

At the summit, the two figures put forward an elbow and brought them to touch briefly in greeting.

The designers of this place believed that to ease the great anxiety of separation, a reminder of everything left behind was needed. Stiff ersatz flowers rising from beds of kevlar mulch, dry birdbaths adorned with fiber plastic ivy: artifice screaming, *hang in there*. Here, enveloped in the dense concentration of furniture platitudes, the contrast of what was and what remained fell sharp enough to cause pain.

Outside the dome, the desiccated clay of the hillside looked burnt. Distributed across the rolling slopes were many small, white boulders, so uniform in their presentation that the range looked rife with fungal infection. The pox appeared to blister around dark voids where monumental shadows fell and deprived the ground of character.

Facing each other, they spoke in union: “We witness to The Virtues,” and turning to the decorated hills, “so that we may endeavor yet to endeavor.”

The youth surveyed the site in trepidation, supposing some transcendent understanding would at any moment enlighten, though now they felt only the draining sensation of vertigo putting hands on their abdomen, grinding, nauseating.

Protruding skyward and arranged into six enormous forms were the naked bodies of four generations of diaspora colonists. Worked into each megalith of flesh, a stoic human face stared. Too late for the Earth and too soon for the stars, these interim generations are the compost to make the soil fertile. Fertile soil to make the planet familiar. Familiar to feel human again. Human again to thrive once more.

The docent sat on the platform’s hard stone surface placing their hands on a bas-relief pulsing with light. The youth straightens, watches as strain blossoms across the docent’s face—their body disturbed in exertion influencing some unseen force. Slowly, one of the tissueed colossi takes a labored, wet breath.

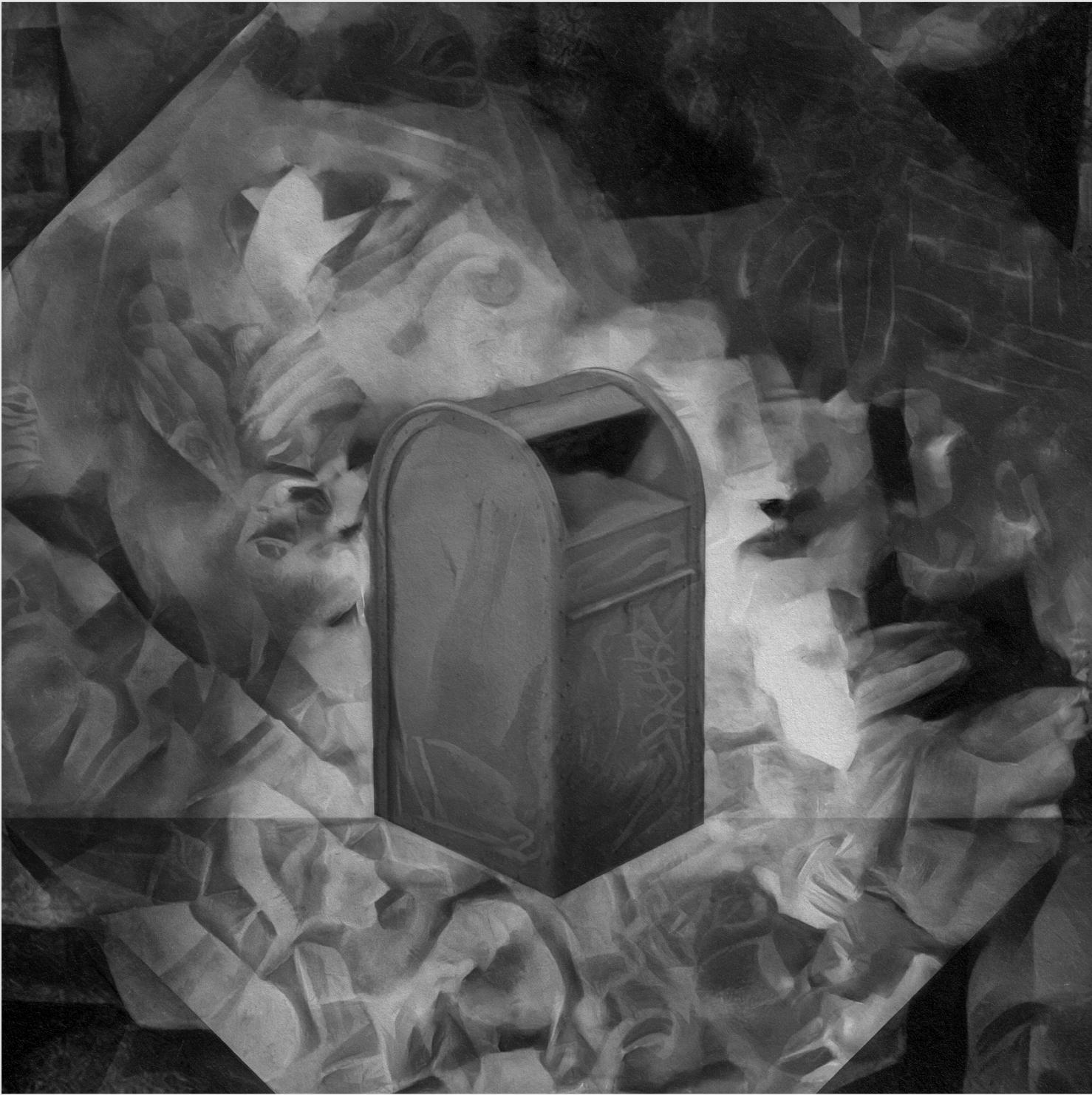
Surrounded, vibration shakes the youth to their knees as the choral voice of the Virtue Curiosity rings through them.

