

# JUNKSPACE

*Hilary Powell*

“If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet.” Rem Koolhaas.<sup>1</sup> *Junkspace*.<sup>2</sup>

J.G Ballard references this melancholic human debris of the universe in his description of dead astronauts flight trajectories “when these new stars rose in the west an attempt had been made to shoot them down-there was the unsettling prospect of the skies a thousand years hence, littered with orbiting refuse-but later they were left in this natural graveyard forming their own monument.”<sup>3</sup>.

This aerial perspective on the world is paradoxically useful in grounding this discussion on the very real junkspace that our urban landscape is composed of. Turning from outer space, moving in from idealised satellite images and utopian city form to the very real, inhabited space of this earth. Indeed, Junkspace could be applied to the entire city space in relation to the fact that “The spatial form of the city reveals a patchwork of incongruous left over pieces alongside a set of artfully designed compositions”<sup>4</sup>

Everyday city life does not gel well with any imposed utopian order and zooming in the satellite observer would find that structure is continuously subverted. This organic growth and juxtaposition is differentiated from the junkspace Rem Koolhaas outlines. His junkspace describes an excess of ‘non places’- shopping mall, precinct, leisure space - an accumulation of conditioned and conditional space. These constitute the fallout or meltdown of modernisation- a programme of entropy not progress offering a ‘seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed” built to fall or fail.

As an event or intervention my practice is concerned with operating in and in between this disjointed landscape questioning and activating the junk sites cast aside by a system of perpetual degeneration.

On the one hand there is the wasted ground or in between spaces leftover by Koolhaas’s junkspace- spaces adjacent to the freeway, beside the house, behind the retail strip. These are sites in which the trajectory of economic vectors that maintain and invent the shape of the city find nothing to carry or transmit them, let alone give them plastic presence.

Then there is more loaded junkspace : buildings that have been converted into such through changing patterns of use and value perhaps due to the very presence of secret and known histories and events less open to improvisational planning.

The very definition of “junk” implies its potential for re-use. It is differentiated from rubbish as waste or worthless material<sup>5</sup> -excess from a system of production, leakage from a general economy. Garbage presupposes decomposition, Junk lies on the edge of this system, its destiny unstable and open to changes in time, use, value and function.

Just as the leftovers and traces of humankind’s production orbit the earth, junk sites and objects circulate the urban environment awaiting re-entry and transformation by the forces of urban renewal - dual narratives of urban demolition and preservation.

Operating in these “in between” spaces in between these temporal processes I believe in the potential to “put to use,” not in terms of original purpose or functionality, but as part of a temporary rejuvenation of these “lost” sites through artistic appropriation.

It is such sites that present the challenge of a site-specific practice. The challenge is to intervene in and interrogate the built environment and the contemporary ruins of junkspace along with the linear histories they imply: "History itself is a construction of the present age and must always be read backwards from the ruins which persist in the here and now. It is to be conceived as both a destructive and fundamentally redemptive enterprise." <sup>6</sup>

## **Recycling**

Recycling can be defined as to reuse, particularly to reprocess or "to recondition and adapt to a new function" <sup>7</sup>

There is a tendency within the growing nostalgia industries to create isolated monuments from a junkspace that in its previous life was a frequented dynamic place. "They are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory' and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position." <sup>8</sup>

In my work as an artist, alone and with group Luna Nera, I aim to put forward an alternative model and theory of recycling than that espoused by Koolhaas's Junkspace and shared by the heritage industry and "gentrification" developers who are programmed to "Restore, rearrange, reassemble, revamp, renovate, revise, recover, redesign, return - redo,, rent." Verbs that start with re- produce Junkspace. Reduce urban to urbanity.

My proposed model of recycling may not mean permanent physical/chemical transformation. It is a temporary transformation of use or meaning and has more to do with a playful reconstruction and Walter Benjamin's philosophy of redemption.

The old fashioned and cast off are rescued by the child and reassembled in his or her own world in miniature. The demolition site, the space where the old is torn down to make way for the new is transformed into a site for playful (re) construction. The child gathers up and saves the fragments found in the modern metropolis and reassembles them in new constellations. <sup>9</sup>

Benjamin's redemptive conception of history and his allegorical figure of the child can be applied to site responsive installation practice. Encountering and transforming the environment using the motif of recycling in both idea and material this shares Benjamin's (in his entire theory of junk) and the surrealists belief that the use and juxtaposition of "junk" objects (or spaces) can lead to a certain 'profane illumination.' In this way such play can be seen as transgression and mimesis prompting a reciprocal relationship to objects rather than commodity fetishism.

The child has been described as a "finder and keeper of lost things" versus an adult's "remembrance of lost times". This theme of the redemption of the cast-offs and by products of society, the unwanted and discarded, is discussed in relation to both objects and spaces here inverting the expected value system, and putting this wasteland or junkspace to 'use'. Transforming, exposing and utilising the material poetics and secrets of the mundane.

Practice then becomes a form of embrace of the outmoded be it site or object rescuing artefacts images and ideas from the brink of extinction and rewriting their specific histories.

## **art/site/event/junkspace**

Koolhaas critiques certain public art practices:

"On its triumphal march as content provider, art extends far beyond the museum's ever increasing boundaries. Outside, in the real world the art planner spreads junkspace's fundamental incoherence by assigning defunct mythologies to residual surfaces and plotting three dimensional works in left over emptiness. Scouting for authenticity their touch seals the fate of what was real, taps it for incorporation in Junkspace."

I believe that the extremely temporal nature of a particular site responsive practice alludes such categorisation. It does not lay claim to the monumental, it is in turn subtle and secretive and an effective means of communication. Rather than providing a static object for contemplation it opens up a discourse around what site or junkspace actually involves.

