

# Construction Without End

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At some unspecified location, a small crowd manipulates elements of a stage set, transforming the place where it is, or it is to be, installed. The duration of the action matches that of Jordi Colomer's 2015 work *X-Ville*. It is a multiple action, as plural as the agents involved, all of whom are characters in a hypothetical city that is as ever-shifting as any city. *X-Ville*'s starting point is to be found in excerpts from a series of texts by the architect Yona Friedman, where utopia and urban space as its suitable framework are discussed.<sup>1</sup> Although up to a point *X-Ville* may be construed as a free staging of those excerpts (their dramatic and cinematic translation), viewers are soon overwhelmed by the behavior of this unknown-city where cardboard and wood represent iron and concrete, and fruit and vegetables represent vegetables and fruit, and "real" currency is exchanged for cards made of the same cardboard as the buildings. The reductivist scenery drives the characters' behavior into a level of circularity and gestural abstraction that soon questions the nature of the action itself. This evokes, like dreams in a huge hangover, disparate genres and theatrical forms from the last century of Western Modernity: documentary drama in Weimar Germany; *Ballet Mécanique*; slapstick comedy in silent films; improvisation theatre, street theatre; the Theatre of the Absurd; crowd happenings; the cinematic agit-prop; and even certain types of circus acts. References, therefore, go far beyond the textual, and the work's singularity lies in their overall synthesis.

<sup>1</sup> Yona Friedman, *Utopies réalisables* (1974). Paris & Tel-Aviv: L'Éclat, 2000; and "Où commence la ville", in *Manuels Vol. 1, 1975-1984*, Poitou: CNEAI, 2007.

My analysis in what follows focuses on certain actions within *X-Ville* – dramatic exercises of a non-figurative kind, we might say – where the problematic connection between work and its representation is brought into sharp relief. To put it differently: Up to what point is it possible to interpret an actor’s labor as work, and the worker as a character in the world-as-drama? On the basis of the ambiguity in these relationships, an even more unfathomable question arises as to what an actor may produce when (s)he is cast as a mason or a gardener: a house, an artwork, or the fragment of a potential artwork. Jordi Colomer’s *mot d’ordre* (or *mot de désordre*) through the last decades – “to inhabit the stage scenery” – forms the background to this questioning. This might even allow us to indirectly address or at least visualize how an artist’s labor (say, a sculptor’s) may be thinkable as acting work, in what would amount to a curious reversal of the weaponized notion of *theatricality*, a term infamously coined by Michael Fried in 1967.<sup>2</sup> This line of inquiry would be analogous to the questions raised, at least in the last hundred years, on how much, in terms of their work, an architect may be likened to a stage designer, or a ruler to a stage-manager, etc.<sup>3</sup> Different transpositions and re-scalings are involved in all these relationships, which question not only the overgeneralization of the theatrical, but also the delocalization (read *miniaturizing*) of politics within the realm of art.

#### An intermediate existence: “metaphorai”

*X-Ville* begins with the recitative declamation of an introductory passage from Friedman’s *Utopies réalisables*, followed by scenes representing the functioning of a city depicted in black ink on pieces of cardboard. In voice-over mode, the recitative accompanies some of these scenes: *X-Ville*’s inhabitants walk, eat, trade, till the land, furnish the common areas, or gather in assemblies. Most of these activities are summarily imitated, without great detail: at one point, for instance, a man and a woman use brooms to push aside a mound of rubbish, yet it can’t be said they are sweeping the floor; then there’s the moment when the city dwellers are given their pay in the form of small change, chocolate, or biscuits. While human motility is accurately portrayed, in the course of the film actions shed their figural nature. Around minute 9, a game played with car tires appears to mimic road traffic, but it could also be the enactment of a race, or a form of collective entertainment.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” in *Artforum* Vol. 5, No 10. 1967, pp 12- 23

<sup>3</sup> The disputed identification between the artist and the subject of political revolution, still propounded by some, lies in a proximal field, though it shall not be addressed here.