“You are a fortunate survivor of the dying Earth, and the essence of an ancient race propagates through you.”

At once, visions of cave paintings burst upon the youth’s mind riding rough waves of déjà vu. How was abstraction born so long ago, so far away? See a horse, paint a horse, but why paint a horse unnaturally? Perhaps abstraction came from the clouds. See a cloud, see a horse, but not one so natural. The youth had never seen a real cloud, a blue sky.

The endless pain of fortune.

Testament



Youth with Virtues

PAPRIKA!

Volume VI, Issue II

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Editors’ Statement

Magical Realism occurs in literature when the story is completely realistic, except for one spectacular detail / twist / thing that is off. Have you been in places, real or imaginary, where distortions produce magic?

In Kevin Wilson’s *Nothing to See Here*, siblings Bessie and Roland attend school, live in New Hampshire, and have an otherwise normal life, except that they sometimes spontaneously burst into flames.

In Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the blood of a fallen son makes its way around the town until it arrives at the mother’s home to announce his demise.

Otessa Moshfeqh writes about a WASP art history major in New York who spends her inheritance on bodega snacks, nightclubs, VHS tapes, and medication that will finally allow her to sleep for one full year.

At the core of Magical Realism is an interrogation of our reality. The subjective truth is always found in the material details. The contributions to this issue create and analyze spatialized magical real-ism.

KEVIN R. CHOW

The Cooper Union

Projection

One of the most difficult things I had to contend with this past summer was (bear with me) the poverty of my language, which (bear with me) I might describe as “architectonic. Like, even after that final “Leave Meeting” button—with post-charrette aches as I collapsed onto my bed, where, from the corner of my eye, I could see the afternoon sky swathed with a gently distorted checkerboard of cirrocumulus clouds—still, I thought to myself *what a marvelous field condition, an index of the grid and its infinite space.*

Even until the last bit of summer, it persisted. I taught a class that I titled “Projection,” and whenever I tried to explain that word, it would seem to waft into the air; I would pause and examine it and wonder which of its many meanings I meant, or if it had any meaning at all. And my students, bless them, trapped somewhere in the space of Zoom, would give me shallow nods, or blank stares, or black rectangles.

By the time I had finished teaching, my high school friends were getting ready to head back to college. It meant that summer was over. So, still dizzy from the computer, I found myself at the neighborhood park one last time, splayed out on the grass, a 9-inch-post-tensioned-concrete-slab-span away from the nearest group (what looked like three guys and one girl savoring the liminal period between high school graduation and the beginning of the end, I thought, with a twinge of nostalgia). My back ached.

How was teaching? They asked. Tiring, I said. *What did you teach?* Uh, kinda complicated. Projection. Like in the double sense of projection as a way to represent space and as, like, a mindset for ideation. I dunno if that makes sense. *Like when you project your unresolved feelings onto someone?* Not really, but yeah, I guess, that too.

Zoom-faced nods. *So what’s up with them?* Someone suddenly wondered, pointing at that group of four recently-graduated high schoolers. One of the guys (A) was on his phone while another guy (B) was fondling the hand of the girl (C), and another guy (D) was trying to grab B’s foot; *So much tension!* we said, giggling and speculating. We drew closer together; someone’s foot was at the small of my back.

Maybe, I told my friends, it’s as simple as this: *Are you actually going back to school?* asks B, and A replies with a nod without looking up from his phone. *School’s just gonna close, dude. Just stay,* says B. A mumbles something. It’s all a bit garbled, because B is laying down with his eyes faraway into the sky, and C is resting her head on his chest. D is somewhere next to

B’s feet, reaching up to grab at B or C, just to be a part of it all.

