, or national memories be secured, structured, and represented" (26)?

At what spatial scale do we remember? Increasingly, it feels as if so much of shared memory is tied to images (photographs, television, film clips), often on a national

or global scale. In contrast, Robertson chooses to focus her attention on material, whether

that be the material contingencies of the site or the archival narratives associated with that

site, which are also tied to the material collected in the archive itself. In his book *Archive*

Fever (1995), Jacques Derrida ties the archive to the permanent site of the *arkheion*,

arguing that "the meaning of 'archive,' its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek

arkheion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior

magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded" (2). The archive is sited, is *housed*, in a

permanent space, rooted in such a way that it supports state power. For Derrida, the

archive is defined by the material that is saved and how it is arranged. He argues that

"[t]he *archontic* power which also gathers the functions of unification, of identification,

of classification, must be paired with what we call the power of consignation" (3).

Reading Derrida's work, British historian and theorist Carolyn Steedman cautions that

"[t]he Archive is not potentially made up of *everything*, as is human memory; and is not

the fathomless and timeless place in which nothing goes away that is the unconscious"

(68). Steedman underlines Derrida's observation of consignation in the archive, but

couples it with the power of chance, suggesting that "[t]he Archive is made from selected

and consciously chosen documentation from the past and also from the mad

fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there" (68).

The archive is a site of material collection for the sake of memory. In it, material

memory is set aside to facilitate the active practice of remembering. Perhaps, before

returning to Robertson's material Vancouver and the material evidence collected there, it

would be helpful to consider another site of collection. If the archive is a site for

remembered material, perhaps the *landfill* is the site for material we wish to erase from

existence, the material we wish to *forget*. In the landfill, we collect, cordon off, and bury

the waste, the negative externalities, of our spaces. In his book *Garbage in the Cities:*

Refuse Reform, and the Environment, American historian Martin V. Melosi describes the

waste disposal outcomes of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, and how

recently closed landfill site Fresh Kills[46] needed to be reopened because of the event:

> In the wake of the shocking attacks of September 11, 2001, and the
>
> destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, Fresh Kills was
>
> reopened to receive most of the estimated 1.2 million tons of debris from
>
> Lower Manhattan. And as several people pointed out, Fresh Kills became
>
> the final resting place for remains of many of the victims of that tragic
>
> event. What had become a reviled disposal site became hallowed ground
>
> as well. (210)

In Fresh Kills, we see a space charged in two ways. First, it is the site where the waste

material of New York can be abandoned, literally obscured from view by the layer of dirt

pitched on top of it. Simultaneously, with the remains of 9/11 buried there, the site also

becomes a site where we might memorialize. Combining this with the "official"

memorial being constructed at the World Trade Center site, we can see how Melosi's

observation complicates the memorialization of the event as one site becomes an active

site of memory (the official memorial), while the other is only passively a memorial site,

destined to be largely left out of the event's historical narrative.

How then can we think about the official, sanctioned narratives of memory and

what they leave out? How can we think about the separation of material evidence from

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[46] Fresh Kills was the primary landfill site for New York City between 1948 and 2001.

narrative? In "The Fountain Transcript," Robertson describes her adventures in

Vancouver's civic archives, where she finds a newspaper article describing a gift made

by Mary Eleanor Stewart to the city "for the purpose of erecting a fountain at Victory

Square" (56). Unable to recall a fountain at the site, Robertson feels "the energetic thrill

of the discovery of a hidden injustice," realizing later that the fountain, imagined as a

more bombastic construction, was simply "a drinking fountain embellished with a plaque

displaying Mrs. Stewart's now-familiar name" (57). The fountain is a marker of Mrs.

Stewart's gesture, but is an empty marker without Robertson's mobilization of material

from the civic archive. What does this fountain show about the ways the city reflects its

own past? Without the archival context Robertson provides, we might walk into Victory

Square in downtown Vancouver and see a fountain that matches Robertson's

description:[47] "It was polished black granite, four headed, canted directly outwards, with

precisely elliptical basins, very grand as far as drinking fountains go" (57). We might

even glimpse the plaque that marks the fountain with a kind of caption, like one attached

to a photograph, that links the fountain to a historical figure and an immediately

inaccessible narrative. Without the narrative Robertson divines from the archive, Mrs.

Stewart's fountain acts as what French historian Pierre Nora calls a *lieux de mémoire*.

Nora argues that "[t]he moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an

immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted

object beneath the gaze of critical history" ("Between Memory and History" 12). These

sites of memory appear with "the deritualization of our world" (12), that is, physical sites

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[47] Or, alternately, catch a glimpse of the fountain on Google Maps as I just did.

must be constructed must be constructed to help us remember, since there is no ongoing social process to help us remember.