Shortly thereafter we witness two cycles of activities, connected with a passage from Friedman where he reflects on the self-sufficiency of cities and how convenient it is for them to be formed of smaller inter-connected villages. First, we see the community of characters rearranging portions of the city, which may be parts of dwellings or whole buildings (incarnated in cardboard panels at a scale a person can handle), or elements for the construction of structures that call to mind real living spaces (cabins) or buildings (frames and trestles for scale models). In other words: the city’s own displacements become its main activity, and also the main figuration of its interminable dynamic. A city’s sole purpose is perpetual mobility. The displacement of fragments, buildings, and whole blocks recalls Michel de Certeau’s remark in *L’invention du quotidien*: “Dans l’Athènes d’aujourd’hui, les transports en commun s’appellent *metaphorai*.”<sup>4</sup> The toiling of the city dwellers reshuffling the city fragments might be called metaphorical in a literal sense – their city “metaphors” are not evocations of something else based on it, but veritable translocations, displacements. The hustle and bustle of the big city is thereby encapsulated in a choice of emblematic gestures. A while later, the attention of the all-seeing camera seems to be diverted towards a lake. As it carries us along the banks, panning from right to left, we find a group of city dwellers standing in line forming a bucket brigade. One of them fills a bucket with water from the lake, and then pours it into the bucket being held by the next person in line, who pours it into the next person’s bucket, who repeats the operation, and so on and so forth until the water is poured onto a PVC pipe being held by others and through it reaches somebody else’s container. We never get to see the water’s final destination, but we witness how in every transfer a little bit (or perhaps quite a bit) is spilled. Entropy is therefore a factor in this hydrological translocation – in every possible transformation of energy some is irretrievably lost – but the lake holds much more water than may be measured by a bucket, and the city dwellers continue with their activity. Again we wonder whether the indifference of agents/actors is a function of their prior knowledge of the representation involved, since their activity is merely indicative of another, perhaps a simplified rendering of far more complex transport chains; or whether the whole point is to find out how many times the water can change hands, or whom it can reach along the chain, as in a game. Or whether what is being enacted is the spillover, the non-refundable expenditure. At any rate,

<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien. 1. Arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990, p. 170.

5 Jordi Colomer in conversation with the author; see “La sabiduría del tramoyista,” in *Lápiz* 258, December 2009, p. 52.

6 *Íd.*, p. 56.

7 “The show *Alta Comedia* at Tarragona’s Tinglado art venue was a watershed moment in my approach to things. By means of a scale model of that 1000 square meter space, I devised the exhibition as an ensemble, an itinerary, a street. The four pieces that made it up were of architectural proportions, meaning a 1:1 scale which allowed you to climb onto them and traverse them. Those pieces were built from blueprints, but I reserved for myself that after-completion moment when I could improvise placing small objects here and there; packets of rice, patches from carpets, shoes mixed with light bulbs, as if to leave traces of the passing of an individual dwelling in those spaces. The excitement in this kind of work came from the coexistence of two scales and two construction moments. There was for instance a squalid little chipboard staircase made by three of us, as we were having potato chips. Once it was finished, that fact that in the middle of a such a huge space you could notice the marks left by greasy fingers, seemed to me to be truly important. The game relied mostly on the viewer’s traversing through and confronting these two scales. I remember always being deeply intrigued by Carl Andre’s metal plates, the contrast between the coldness in the construction and the public walking and ‘acting’ on top of them”. *Íd.*, p. 52.

8 Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” in *Arts Yearbook* 8, 1965, pp. 74-82.

the least relevant question is “until when” is the action going to be repeated – the question of duration, which is also somehow the question of ends. Each action lasts as long as is required for its typology to be established: the city’s action A, behavior B, practice P. What matters, though, seems to be how each of these exercises sets in motion a system of objects connected with the urban model underpinning the work.