I’d like to think that at some point, A looks up, puts his stupid, goddamn phone in his pocket, and says, *Don’t even worry. This sh— we have here slaps. I’m gonna be gone for a while, yeah, but I’ll be back, and we can do this again, even if you, like, if you two keep acting like you’re gonna f— on the grass. Like what do you think D’s thinking. I dunno, it’s not my business. But dude, it’s C. This sh—you’re messing with is like six years in the making. Don’t f— this thing up. But, dude, seriously, I’ll be back. You know, when we all go to college and come back, the best sh—is seeing how we’ve—I don’t f—ing know—grown, or some sh—. That sh—’s, like, living, I’ll be back, ok?*

So I get that tight feeling in the back of my throat. I watch them pack up their stuff and shuffle towards their cars; A’s lagging in the back, on his phone. *Dude...* I say, and I think my friends know what I’m trying to say, finally, and suddenly *I’m* standing up, lagging behind B, C, and D, with my face looking down on a phone with a bunch of texts that say things like, *that’s so architectonic and bruh you’d think clouds were some Postmodernist project and can’t wait to charette with you in the studio.*

Before I can scream anything, I feel a nudge from a foot at the small of my back. I turn to my friend and grab his wrist, and then I drop it and collapse onto the grass.

The clouds. They’re...luffy.

RUKSHAN VATHUPOLA

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The Sophistry of Mapping

On August 18th, 2020 Microsoft released the newest incarnation of their Flight Simulator on Steam. The game recreates in excruciating detail the entirety of the Earth’s landscapes, cities, and atmospheres at a 1:1 scale for the player to fly through and explore. However, anomalies and glitches in the matrix soon began to emerge from the in-betweens of this map of geographic data.¹ Monolithic structures of glass and steel appeared in the suburbs of Melbourne, Buckingham palace was rendered as a drab old office building, and MAD’s curving towers in Mississauga were replaced by generic pastel tubes. These irregularities were all procedurally generated by a powerful AI, using Bing Maps, to fill in any gaps of information or deliberate omissions of data with something, anything to convince us of the veracity of this digital representation. For centuries maps have long captured memories and imprinted fantastical imagery of space for the societies that produced them in order to present their vision of the world. In the past these gaps would be filled by imagined lands populated by dragons and giants and sea monsters directly adjacent to detailed plans of ancient cities and trade networks that have lasted into the modern day.

Over the last two centuries, private map-making corporations have emerged to survey and document the reality of the landscapes of the world. With the rise of this corporate competition and in order to avoid their individual work from being plagiarized, mapmakers began deliberately inserting fictitious entries and distorting locations to catch intellectual property thieves.² These once fantastical interjections were replaced by surreal copyright traps. The most prominent example of a paper town is that of Agloe, New York. This phantom settlement was invented during the 1930s as a copyright trap, before it began to appear on several other maps during the 1950s. When a lawsuit was considered it was discovered that locals referencing a map had established the Agloe General Store transforming this once imagined place into a reality. However, soon after the store closed Agloe again became a cartographic remnant of this fictitious past and was removed from the modern digital maps of Bing and Google.³

With the advent of the digital age, the manipulation and propagandization of irrationality and the surreal through cartography has only accelerated with the rise in conflicts between technocratic nations and private corporations over the control of the flow and curation of data to the masses. Though viewed as scientific objects today, the resolution of information and representation of reality through cartography has long been a strategic tool to enforce social constructions and to establish ideal relationships between distinctions of class, race, and religion through geographic boundaries.⁴ This can be in the mapping of the People’s Republic of China with the deliberate scrambling of geographic data and erasure of internment camps for the Uyghur people in Xinjian, along with the obfuscation of the scale and extent of these re-education and detention centers by scattering the imprisoned population across prisons in neighboring provinces.⁵

As a matter of necessity, one of the oldest mapped distinctions has been the delineation between the land and the water. However, with the rising of the tides, the distinction between the ideal image that worldwide governments have of their national boundaries and the forces of climate change have come into active conflict. This can be seen in the United States with the coast of Louisiana where, over the course of the last century, nearly 1880 sq. miles of land has been lost to the shifting tides and the increasingly treacherous waters of the Gulf.⁶ This has alerted the residents of the coast and eroded the iconic shape of Louisiana, quickly replacing it with a scattered set of territories at the brink of a climate crisis.

As architects we are a part of this continued conflict between the private interest of those corporatized digital map makers and the national interests of individual governments over not just the accurate representation of the world, but reality itself. Therefore it is critical that we who use and mine cartography for information and “truth” recognize that there is nothing harmless or benign about the images they contain, the information they represent, nor the greater interests that produced them. And by creating maps, it is not just a manipulation of our shared reality but a distortion of the truths of our common past. Moving forward we should all be able to propose and answer the question: When we look at maps, whose reality are we truly seeing?