Using the musical analogy of a city score it attempts to allow the lost stations on the dial sound out again as spaces of relations and exchange.

## **Event**

The art event can be seen as a moment of rupture opening up these sites within the continuum of time or urban space to potential and possibility. It becomes a means of 'eventualising' our history of spatial distributions in which it interrupts the self-evidence of its context, historical and conceptual, and obliges it to modify itself.

As such the event becomes a space or time of difference - a sudden "drama" or rupture that cannot be explained by mere function. This links back to Kaprow and the movement of art onto the streets as a new possible setting for the staging and siting of art... a questioning or problematisation of accepted frameworks of reception. Likewise, Tschumi expands on the event speaking of the emergence of a disparate multiplicity eventualising the fixed and monumental.

It could be said that we live in a fractured space (or a breakbeat era)<sup>10</sup> made up of accidents and incidents. i.e. events.

Discussing a city space in such deconstructionist terms leads to an overlap of architectural and cinematic analogies using montage as a means to explain the gaps and ruptures in spaces and time; according to Tschumi:

"Montage as a technique includes such devices as repetition, inversion, substitutions and insertion. These devices suggest an art of rupture, whereby invention resides in contrast, even in contradiction."<sup>11</sup>

In this montage of attractions disparate shots or sites are constructed temporally and spatially and events appear partly as a convergence towards a story and partly as a succession of independent tableaux reassembled in a jump-cut space.

The space of the city can be conceived as a practical cinépoetics in which the gaps or jump cuts in use, structure or value become open to interventionist strategies.<sup>12</sup>

The potential for disjunction and juxtaposition is inherent in this system of montage utilising counterpoint in a surreal method of deconstruction.

These events happen in the midst of and also in between histories making time and space for a renewed understanding of the sites of history and events and their relationship.

These intermediary tentative dynamic spaces that these events form and occupy move people as they perceive some sort of leap into the extraordinary.

In a similar spirit to Walter Benjamin, Henri Le Febvre claims that within the lived experience there are 'moments' which reveal the emancipatory capacity of potential situations. This can be seen to involve a break with our own self-constructions offering the possibility of a "space" to re-examine the history of how we take these self-constructions for granted and expose us to the invention of new ones.

In terms of this investigation these self-constructions are the events produced in concrete urban sites that are freed of their former use and value. i.e. derelict; e.g. the abandoned factory, cinema etc. By constructing new event constructions within such sites drawing on the history and phenomenology of the site these events playfully reconstruct these elements positing a certain "once upon a time to come" and creating spaces of difference and possibility.

By tracing these particular urban histories the architectural event becomes part of the unfolding of a story - a story in which these events form the turning point of a narrative opening up the site to new potential outside of its expected use and value.

“The question of events is also the question of the invention of ourselves.”

Derrida believes that “the invention must possess ‘ the singular structure of an event.”<sup>13</sup> and both the words event and invention are derived etymologically from the same root (venir = to come). To invent is to “come upon” something for the first time, the event is part of this process.

This “invention” is repeated in by Bernard Tschumi: “The very heterogeneity of the definition of architecture-space, action, movement makes it into that event, that place of shock, or that place of the invention of ourselves. The event is the place where the rethinking and reformulation of the different elements of architecture, many of which have resulted in or added to contemporary social inequities, may lead to their solution. By definition it is the place of a combination of differences”<sup>14</sup>

Returning to Foucault’s rethinking of space and the histories of those spaces we construct for ourselves it is now useful to note that the events he explores are events of thought.- of new kinds of thinking seeing and doing - an interdisciplinary process and practice.

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## NOTES

1 Rem Koolhaas is an architect and theorist. He is founder and director of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Other Publications include *Delirious New York*; a retroactive manifesto for Manhattan (Monacelli 97), *S.M.L.XL* ( Monacelli 98) and *Mutations* (Actar Editorial 2001).

2 Unpublished article. Full version available at <http://www.btgJapan.org/rem.html>

3 J.G Ballard. ‘The cage of sand’ in collection of short stories *The voices of time*.(Phoenix 1992. First published 1963). He is a continuous source due to his preoccupation with themes of entropy and post apocalyptic landscapes and situations.

4 Boyer C. *The City of Collective Memory: Its historical imagery and architectural entertainments*. MIT Press Mass. 1994 P7

5 Pollard E. 1994. *The Oxford Paperback Dictionary*. Fourth edition. Oxford Univ Press. Oxford.

6. Gilloch G. 1996 Myth and Metropolis. Walter Benjamin and the city. Polity press p114

7 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition Houghton Mifflin Company. 2000.

8 Auge M. 1995 trans Howe J. *Non Places introduction to an anthropology of Super modernity* . Verso London. pp78

9 Benjamin W 1999.”*Illuminations*” Pimlico London

10 “Breakbeat” is a useful musical analogy for temporal and spatial interruption and the city read as a score. Breakbeat implies more than rhythmical repetition; it is rather a breaking of the pattern or displacing of the beat

11 Tschumi B. *Architecture and Disjunction*. Cam MIT press p191

12 This play of joints apparent in deconstructionist theory (see Tschumi’s relationship to Derrida and Eisenmann has been overtaken in recent philosophy e.g Deleuze by the notion of the fold....something that needs further reading and understanding.

13 Derrida J. *Psyche: L’invention de l’autre Paris* seuil 1987 p15

14 Tschumi in *Complexity*.jova no 6 Benjamin A. Replying to Questions using recent texts e.g. architecture + disjunction MIT press 1994.