We know and understand the story of Mrs. Stewart's fountain because Robertson is able to mobilize the material detritus of the archive to illuminate the physical site. The same exchange between archival narrative and physical site occur in the way that Robertson relates the historical timeline of New Brighton Park. Robertson begins her description with a plaque that provides what she calls the "inaugural mythos" of the park by narrating "the park's civic historical status" (38). The plaque establishes an active and official monument for the past, but Robertson, in evoking the official narrative of the site, also wants to point out the way that the site *exceeds* simple narrative:

> We shall add to this inaugural mythos an additional fact: the site also comprised the first real estate transaction in what was to become our city. From its inception, New Brighton has remained emblematic of colonial economies: primary industry, leisure, and real estate find here their passive monument. (38)

If the plaque acts as an active monument, describing a specific memory of the site, perhaps Robertson's "passive monument" emerges from the materiality of the site, of what stuff remains there that hasn't been removed, of what remaining material is left to enable resistant readings of a site. In a sense, the passive monuments of New Brighton Park complicate intentional, unified master narratives, instead allowing the site to become a kind of chance-fashioned archive as the material elements leave historical traces. Perhaps, like Atget's Parisian rooms, the park "archives touch," or perhaps, "like an archive, its passivity seduces and structures us" (204). Through the friction created by

the interaction of material from the civic archive and material from an actual site, Robertson can create histories for New Brighton Park in the same way she explores the history of the scaffold by considering the few documents that had not been destroyed or lost, a combination of "[a]rchival images and on-site observations of the renovation of Vancouver's leaky condominiums" (152). The archive becomes a source of material to change the meaning of a site. The material left at a site becomes a lens through which the archival material can be organized. Instead of accepting one simple narrative of a place, Robertson enacts a kind of interrogation and description of what a site means by traversing the various materials that give (or have given) the site meaning.

In a similar spirit, Steedman, thinking about the place called memory, argues that "[t]o interrogate that place, we have to be less concerned with History as *stuff* (we must put to one side the content of any particular piece of historical writing, and the historical information it imparts) than as *process*, as ideation, imagining and remembering" (67). For Robertson, looking at material is part of a larger practice of flooding a site with meaning, of imagining the possible pasts that affect the present of that site. Armed with the knowledge that "[a] shantytown of squatters overlaid the economically dormant site with its various salvaged shelters" (39), Robertson is able to notice how "[t]ruant patches of comfrey and mint mark long-disappeared shanty gardens" (40). Robertson is able to scaffold up a historical meaning for New Brighton Park through the mobilization of archival material across space and, through this, the past and present of a site become multivalent, able to carry multiple meanings and complexly exceeding the striations of official historical narrative. This multivalent character emerges in Robertson's "Second Walk," where she and her guide walk through an unidentified park not unlike New

Brighton. "Slowly," she notices, "the park revealed to us the newness deep within banality. This was the city where the site oozed through its historical carapace to become a paradoxical ornament" (231). How is the site a paradoxical ornament? Perhaps the answer lies in the distinctions that have emerged: official and unofficial, active and passive, intention and chance, hard and soft. Perhaps the site's historical carapace is the stultified narrative represented by the plaque, as the now-multiple meanings of the site exceed that narrative. Between the hard structure of the official monument and the soft structure of the passive monument is the possibility that spatial memory lies with a combination of the physical material of history and the process of reading it. But how can we read a site without falling into the trap of fixing it, of restricting it to a historical carapace? Robertson cautions that "[t]he gaze is a machine that can invent belief and can destroy what is tender," and, because of this, she asks, "[w]hat can we claim about the park, about the sorrows that are and were not our own?" (238). Her answer is succinct – "Nothing" – but she argues that by making (resistant) claims for the park, "[w]e simply sign ourselves against silence" (239).

So Robertson, in an attempt to not feel consigned to silence, makes careful noise. During her walk, Robertson looks for contrary readings of space, readings that counter the narratives of power. She and her guide stroll through the park, "waiting somewhat randomly to achieve the warmth of an idea" (232). Robertson's scopic research, with its focus on watching and paying attention, is something she frames in a tentative way, cautious about the fixative possibilities of her research. She is playfully critical of her own spatial practice, observing that "as researchers, we were bound to scrupulously visit each potential explanation for the scopic piety we so cherished," yet acting relieved

"when we found the explanation lacking" (239). For Robertson, the process of reading space is constantly under question and revision. Perhaps the possibility inherent in not knowing, in doubt, allows for the repeated recomplication of space as the process of spatial reconsideration is never foreclosed upon. Despite this, Robertson regrets the difficulty of making "remarkable faults in a spiritual diorama" (232) as the process of envisioning contrary readings that might form cracks in spatial understanding is *slow*:

> Only slowly did contrary readings appear. Only slowly did we see our own strolling as a layered emergency: we recognized that we were the outmoded remainders of a class that produced its own mirage so expertly that its temporal disappearance went unnoticed. We found ourselves repeatedly original. (232)

Robertson describes a class of people outside history, temporally vanished, that are stuck in a repeated cycle of origin, where the past is either bracketed off (the monument) or erased (the landfill). By searching for contrary readings, Robertson wants to introduce new wrinkles to the mirage of contemporaneity by carefully teasing out the aspects of a space that have only disappeared because they are hiding (or hidden). Encoded in Robertson's strolling are two things we need to consider: first, the cycle of erasure that leads to the jettisoning of material, and, second, the possibilities of the contrary dreamings found in tactics like walking and reading.