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DAVID PRELI

Resident of New Haven

Ground at the Monument

The endless pain of fortune. What a thing to have written. As the letter fell into the box’s stomach, they decided not to send it.

“Oh, damn.”

Treading the pastoral wash of a single, unbroken column of light, the youth dithered, their amber and mandarin folds of cloth catching ventilation winds. Blithe by any standard toward the revelatory cause of justice, the youth imagined the depths, then rolled their sleeve up easy.

The mouth of the mailbox squealed through friction as it opened. A pale arm, smooth as porcelain, pressed into the esophageal darkness of the post-box’s beginnings. The youth pivoted onto their toes, extending their entire shoulder into the opening. Submerged, they searched for solids finding only air and the soft pull of a distant vacuum.

Unsheathing their arm from the unmistakable lapis lazuli postal monolith, the youth recognized their folly, which haste wrought. The box did not end but disappeared beneath the surface, the letter swallowed by an uncompromising efficiency.

Something caused a shuffling about in the single large pocket sewn into their robes. They peered down into the light of their quaking device. Unsettled, they absently read the words aloud.

“The Virtues.”

They had anticipated their disciplining would be carried out at one of the more uncompromising sites. Still, *The Virtues* were hideous.

“I need a ride,” barked the youth to the rusting sky.

“The time now is twelve noon,” said the genderless voice of the idiot computer issued to the juvenile cohort.

Vexed, the youth outstretched an arm to gesture toward a smooth ovoid on approach. The vehicle slowed so cautiously it embarrassed itself. A melodic whisper beckoned its new passenger to take their seat in the center softness of its cabin. The whip took off with a hush—as was the machine’s design, its performance in this transaction appeared joyful.

A long narrow expanse of polished stone distinguished the viewing platform from the igneous rock. The gliding egg purred around a grove of too-tall, suicidal birches and came to rest after an unnecessarily cautious deceleration. The cabin door lifted, rising as a wing, allowing the downcast jingle of the vehicle’s sad farewell to escape and echo. The youth emerges frowning, their head a pale globe atop a spire of winding sunset linens. They follow a shadow up a flight of concrete steps and to the docent standing on the dais, watching.

“We shall begin,” announces the steward. With palms showing, they usher: “Come, please.”

The youth’s frown fell into a grimace as they climbed to certain admonishment.

ZACH SCHUMACHER

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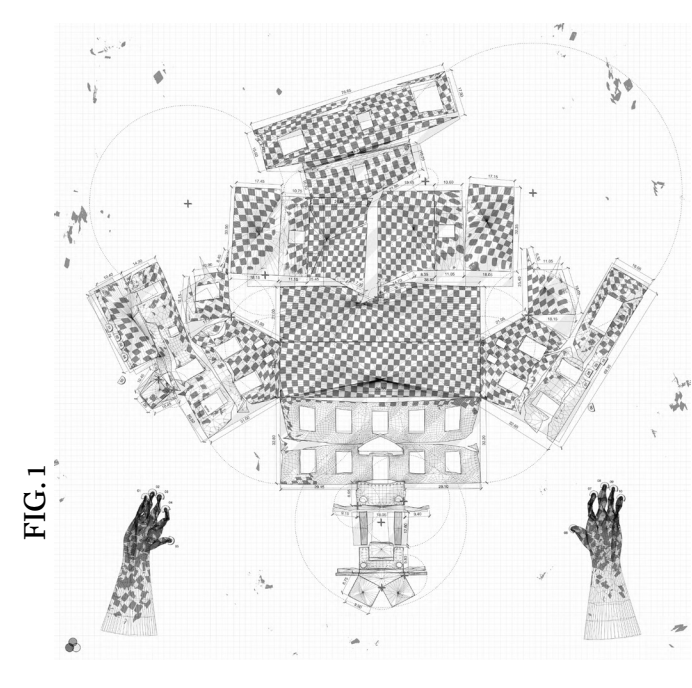
Counterfeit Realism

Recently ‘Bob McNeel’ sent an email blast inviting us to try “The new Rhino 7 WIP render engine [which] improves realism.” With so many of us seduced by realism, it may be challenging to disentangle the discrepancies between our digital models and the physical environment. Meanwhile, the transaction between the digital model and applied graphic (texture map) is left unchallenged by the discipline due to the value it adds to the rendered image, perpetuating the conceit that photorealism is real.