At one point Colomer clarified his views on sculpture as practice and material field, arguing that “the point is not to vindicate a particular discipline; on the contrary, sculpture is rather the place from which everything can be encompassed”.<sup>5</sup> In connection with this field, cinematic practice appears as “sculpture extended through time”.<sup>6</sup> Sculpture serves as stage scenery both inside and outside a film: both in the space where cinematic action unfolds, and in the exhibition space where the cinematic work is screened. Sculpture’s aesthetic space (or construction’s sculptural value) is particularly salient in Colomer’s early works, both in the stage sets displayed at his 1993 exhibition titled *Alta Comedia* (High Comedy) and in the minimal volumes in the 1996 installation *El lloc i les coses* (Place and Things).<sup>7</sup> Thus sculpture “expands” upon being filmed, and that expansion is another name for the processes carried out on and with the stage scenery. What distinguishes such processes, what renders them *specific* in the same sense as objects in Donald Judd’s famous text,<sup>8</sup> is that, besides being halfway between sculpture, scenography, and architecture, they are neither constructions nor destructions. The term that might perhaps best define them is the above mentioned *metaphorai* from present-day Athens. They are constructs yielding no results, with no further teleology beyond their own execution. A kind of labor is displayed in them which is more likely to be found in the preparation of festivals and rites, or demonstrations and parades. This constructive force is not accumulated, nor does it alter the intrinsic mobility of such forms of activity. Work does not materialize into any kind of product beyond the experience, the memory, the description, the document that will subsequently expand the action across time.

For the above-described material displacements, translocations and transformations, scattered historical precedents may be found, mostly in the gray areas of art history. Architect Gianni Pettena recounts how, as work was being carried out on his *Clay*

*House* installation in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1972, a boy from the suburb where the house was located cycled by and asked: “Are you building something or destroying something?”<sup>9</sup> It was precisely Pettena who, years later, conceptualized his own work through the rubric of the “anarchitetto” whose speculative labor is not so much expressed in buildings but rather through interventions that probe the alleged essence of the architectural.<sup>10</sup> Sculpture might be rethought in analogous terms – especially as practiced by Colomer and other artists for whom the category, genre, technique, or artistic medium is basically a viewpoint or perhaps a *language game* in Wittgenstein’s sense, within which everything else, all that can be “encompassed,” may circulate as new signs thereby acquiring unforeseen qualities.

Following the thread of Pettena’s *anarchitectural* trajectory, other instances can be found. At the time he was working on the Clay House, Pettena met Robert Smithson at Salt Lake City. Years before, Smithson had found the Palenque Hotel at some obscure location on the Yucatán peninsula, and had delivered a famous lecture about it at the University of Utah. Extant today as a slide show with a tape recording of the artist’s voice, the document/work known to us as *Hotel Palenque* is without doubt the only vestige of the singular hotel. “A hotel which is also a motel”, Smithson explained, whose partly unfinished, partly ripped up floors are “reminiscent of Piranesi,” and whose design exhibits formal originality (the emptied pool with a suspension bridge spanning over it) and sophistication (the garden of broken bricks, the wall-less window) worthy of true amazement.<sup>11</sup> The Palenque Hotel, a prophetic monument for a proto-punk architecture that never was, is a frozen *metaphora*, its form stuck at the point where construction development turns around upon itself and is accepted as ruin, to the visitors’ hilarity and bewilderment. In a similar vein, Smithson’s own *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) is a brutalist prefiguration of Pettena’s *Clay House* presented as construction without end: stuck in time but also lacking purpose, *atelic*. This work by Smithson also partially inspires Juan Muñoz’s reflection in a text work titled *Segment*, a mock-research piece on the (fictional) legend of La Posa, an empty house burnt and rebuilt each year in the village of Zurite, in Peru: “Rather than a house,” Muñoz argues, “[La Posa] resembles *the image of a house* [...] Is this gathering place and crossroads point also a lodging, a dwelling? It can’t just be a monument, a symbolic structure posing as a house”.<sup>12</sup> The

9 Gianni Pettena interviewed on his installation *Architecture Ondoyante* at 49 Nord 6 Est - FRAC Lorraine, Francia, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/98547364>. Accessed February 2017.

10 G. Pettena, *L’anarchitetto. Portrait of the Artist as a Young Architect*. Prato: Guaraldi, 2010.

11 The original text of the lecture is not included in Smithson’s *Collected Writings*. I used the Spanish edition of the text: Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque* (1969), trans. by Magali Arriola, Mexico City: Alias, 2011.