Is Utopia a Space Where We've Erased Everything?

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre broaches the idea of the

"readability"[48] of space. In an architectural model invested in readability, according to

Lefebvre, "[t]he architect is supposed to construct a signifying space wherein form is to

function as a signifier is to signified; the form, in other words, is supposed to enunciate or

proclaim the function" (144). Lefebvre sees this act of collapsing form and function, of

an architectural impulse toward spatial understandability (and with it the logic of clearly

"reading" and "writing" space), as approaching what he calls a "'pure' surface," that is ,

"the dissolving of conflicts into a general transparency, into a one-dimensional present"

(145). Robertson evokes this idea in the title of the second essay of "Occasional Work."

"Pure Surface," originally published in an issue of Toronto's *Mix* magazine, is

accompanied in *Office for Soft Architecture* by a dossier of photographs from Vancouver

artist Keith Higgins from his website *Vancouver Special*, where he records and

catalogues the repetitions and variations of single-family homes in Vancouver. Flipping

through his photographs, the similarities between the houses emerge: the same roof

shape, the same balcony, the two levels, the large windows. In *Office for Soft

Architecture*, Higgins' photographs are presented over four pages in a matrix that

emphasizes the seriality of the houses. With these repeated structures in mind, Robertson

suggests that "[t]he suburb is a received idea, a quoted stupidity, a commonplace cliché, a

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[48] Lefebvre is critical of this idea of readability, remarking that "the impression of
intelligibility conceals far more than it reveals. It conceals, precisely, what the
visible/readable 'is', and what traps it holds" (144). He argues that "[n]othing can be
taken for granted in space, because what are involved are real or possible acts and not
mental states, or more or less well-told stories" (144).

spatial impostor, a couple of curios, an idle machine, a proof of the great chain of simulation" (26).

The suburb, for Robertson, is a site that wants to make itself clear, a repeated and "completely revealed site," but also a site that "yields only negative ontologies" (27) – there are no signs of life here. Robertson argues that "[t]he suburb is memory fattening to russet then paling to flush when it bursts before dropping as whiteness on parked cars" (27). Robertson reveals a connection here between memory and *shit*,[49] but shit slowly fading to white in the sun. Unlike New Brighton Park, memory in the suburb slowly erases) or is erased. Robertson ties what memory actually exists in the suburb to a nostalgia for childhood:

> The suburb is a child's Versailles. The long *allées*, soothing symmetries, weedless clipped lawns, and floral parterres unfold the security of a formal order that repeats to the vanishing point of the schoolyard. These are memories, so the scale of things is vast, the horizon unattainable, the vegetation sparse, symbolic. The spindly blooming tree at the edge of each lawn has grown, has been joined by a motley speckling of unpruned shrubs. Then, the lawns were mostly empty. Everything was visible. (26)

According to Robertson, in childhood, spaces are simpler and emptier. There is a "childish comfort of the explicit, the regular, the habitual" (26-27). The spaces of adulthood add new wrinkles as the childishness of the explicit is "piqued by the vagaries of adult bridge parties and the relation of Simplicity tissue paper patterns to the mothers'

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[49] Specifically bird shit splattered across a car window, but the metaphor could probably be extended to dog shit drying out in the sun – a sight I haven't seen since I was a kid, since, it seems, everyone is expected to clean up after their dogs right away.

Mary Quant shifts" (27). Perhaps the suburb as a kind of faked childhood space is an attempt to erase vagrant spaces, to empty lawns of unpruned shrubs, to return to the safe, predictable spaces informed by a nostalgia for a past that may or may not have existed.

In mass movements to the suburbs, as exemplified by so-called "white flight,"[50] we can see a desire to escape to somewhere safer and cleaner than the core of the city. In recent years, we've seen a reversal to this in gentrification, where the upper and middle classes return to "newly revitalized" areas of the city, as seemingly derelict neighbourhoods are cleaned up – the refashioning of the Woodward's building in downtown Vancouver making a perfect example. What lies at the heart of these civic transformations is the assumption that spaces should be safer or more "civilized" and negative externalities should be reduced, an assumption that, despite its common-sense goodness,[51] risks restricting spaces only to elements that are deemed appropriate. Describing the progressive movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for cleaner cities, Melosi notes that the proper collection of waste materials was a sign of an organized and civilized society:

> Primitive collection and disposal practices were signs of backwardness
>
> and barbarity; civilized societies were well kept and sanitary. One could
>
> hardly expect citizens to seek moral and material progress in a despoiled
>
> habitat polluted by litter and disease-breeding refuse. In the broadest

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[50] The movement of monied individuals, often white, to the suburban outskirts. David Harvey writes about this in his *Spaces of Hope* (2000) in terms of Baltimore, noting that "[t]he affluent (black and white) continue to leave the city in droves (at a net rate of over a thousand a month over the last five years according to the Census Bureau) seeking solace, security, and jobs in the suburbs (population in the city was close to a million when I arrived and is now down to just over 600,000)" (138).