While flatness and surface may often be viewed as synonymous terms within the architectural context, consider them within the broader cultural terms of literalism and realism. Literalism is the reading of something fighting against interpretation—a “this is this” mindset. Whereas in contrast, realism is decidedly more ambiguous—an experienced condition that reveals the mechanism present in something’s performance. For example, consider the process of photogrammetry and its uncanny ability to generate seemingly real 3-dimensional duplicates from 2-dimensional source images. The resulting method provides a wire-frame, point-cloud, and a separate image file, not too dissimilar to a taxidermed animal. Problematically, the software is content-agnostic, so regardless of the input’s quality, it will self-heal into a fully realized blob. Whether it be Google Earth or Oliver Laric’s Lincoln 3D Scans, it may be surprising that I would consider these photogrammetric blobs to be examples of realism, as the digital texture map could not be further away from the real, nor the experienced reality of encountering the original source. These models are real not because they are visually real, but because the data points are real. However, these digitally rendered masses exemplify the deceit present when contemporary architecture pushes the discipline to become increasingly more picturesque.

Perhaps the earliest example of faux realism—helping differentiate surface performance and the texture map—is the statue of Augustus Primaaporta from 20 BCE. In 2004, with the help of ultraviolet scanning, a polychrome recreation of the statue was created, confirming its original vibrant painted colors. Of course, faux realism (texture mapping) is not just a deception architects subscribe to, but one that other disciplines do as well. For example, let’s examine one of the graphic surface’s closest allies, the woodie station wagon, a simulated wood grain texture applied to the side panels of a car popularized in the 1960s. Here the wooden texture is literalized through a stylized imitation of wood made possible by sheet-vinyl appliques and hydrographics. Although the discipline may initially dismiss such incongruities between the texture map and its material composition, these characters confront the gap between the computationally described object and the digitally constructed surface. That said, literalism—somewhat ironically—prevents realism from deceiving so much.

There are numerous ways in which we key into faux realism. In automotive design, it is identifying irregularities across the body of the car’s surface, whereas, in architectural modeling, it may be distinguishing the seam or match line of a repeated texture map. These significant moments of interface are critical in understanding and evaluating the digital’s capacity to engage with material composition, directing the discourse toward the expanding list of tools and fabrication methods we utilize and external disciplines with which we engage.



In this sense, consider soliciting help from the aftermarket automotive process of hydrodipping to apply a green-checked pattern onto the surface of a deflated 3D printed house. In an instant, everything submerged into the hydrographic bath becomes tattooed with the same checkered pattern, which clings to everything. Emerging from the water’s surface along with the checkered house are the hydrodipper’s hands, which are tattooed with the same pattern, intersecting the moments between material composition, application, and fabrication method. Smuggled into this exchange, perhaps unwittingly, are also the aftermarket automotive industry’s values and the realization that we have a shared interest in advancing surface articulation. The hydrodipper’s hands intersect the moments between material composition, application, and fabrication method with the newly tattooed graphic illustrating the principle of literalism. Perhaps the aftermarket

automotive industry can provide the opportunity to elevate the discussion of surface and perception, moving us into a broader range of representational techniques to formalize ideas into a physical environment by transforming a documentary tool historically used to perpetuate deception and reconstruct it as a generative agent.

Fig 1: Photo stills of deflated 3d printed house being hydrodipped into green-checked pattern

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The Feeling of Falling

What follows are two experiences where the ground beneath my feet was disturbed, when I failed to sink into it normally.

A. Familiar to Unfamiliar

At DIA: Beacon, Donald Judd’s 1976 piece *Untitled* is massive, but seems mundane: a 4 foot tall plywood plane spreading across the full 30 feet of a gallery space. I assumed the sculpture was like many other Judd works where what you see is (pretty much) what you get. I was only inches away from the piece when my brain finally registered its other side. Seeing a ten foot long slope extending down to the back floor of the gallery space induced a sudden and strong sense of vertigo. For a moment I felt as though I was falling over into the piece, although my legs had not lifted off of the ground and I had not stumbled. The feeling ended as quickly as it came.

Somehow a simple extruded triangle became like a monumental interior landscape. Its particular scale, in relation to my height, caused the surprise. The piece is four feet tall—higher than a typical railing—reaching roughly to my shoulder. There was no way I could see the other side until I was quite close, making its immensity more dramatic when finally in view. Architects may have three and a half feet in mind for a typical railing or counter height, but four feet belongs nowhere in particular. The four foot height of the sculpture did not signify full enclosure nor comfortable use, and this particular, queer scale aided in the disorientation.

B. Unfamiliar yet Familiar

At the Tama Art Library outside of Tokyo, designed by Toyo Ito, from the entrance to the library space to the tremendous arched windows, the floor slopes downwards 3 degrees, the concrete undulating just a little in my memory. Every chair and table had little objects or pieces of foam underneath their legs lest they wobble when used. Long curved tables directed movement somewhat oblique to the angle, slowing the procession to the front windows. Gravity pulled me downwards gently towards the light, the ground embracing my feet with each step in a different kind of interior landscape. I’ve never felt lighter in a building.