[51] Who wouldn't want to live somewhere safe?

sense, filth bred chaos, while cleanliness promoted order. (*Garbage in the Cities* 91)

Melosi's vocabulary treads dangerous social territory (barbarity vs. civilization, chaos vs. order) that intersects with discourses around class and race. There is a tension between the refuse-filled city streets (associated with barbarity and chaos) and an ideal, utopian vision of the city as space swept clean. In thinking about seemingly different spaces like the suburb and New Brighton Park, perhaps it would be useful to consider them in a spectrum running from the landfill as a space of forgetting (a space of excess) and the remaining city after it has been reduced to pure surface – what Melosi, evoking the 1893 Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, calls "the spectacle of the White City" (91).

In their book *Urban America: From Downtown to No Town* (1979), David Goldfield and Blaine Brownell describe the site of the 1893 World's Fair, nicknamed the "White City" because of its classically inspired buildings, in quite utopian terms:

> In contrast to the sprawling industrial cities that were becoming common at the time, the classical buildings rising from blue lagoons, with their plaster-of-Paris facades gleaming in the sun, seemed to be a vision of a lost utopia. Observers called it the White City, and it epitomized cleanliness, grandeur, beauty, and order. (214)

According to Goldfield and Brownell, the White City inspired the City Beautiful movement, which desired cities to be designed with aesthetics in mind, so that the city could be seen as a "beautiful, graceful creation of human beings" (214). Melosi argues for a connection between the "grandiose objectives" of the City Beautiful movement and the "modest goals" of sanitary reform movements, noting that " there was a direct

relationship between the cleansing of the physical surroundings and civic improvement" (93). The traces of human interaction in space are removed in the name of a cleaner, more healthy, better operating city. Within this frame, could the impulse of the suburb be to remove or channel the negative externalities of the city, building, if not a White City, at least a *whitewashed* city, a city that is easier to follow and read? Deleuze and Guattari argue that "[o]ne of the fundamental tasks of the State is to striate the space over which it reigns, or to utilize smooth spaces as a means of communication in the service of striated space" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 385). Striated space is the space of grids, of fixed location, of easy readability, with smooth space as its opposite (messy, nomadic). In terms of Robertson's project, fixed buildings are striated beside the smooth space of the scaffold. Melosi's connection between civic improvement and civic cleansing, then relates to the scaffold in the same way that the scaffold must be removed from the building. Waste is a necessary product of human culture, and is something that must be removed. The homeless people squatting in the Woodward's building are, if we follow a Marxist line, produced by profit-motivated capitalist culture, and are something that must be removed.

In a catalogue of Vancouver artist Renée Van Halm, where Robertson first published "How to Colour," the ninth essay of "Occasional Work," we find an installation by Van Halm that speaks to this image of the city swept clean. Titled *Dream Home* (2002), the pieces find Van Halm reinterpreting the suburban house be presenting each room as a box in a series, arranged according to their proper location in the house. In her essay "Dream Homes," architect Sherry McKay looks at these pieces in terms of the ways they configure both the suburban house and city. The installation's forms, according to McKay, "define domestic space – large rooms for socializing, smaller ones

for intimacy, some for public life, others for privacy," but, in a strange inversion, she argues that "[l]acking human occupants they are deprived of scale: the home could be a city" (21). Evocative of Robertson's suggestion at the end of "Playing House" that "[t]he city is the shack inside out" (185), Van Halm's *Dream Home* turns the suburban house inside out. The close relation of home and city plays out in the details. The negative space of the house (hallways, alcoves, foyers) becomes the negative space of the city (streets, intersections, plazas). Van Halm reduces the city to its surface at the same time she exposes the grid of the suburban home. Looking from above, her installation is like an aerial map painted in pastels.

Van Halm's is a city swept clean. The buildings are antiseptic – their pastel not far from a sterile white. Their colours are muted, unwilling to commit to a bolder statement (though their unoffensiveness is a statement in and of itself). The buildings are strangely without human markings. In "How to Colour," Robertson comments on whiteness as a marker of forgetting, arguing that "[t]he white wall is a phantasized exoskeleton, not so much a screen memory as a ghostly amnesia" (142). Citizens of the city of *Dream Home* or of the idealized childhood suburb might wish for this amnesia of the white wall, making the city more readable, but, as Robertson argues, "the surface of the city indexes conditions of contamination, accident, and subordination" (139). Robertson locates these indexical ruptures in pigment. Discussing Napoleon's army, she notes that "[i]n Weimar they marched in white uniforms with gilded buttons" – a decision that needed reversal because "[a]t battle each soldier could read death on his fellow's tunic" (140). White makes human movement and interaction visible against the pure surface of the body or the city, here as an eruption of blood onto the white surface of the

uniform. Robertson suggests that "white proposes a disciplinary unity and it always fails. It already submits to pigment and chance" (141). If a utopian impulse comes from the desire to wipe the slate clean, to start again, to return the white page back to its original state, Robertson argues for its impossibility, since the page is always already spattered with blood, with filth, with shit. It is reminiscent of Michel de Certeau's suggestion that "[t]here is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence" (*The Practice of Everyday Life* 108). There is no way to completely remove the traces of a past from a space, no way to exorcise or unhaunt space. But what we should begin to see is not a failure to return to origins, replacing space with a much different utopian architecture. Instead, Robertson wants us to focus on the possibility of performing on the spatial grid against expectation, giving voice to the silenced and erased aspects of that space.

New Brighton Park is a site that defies easy readings. Compared to the White City with its beautiful, classically inspired architecture, New Brighton Park "beautifully lacks architecture" (37). New Brighton Park is "never a settlement, always already a zone of leisured flows and their minor intensifications" (41). Robertson calls the park an "inverted Utopia," taking the opportunity to *détourne* the May 1968 Situationist slogan "*sous les pavés, la plage*" into "*sous la plage, le pavé*" (37). By inverting the slogan, putting the streets underneath the beach, Robertson throws the utopian intent of the slogan into turmoil. Instead of the suggestion that we tear up the gridded streets of the city to reveal a nostalgic pleasure ground outside the urban, Robertson suggests that by digging up the beach of New Brighton Park, we find the gridded streets of the site's past uses, making visible the ways the site has been overwritten – something that, in the case

of New Brighton, is not a simple matter of erasing the features of a site in order to replace them. By mobilizing the archive across the site, Robertson is able to conduct a virtual archaeology of New Brighton, carefully outlining its historical uses from the beautiful (Brighton House: "a playland at the end of the first stagecoach route in the colony" [39]) to ugly (the site of the "first racial exclusion policy on Vancouver parkland" [40]). This accumulative reading shows how Robertson is not interested in origin, but is interested in the way origin stacks up and is confounded by the (sometimes bloody) traces that could not be erased fully. She reads past the striating force of the park's plaque that "narrates the park's civic historical status" (38), the plaque that announces the park's status as the origin point of Vancouver, interested more in a way of looking at space, to use the words of Rem Koolhaas as quoted by Robertson, that won't be concerned "with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential" ("What Ever Happened to Urbanism" 969). Robertson outlines the transformations the site has undertaken and, in doing this, outlines the site's potential, suggesting perhaps the positivity inherent in this kind of constant change.

Perhaps the utopian revelation of New Brighton Park, if there is one, is that utopia is here if you want it, but only through a consistent and repeated process of resistant change approaching a kind of strategic tentativeness, a realization that spaces should be altered to suit us and abandoned when they don't. Is this why Robertson tells us that soft architects want to view urban origin as a series without beginning or end, a constant flux of spaces that change as we change and that are open to our resistance? For Robertson, the most desirable spaces are the ones most open to contrary movements, resisting those in power. The most desirable spaces are not tidy or one-size-fits all, where everything and

everyone has a clearly defined identity. The most desirable spaces carry and archive our

investments in ways that we can see and alter. The most desirable spaces accommodate

for minor and "not-for-sale" happiness. A site covered with the decay and rubble of the

past is a site for the construction of a pavilion, a temporary site of spatial entanglement

where those willing to stand together can do so until spotted, then fly off. "Now,"

Robertson suggests on the inside cover of *Office for Soft Architecture*, "we wish to be in

one place yet move like blackbirds" (n. pag.).

Conclusion

How To Go Phantom

There is no place but a stance. (*Office for Soft Architecture* 218)

After all this discussion of cities other than my own, I return to my own place as I prepare to dissolve from it. I am getting ready to move to Vancouver, giving away old furniture, packing up books and dishes, leaving things in the alley for scavengers. It's funny that just as I am finishing up this work on Lisa Robertson's *Office for Soft Architecture*, I am once again asked to consider the spaces of my own city in a different way by a pair of local artists. In their relational performance piece *Each Other*, Eric Moschopedis and Mia Rushton ask participants to think of their city not as a finished container but as a site to be revised, adopting the model of a public library:

> By looking to public libraries, we see a model that is ripe with possibility because libraries are two things: lending institutions (systems of exchange) and a truly inclusive and democratic public space. Unlike a shopping mall that portrays itself as public, the library is a space where everybody, including the marginalized—women, immigrants, children, the homeless, the differently-abled, and the under-employed—can freely congregate. As civic institutions, libraries have an indiscriminate lending and return policy—anybody can borrow. And the books that libraries lend behave as a meeting place for citizens (think here of the scribbles that dot the margins of books, earmarked pages, underlined text, and altered images). (*Each Other* n. pag.)

For Moschopedis and Rushton, the seemingly private space of the book becomes what they call a "micro-public-space" where the actions of individuals cross upon the surface of the book. Using this information, the activities of *Each Other* ask participants to consider the private and public spaces of the city as they might a library book, giving them permission to write in the margins of space. Moschopedis and Rushton ask participants to consider themselves readers of the city.