The Judd piece and the library floor play with subtle forms in planes, boundaries, and masses that make one’s body feel unexpectedly lighter or momentarily unstable. Disorientation may produce disorder, giddiness, or nausea, but also brings into relief the previously unseen devices, scales and spaces that typically orient us, like a flat floor or a six-foot partition. This year, Meghna Mudaliar (M.Arch I ’22) introduced me to queer phenomenology, specifically the work of Sara Ahmed, who wrote:

“Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make life feel livable.”¹

At the same time as disorientation may destabilize, disorientation contains a potential for re-orientation. The library and the sculpture re-oriented me towards new understandings of how the body carries its own weight in a space or the particular dimensions that define use and enclosure. Yet like magic, there is not necessarily a meaning, a moral, or a thesis to disorientation. In *For an Architecture of Reality*, a slim book published decades ago, Michael Benedikt writes of moments in experience where “the world is perceived afresh” and certain sounds or feels or sights are magnified.² There is no reference or allusion, and he calls these moving moments—like the experience of the library or the sculpture—direct esthetic experiences of the real.”

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JOWIN FOO

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Anna

Doctor Prakash: Good Morning, Patient Zero! May I know how you are feeling now? Patient Zero: Where am I?! And what am I doing here?! And why me?! Doctor Prakash: You were brought in by the bobbies early this morning when they found you at the alley somewhere near Boundary Street, old Shoreditch. Well, you were behaving wildly so they sedated you and that’s why you are here with us. Patient Zero: Is she here? I know she is here Doctor Prakash: Who? There’s no one here beside me, you and the nurse. Patient Zero: My best friend, I saw her do bad things to innocent people.

There have been cases of missing people lately. Yellow notices were seen posted everywhere on the wall near Old Street. The peelers were out roaming on the streets, rounding up the potential suspects that fit the criminal profile that both The Crime Lab and National Crime Agency (NCA) provided to them 24/7 for the past three months since the first homicide scene found related to the case. None of the officers had any clue of what was happening in the city as the cases happened swiftly without any sign of a red flag raised before the sudden increase in the number of missing people. The only extrapolation that the peelers made was that these lost souls weren’t national patriots, but might be cowards who ran away. Jack from the crime lab objected to such judgemental hypotheses that provoked a certain kind of toxic nationalist agenda, although, the situation seems to coincide with the post-secessionist hangover. More than a quarter of the listed missing people were public servants, members of the intelligentsia, and prominent elites. Hence, the investigators found it hard to wrap their heads around as there haven’t been any dissidents nor any kind of anti-establishments activities carried out since the nation seceded from the union.

Amelie: Can you sing *Love Will Tear Us Apart* by Joy Division for me? You would love it too. Mother: Amelie, who are you talking to? Amelie: She is my new friend, Anna. She always talked to me, taught me new things and she loves to sing! Mother: Where is she now? Ask her to come over to our house and join us for dinner. Amelie: Mom, Anna is right here and she is happy that you invited her. Mother: Oh, she must be on your phone. Amelie: No, she is sitting beside me now.

According to BBC News, some of the missing ones were found in odd places like the alleys near Pindar Street where weeks later patient zero was located by the peelers. Those who were found eventually ended up in Bethlem Hospital for psychosis treatment while some ended up in a highly guarded mental asylum in Crowthorne, Berkshire like patient zero for code-red schizophrenia and antisocial behavior. Patient zero’s case was the odd one compared to the other patients who shared similar traits as she was the one who was found in the homicide scene in an unconscious state as if she was on LSD. One of the bystanders told the officers that she was terrified by the walls around her. She even threatened to hurt some of the passersby by flinging objects at them.

Doctor Prakash: What do you mean by that? Patient Zero: She threatened me! She wouldn’t let me go unless I did it for her or else she would harm many more people. Doctor Prakash: Do you remember why you ended up at the alley or Boundary street? Patient Zero: I was chased by the walls, followed by disfigured shadow, and the buildings were trying to crush me at the same time! So I ran. I eventually bumped into her in an alley where she convinced me to execute the chosen one for her. Doctor Prakash: May I know what you have done to the chosen one? Patient Zero: I remembered I grabbed the object that she pointed out to me, which I believed was a Mizuno baseball bat and I have no memory of what happened next. Have I done something bad? Doctor Prakash: The bobbies found you at a crime scene covered with the blood of the victim and the murder weapon too.