This tension between physical space and textual space is prominent in Robertson's work. She explores the textual traces of a space from the archive or the library as much as she explores physical sites. She hopes to send her readers back to the stacks of the library to research. She proposes description as a method of spatial interaction. She sees language in the structures of the scaffold. She notes in her "Seventh Walk" that "[w]hen there was a call for images we would fan through the neighbourhood constructing our documents" until "we ourselves were the documents" (270). She proposes treating space and language together, treating, like Michel de Certeau, the act of interacting with the city like the act of actively reading a book. In the introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau contrasts two images of the reader. The first is that of the passive "user" as de Certeau argues that reading "seems to constitute the maximal development of the passivity assumed to characterize the consumer, who is conceived of as a voyeur (whether troglodytic or itinerant) in a 'show biz society'" (xxi). This version of the reader assumes a kind of uncritical, gawking eye, interested in consumption. De Certeau contrasts this to a much more active reader, a reader able to produce meaning:

> In reality, the activity of reading has on the contrary all the characteristics
> of a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the

> text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and
>
> expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written
>
> spaces in an ephemeral dance. (xxi)

De Certeau returns agency to reading as it becomes a playful act that inserts the reader into the text, suggesting that "[a] different world (the reader's) slips into the author's place" (xxi). According to de Certeau, the text becomes "habitable," a rented apartment made the place of the transient renter, a street made home by the pedestrian as they fill it "with the forests of their desires and goals" (xxi), a space squatted in and made a kind of home.

Wanting to add my bit to the book of the city, I sat down beside *Each Other*'s portable and collapsible cart, a cart specially made for mobility, at a small workbench[52] to participate in one of the three activities. I chose "Scribbling in the Margins," where I was given the choice of one of three signs, each with the start of a message[53] that I would finish and hang up somewhere in the city, as a kind of spatial marginalia. Already written at the top of the sign was the message "Good things that could happen here..." Thinking of Robertson, I hand-stamped each letter of my message: "Everything might crumble. We could build new houses from the rubble."[54] In a sense, my message is a co-conspiratorial whisper with the Office's project to build our own spaces and places out of the abandoned, decaying, and obsolescent. The message could just as easily be scribbled in the margins of *Office for Soft Architecture* as in the back alleys of a Calgary suburb. In

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[52] A workbench that was also an outside panel of the cart that detached.

[53] The sign I chose read "Good things that could happen here..." The other two read "I wish this was..." and "This is the place where..."

[54] My thoughts about Robertson with this hand-stamped message were clearly not aimed toward this conclusion. If they had been, I might have directly quoted Robertson.

the instructions to the exercise, Moschopedis and Rushton argue that in this sense of marginalia, of an active readerliness, "books don't have just one author, but many" (n. pag.). Each person scribbling in the book becomes a kind of co-author, passing through the pages of the book and leaving their marks. The book operates like Atget's rooms, recording the various passages through its pages, though by encouraging the actual physical act of "scribbling" Moschopedis and Rushton give their civic readers some spatial agency. "We all have very different stories of interpretations about a certain place," Moschopedis and Rushton suggest, and by leaving textual markers in unexpected spots, we can interrupt the spatial reading habits of passers-by, allowing them the chance to reflect on the way they interact with the city by reflecting on the actions of others who share that space, allowing a view of a shared space with multiple valences.

Robertson's work as the Office hovers in a field of terms that counter an idea of permanence – doubt, passage, uncertainty, multiplicity, delusion, recombination, transience – without suggesting a complete absence of place. Rather than place as a fixed container, Robertson shows the way it is a stance of recaptured agency as the Office looks for ways individuals can re-author the city, scribbling in its margins through the use of accessible and repurposed materials. That Robertson's chooses to take a stance as an architect is strange given that even radically challenging architects like Rem Koolhaas still require influxes of capital to actually build their ambiguous (yet still concrete) designs. Robertson proposes no such permanence, instead focusing on the ways space can be changed and moved with fewer resources, lowering the bar to architectural construction. But aside from the shack and the scaffold and the curtain and the costume, Robertson's key architectural tactic is the *book*. In "Time and the Codex," the piece

accompanying the work of Marlene MacCallum, Robertson notes, "I use the book as my imaginary house" (n. pag.). The book is a site of possibility, as much as any empty house, but, she argues, the book resists myths of origin – "what the book subtracts from architecture is the originary connotation of the arche" (n. pag.) – in favour of becoming a space that frames chance and allows the reader to "lose" themselves. Referencing Sigmund Freud's essay "The 'Uncanny'" (1919),[55] Robertson notes that "Freud describes the uncanny as a confounding of the self, where the 'foreign self' is substituted for one's own, by 'doubling, dividing and interchanging'" – an observation important to Robertson because of the way it "provides an affective convention for the shadowed exchange between the person and the socius, an exchange that is not limited to a monologic model of time" (n. pag.). Much like her search through the aisles of Value Village for different identities to sink into, the book becomes a site where one can vanish into another identity. For Robertson, this isn't necessarily an uncanny position for the reader, who "may crave knowledge, as it dissolves and reforms in the contract between the reader and the book" (n. pag.). As a reader, Robertson lets slip that she prefers "to become foreign, unknowable to myself within this discretely structured site" (n. pag.). In this context, the book becomes a site where the reader can reflect, much like Atget's rooms, charged with