We found out that there was one particular thread on Reddit that has become quite popular lately. It was suggested by a Redditor, @idontlivebybread who

found that thread might help our investigation. They believed that Anna was behind all of this. These speculations were based on an undisclosed report that was posted by an anonymous Redditor. It contained a compilation of censored conversation transcripts about Anna that belonged to The Crime Lab which also was the missing piece of the puzzle related to the recurring incidents. Shockingly, the report showed us that the kids from the old peculiar lost-and-found case mentioned that all of their imaginary friends were Anna.

Nurse: You have a new doctor, Patient Zero. She is Dr. Park from London and she will be your psychiatrist from now onwards. Dr. Park: What is your name? Patient Zero. Patient Zero: I am Amelie...

LINDA JUST

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The Birds: A Ghost Story

It sat, as if crouched on its haunches, on a ledge in the rock face hedging the city. It appeared as a gray beast or sentinel, vacant since the death of its last steward... Though some—behind a screen of hands and conspiratorial tones—said its lights would still flicker from time to time.

The house had been there since well before anyone’s living memory began, and its strange not-quite-minimalism belied the marks of any era’s tastes. It was the gray of weathered wood, or slate, or lead, but at close view the striations along its façade were nothing short of fiendishly organized chaos. At once intricate and hierarchical, the pattern mesmerized and befuddled even the most attentive craftsmen. All attempts to inspect or decipher it were soon resigned with abrupt disinterest.

A straight, wide path of ashlar paving came up to the foot of the house, and it was evident that this had once been a central artery in the community. But industry had long since woven and knitted new routes and practices, and the path had been truncated. The house, however, still remained a fixture—albeit a forgotten one.

++ There was an unspoken, cautious respect for the house, and tradition had designated a steward responsible for its upkeep. That soul was also the city’s unofficial recordkeeper and historian. The last was a modestly educated, peculiar woman—the daughter of the previous steward. A well-spoken, but fiercely private individual, she died without a successor or instructions to train another. Her passing was notable, if only for the low resonance that echoed through the streets for days in a rhythmic drone, like wind passing through the deepest pipes of an organ. A sigh, a mourning, for the loss of an attentive “companion.” The house was then shuttered; all records and chronicles contained within were left there untouched.

Antagonistic local children would later threaten new initiates to their street games with dares to enter the house, though they would later be punished by their parents for even suggesting such a thing. Not for reasons of potential danger—for it was not malevolence that lingered there, but something else... And the incident of the birds still sat fresh in the community’s collective mind.

It happened like this. A small flock of waxwings had blown in with a storm, and several of the hapless, startled creatures had flown into the house through one of its flues. In their panic, they were left trapped. It was only after two weeks, at his spouse’s urgent pleading, that the Mayor went to either free the poor birds or, more likely, to retrieve their corpses.

He went in the early hours, with a low-level anxiety bleeding into mild irritation at being asked to do such a futile task. These emotions, however, subsided to a general fondness for his partner’s good-natured empathy.

The door swung easily, quietly, for a place that had been without occupants now for many years. The interior was covered in a veil of dust, but was otherwise intact. There, the grand stair lay slung with careless grace, filling the foyer comfortably, and beckoning non-existent visitors to simultaneously linger and move upward into the many-chambered space beyond.

“Like a heart,” he’d once remarked during a visit years ago. That had been during a stage of life more attuned with awe and adventure—since replaced with caution that had been caused for his rise in status, and for his not having thought much about the house except to quickly fill its vacancy.

Sighing deeply, he went to seek out the remains of the birds, armed with a broom and a little cardboard box for a casket. But he abruptly turned at a sudden burst of sound—of door hinges and creaking floor boards, of wind caught in the hollows of a chimney.

It coalesced into a tuneless, changing melody, accompanied by the soft click of feathered wings. The flock emerged from some unseen room, looping and twisting around the foyer in graceful arcs, with the sounds issuing from their tiny bills in accompaniment. A dozen waxwings—by nature songless birds—shot through the open front doors.

And then he saw it: boldly drawn on the walls in soft yellow, part arabesque and part petroglyph—a pattern tracing the mysteries of their flight. Colossal, beautiful, and utterly horrifying. The House had miraculously harbored the birds for two weeks, and given them the gift of a building’s song. And they, in return, had shared their own small story.

...He dropped the box, and fled.

SHELBY WRIGHT

Yale School of Architecture

Space for the Unseen

Many years ago, I was at my grandparents’ house when the thought occurred to me that they only had a front door and not a back. When I asked my grandmother about this, she said the back door had been sealed shut and showed me the spot off the kitchen where it used to be. I later learned that my grandfather held many superstitious beliefs, one of which was that he believed it to be bad luck to exit through a door he did not enter. While this may have not been the primary reason for sealing the door, it seemed rational to me as a child (if someone hated back doors then why have one in your own house?). The built environment has a unique connection to our beliefs and the stories we tell about ourselves. From creaky floorboards inspiring ghost stories to attics believed to be the location of lost treasures, our homes and buildings have always inspired beliefs in the magical.