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[55] The section Robertson references is part of a longer catalogue of uncanny elements found in literature and analysis. This particular section starts from a discussion of the novel *Die Elixire des Teufels* by nineteenth-century German author E.T.A. Hoffmann and moves into a discussion of the "phenomenon of the 'double,'" where Freud sources the "themes of uncanniness which are most prominent" (234). The version Robertson cites is one of several variations of the double that Freud points out: "Or it is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of self" (234).

the Oedipal frame of the house but also a site for reflection, where readers can consider their own lives by peering into the lives of others.

By configuring this fragile exchange of reader and text (and writer), Robertson flirts with the uncanny, with the improper, as she casts the "foreign self" of the book (whether this is the author or not) as an affective presence in whom the reader recognizes something. This notion of the uncanny, of haunting, of "going phantom" is something Paul Stephens draws our attention to in terms of Robertson's use of genre. He points to the opening of Robertson's *XEclogue*, a piece titled "How Pastoral: A Prologue,"[56] where she addresses genre in phantom terms:

> I needed a genre for the times that I go phantom. I needed a genre to rampage liberty, haunt the foul freedom of silence. I needed to pry loose liberty from an impacted marriage with the soil. I needed a genre to gloss my ancestress' complicity with a socially, expedient code; to invade my own illusions of historical innocence. (n. pag.)

With this in mind, Stephens frames Robertson's use of genre in terms of obsolescence. "Obsolescent modes (such as the eclogue and the epic)," he argues, "become means by which to counter the inexorable progress of global capitalism" (16). When Robertson states a desire for a genre that might "pry loose liberty from an impacted marriage with the soil," it is also a desire for a literary mode that might resists the dominant narratives of a power structure (capitalism, patriarchy). Robertson wishes to complicate the movements of a dominant narrative from the inside. Her choice to "choose the dystopia

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[56] "How Pastoral: A Prologue" was expanded into "How Pastoral: A Manifesto," published in *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990's* (2002) edited by Mark Wallace and Steven Marks.

of the obsolete" over the "Utopia of the new" is an attempt, she tells McCaffery in their PhillyTalks exchange, to "cut short the feckless plot of productivity" (23). Working out of a feminist frame, Robertson argues that, in the face of the reductive narratives applied to those outside of power, "[w]e must become history's dystopic ghosts, inserting our inconsistencies, demands, misinterpretations and weedy appetites into the old bolstering narrative" (23). The genre of architectural writing is charged by certain bourgeois, patriarchal narratives and Robertson, by dissolving into the Office, "goes phantom" in the genre, making room for those silenced (women, non-whites, the homeless, even those who only rent). If the *Heimlich*, as Freud suggests by quoting at length from a definition of the word,[57] arouses "a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house" (222), Robertson becomes an uncanny (or *unheimlich*) phantom within genre, forcing the walls of the house to sway as if in the hands of a foreign presence.

Robertson carefully describes her city in flux, recording the melting of her identity into the Office for Soft Architecture and leaving, as she suggests, part of her body in "this book and the room around it" (1). Do I, leaving my sign on the back of a bench in the Calgary suburb of Kincora,[58] leave a part of myself in that space, going phantom to haunt a passerby with not only my clearly handmade slogan but also my physical attempt to communicate with them about the space we share? What is this point of civic exchange, this emergent public space? What does it mean for readers of the book and of the city? As readers of Robertson's book, are we meant to passively shuffle our

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[57] Freud quotes from Daniel Sanders' 1860 dictionary *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache.*
[58] Kincora, in the far north of Calgary, is where my sister's family recently moved from McKenzie Towne, in the city's far south.

eyes across the page or are we meant to actively engage with the city in ways suggested by the book (and to engage with the book in ways suggested by the city)? Of course, I am suggesting the second option, that we should "go phantom" in Robertson's book to imagine ourselves in our own cities, losing ourselves in her text in order to practice the formation of spatial knots with locations and objects and others in passage, making tentative and alterable places. If we follow Robertson, what we should be making are "elsewheres" in the city. In "Time and the Codex," Robertson quotes de Certeau, who connects reading with the formation of an elsewhere:

> An initial, indeed initiatory, experience: to read is to be elsewhere, where *they* are not, in another world; it is to constitute a secret scene, a place one can enter and leave when one wishes; to create dark corners into which no one can see within an existence subjected to technocratic transparency. (173)

For Robertson, the book is "an object of potential, of futurity" ("Time in the Codex" n. pag.). Its "darkly confected elsewhere is a speculative polis" (n. pag.). The book is a kind of secret rehearsal space for the movement of spatial ideas. As a shared private object, a micro public space, the book is a point where individuals can meet in a kind of shared elsewhere, a site of shelter for the imagination.