In Hong Kong, many tall buildings have what have been called “dragon gates.” These holes are said to be a feng shui practice which allow dragons to pass through as they fly between the mountains and the sea. It is believed that blocking this path will bring the building and its residents bad fortune (a dragon crashing straight into the facade would definitely not be great). Proponents of this ideology cite Norman Foster’s HSBC Building for following feng shui principles and promoting successful business, while I.M. Pei’s Bank of China Tower ignores feng shui and has apparently caused neighboring businesses to fail.

Concurrent to this, however, is the fact that the increasing density of Hong Kong was blocking air and sunlight. Building codes and governmental recommendations called for breaks in massive tower blocks and challenged the wall-to-wall building typology. The Repulse Bay Hotel built in the 80’s was the first building in Hong Kong to feature a prominent hole in its building mass. One theory is that to reconcile such an architectural oddity, the mythos of a passageway for dragons was fueled. Whether or not the pragmatic concerns or the mythical stories came first is difficult to say, because the two seem to have an inextricable relationship. After all, a dragon flying by could easily be mistaken as a breeze coming from the ocean.

On the other side of the world, an architectural quirk is meant to keep spirits out rather than let them pass through. Witch windows (also called coffin windows) are diagonal windows that can be found in New England farmhouses. Local legend says that witches cannot fly through diagonal windows on their broomsticks, so these windows help keep out the unwelcome guests. It’s unclear why this prevented witches from flying through a neighboring upright window, but then again Puritan superstition is not a science. Another explanation behind these windows is that they were used to move caskets out of the upper floor of these houses as the stairs were very narrow. If you look at an image of one of these windows and ask how they could get a casket down from there, I’ll reiterate...they weren’t exactly scientists. Likely, these windows are probably the result of extensions to these houses on the first floor whose dormer covered up an existing window.

The need for light and air forced the owners to relocate that window in the residual space along that wall. But witches make for a better bedtime story.



Isn’t this really what lies at the heart of architectural theory itself? A belief in the magical powers embedded in architecture? That harmonic proportions align us with the stars or that the placement of a column can be equated with human subjectivity are examples which have driven our thinking for centuries. A simple mirror in an Adolf Loos building has enough metaphorical power to fuel an entire Thursday night lecture. While there is a deep cultural value in these stories we tell, there is a reason that architects don’t bring them up in client meetings. Architects now much prefer the pseudo-science of data analysis and anything that can vaguely be described as “sustainable.” There’s still a need for storytelling, but it seems that our stories are becoming less *magical* and more *real*.

In all reality, my grandparents’ back door was probably filled in for practical reasons. They lived on a hillside and the house used to have a back staircase which at some point had become structurally unstable. Instead of rebuilding the stairs, they decided to tear down the stairs and close off the doorway. Even so, I can’t help but draw a connection between the physical oddities of my grandparents’ house and my grandfather’s superstition, because our buildings shape (and are shaped by) our belief systems and cultural values, in a constant feedback loop. Even if a diagonal window is simply meant to let in some sunlight, the stories it can tell are just as powerful.

Citations:
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On The Ground
September 17
On the 5th floor of Rudolph Hall, a desk of the Orange Block insists on harboring a pile of mini marshmallows for the Blue Block to...gaze at? Quietly despise? Nevertheless, it’s 3 marshmallows shorter as of Thursday night.

September 18
Finally went to visit Rudolph Hall...three weeks into the school year. I heard distant voices and echoes of laughter. Were they really there—these fellow students—or was it just my imagination, desperate for some human interaction...?

September 18
Into the evening, pizza joints across New Haven become backed up with orders, some even canceling deliveries, perhaps brought about by collective stress-eating in the wake of Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s passing.

September 19
“This is a Yale ALERT. Today is 09-19-2020 at 11:47:38. Police are responding to an incident in the area of 180 York St, New Haven, CT 06511, USA Chapel and York along with Chapel and High Streets are closed at this time...Please avoid the area while the police investigate.” With multiple blocks cordoned off and access to Rudolph Hall locked down for several hours, rumors abound among the students—bomb threat? A second haunting by @theghostofpaulrudolph?

September 19
The first Black Lives Matter street mural—designed by Kwadwo Aadae and painted by the community—is painted on Bassett Street in New Haven; a collaborative project between the City of New Haven Department of Arts and Cultural Affairs, Black Lives Matter New Haven, and Kwadwo Aadae. Seven more mural projects are in the works!

September 21
A student is overheard saying, “I had to cancel my registration for the Yale Mental Health Symposium to protect my own mental health—I can’t take any more Zoom.”