From this, we end up with a series of place-knots that involve the book. Following Doreen Massey's claim that place is the result of continual reinvestment, of the entanglements of trajectories by intersecting actors (whether human or not) in space and time, I wonder if the elsewhere Robertson is after isn't a sense of public space on a micro level – at a smaller scale, such as the scale of the body – public space that is continually

negotiated between individuals. Massey argues that "instituting democratic public spaces (and indeed the spaces of places more generally) necessitates operating with a concept of spatiality which keeps under scrutiny the play of social relations which construct them" (153). With this in mind, I wonder about how I move with the book in actual space, using it to scrutinize my own positions in the "play of social relations." I sit in my bed reading the book under the covers with a flashlight.[59] I sit in a classroom with others who may or may not have read the book. I walk through the streets of the city with a copy in my hand. I chat with people at meetings and events about space and place and the ideas that come from the book (even if I don't mention it by name). With some people, having read the book becomes a kind of secret handshake. Small discussions sprout up and disperse around the book. In this sense, the book becomes a kind of relational project as long as it has a reader who is willing and able to become a kind of branch office, dissolving into a larger project of civic engagement. In this sense, we are all possible workers in the Office.

As I conclude, I would like to put this under even further scrutiny by proposing that even the Office for Soft Architecture is a necessarily dissolving structure, scattering with the publication of the book. In her "Seventh Walk," Robertson suggests that "as many we could more easily be solitary" and that as solitaries, "[w]e would closely observe strangers to study how, in a manner, in a touch, we might invent the dream of a congress of strange shapes" (270). Robertson's "we" is a kind of surveillance team, looking for signs of new social and spatial arrangements in the movements and interactions of others, but her "we" is not an organized group. Instead, this group of

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[59] Not really, but this is the most private way I can think of reading.

solitaries are scattered and anarchic, dispersed across the face of the city as they

document it. Robertson claims for the Office a kind of phantom status. Similar to this, in

her book *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf contemplates the possibility of what she

calls a "Society of Outsiders" – a society of the daughters of educated men that "would

have no office, no committee, no secretary," a society that "would call no meetings," a

society that "would hold no conferences" (309). Woolf's society would attempt to

achieve the same ends as a more traditional society ("freedom, equality, peace"), but will

seek "to achieve them by the means that a different sex, a different tradition, a different

education, and the different values which result from those differences have placed

within our reach" (320). Cautioning against the fascist implications of unified pageantry,

Woolf suggests that "ease and freedom, the power to change and the power to grow, can

only be preserved by obscurity" (322).

Woolf's non-institutional society reacts to the static and fixating possibilities of

fascism, proposing as an alternative the "absenting" of one's self from institution. In his

book *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New

International* (1994), Jacques Derrida proposes a similar strategy in the form of a "New

International," deliberately invoking the worker's internationals of Marxism. In the face

of declarations after the end of the Cold War that Marxism was dead along with

communism, Derrida suggests that those still resistant to capitalism mustn't take their

eyes off the numerous sites of suffering in favour of the newly permanent structures of

global capital:

> Instead of singing the advent of the ideal of liberal democracy and of the
>
> capitalist market in the euphoria of the end of history, instead of

celebrating the "end of ideologies" and the end of the great emancipatory

discourses, let us never neglect this obvious macroscopic fact, made up of

innumerable singular sites of suffering: no degree of progress allows one

to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men,

women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the

earth. (106)

Like Woolf, Derrida proposes an organization without organization – an organization

"without status, without link, and without name, barely public even if it is not

clandestine, without contract, 'out of joint,' without coordination, without party, without

country, without national community" (106-07). Derrida swings the gates open further

than Woolf, framing his "barely public" New International around wide and dispersed

questions of international justice in order to renew critiques of global capital inspired by

"the spirits of Marx or Marxism," suggesting multiple approaches streaming forth from

the now-phantom corpse of the often-fixated ideology of Marxism.

Is it possible that Robertson's Office might act as a kind of spatial stance for

future exploration? Could we as the readers of her book form a "Secret Society of Soft

Architects" or a "New Office" in the style of Woolf or Derrida? In a 2011 talk for the

North of Invention conference at the University of Pennsylvania, Robertson discusses the

work of French linguist Émile Benveniste, noting that "[c]o-citizens, in Benveniste's

archaeology, are those who speak together and their home is the vulnerable shelter that

that speaking together offers them." Robertson's gesture toward a kind of linguistic

shelter, a fold in space made through the harmonizing of our voices, is perhaps the

gesture toward the kind of temporary relational pavilion we can build around Robertson's

book, or, in fact, any book or discourse or idea. The trick becomes not the making permanent of that pavilion or the fixed agreement of certain harmonies, but the realization that speaking together is temporary and tentative. This allows us to find new agreements and harmonies, and also allows for the appearance of antagonisms and resistance. Rather than a fixed location, name etched onto a window or engraved on a brass plaque, perhaps the Office might become something less official and more about the spaces and places people produce through their intersecting physical and linguistic trajectories.

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