12 Juan Muñoz, “Segment”, in *Escritos/Writings*. Barcelona: La Central / MNCARS, 2009, pp. 121-143.

cycles affecting these “ever-perishable” buildings, as Muñoz terms them, are also regenerative. This architecture’s time-like structure is a Moebius strip that begins at the end or goes back towards it in order to then reverse back to the future from which it is born. It is safe to say that through the principle of endless construction, the act of building becomes emancipated from architecture and its functions. Both its making and its unmaking being unfinished, the building remains in a kind of intermediate existence. Should this field of activity, this area of endless work, be called *sculpture*?

### Stage scenery as actor

Things posing as houses: that’s what stage sets are. Outlining the history of stage sets and their role in shaping theatrical writing at a time that might be considered foundational, Edward Gordon Craig remarked: “Once upon a time, stage scenery was architecture. A little later it became imitation architecture; still later it became imitation artificial architecture. Then it lost its head, went quite mad, and has been in a lunatic asylum ever since.”<sup>13</sup> Craig briefly recapitulates scenography’s history of madness as follows:

After the Greek and Christian theaters had gone under, the first false theater came into existence. The poets wrote elaborate and tedious dramas, and the scenery used for them was a kind of imitation architectural background. Palaces and even streets were fashioned or painted on cloths, and for a time the audience put up with it. (...) After the Shakespeare stage passed away, the daylight was shut out for ever. Oil lamps, gas lamps, electric lamps, were turned on, and the scenery, instead of being architectural, became – pictorial scenery.<sup>14</sup>

According to Craig, real architecture generates real drama and real emotion, as opposed to painted or “pictorial” scenery that inspires pretense in the audience as well. Without advocating a kind of naïve representational realism, Craig’s position was “realistic” inasmuch as he wanted to push the theatre towards the spaces of sheer life, where the same sun shines over actors and public:

<sup>13</sup> Edward Gordon Craig, *Towards a New Theater*. London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1913, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Íd.*, pp. 10-11.

When Drama went indoors, it died; and when Drama went indoors, its scenery went indoors too. You must have the sun on you to live, and Drama and Architecture must have the sun on them to live (...) It was the movement of the chorus which moved the onlookers. It was the movement of the sun upon the architecture which moved the audience.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Íd.*, pp. 7-8.

Within this vision of scenery as coterminous with the world, the presence of items deliberately made for the stage set – such as a city represented in black ink on cardboard panels – would allow theatre itself to emerge as a character, and the scenery to act as effigy or emblem for the staging of the play itself – the theatrical representation. Actors confronting such objects – abstracted from, or indicative of, off-stage life – are actually faced with drama’s presence in a no less strange space. A kind of split has occurred.

Beyond Craig’s judgment on Baroque drama, however, we might turn to other scenographic practices from past centuries, when cityscapes afforded the natural locations for theatre plays. “Bonet Correa recounts how in the 18th Century houses were covered with fake façades made with large cut-out frames. Ephemeral obelisks and triumphal arches would last, just like the façades, ‘for three, four, five or even up to six days’. Except for Palermo’s Porta Nuova or the Arco de Santa María in Burgos, which became steady architectural features, nearly all of these structures would be destroyed a few days after being built”.<sup>16</sup> Following this, it is legitimate to think that the cinematic camera may be the ideal medium through which such contrasts may be emphasized while the real, concrete space where they are generated is simultaneously preserved.

<sup>16</sup> Juan Muñoz, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

Stage scenery thus becomes a character incarnated in moveable items, elements for an endless transmutation where the city, as overarching city-stage, may see itself reflected in a synthetic mirror. In yet another well-known – and no less overstated and confrontational – text, Gordon Craig suggested the concept of “über-marionette” to describe objects that become more lively than the actors themselves: “The actor must go, and in his place comes the inanimate figure – the über-marionette we may call him, until he has won himself a better name (...) a superior doll (...) descendant of the stone images of the old Temples.”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Edward Gordon Craig, “The Actor and the Über-marionette”, in *The Mask* Vol. One, no. 2, April 1908, p. 11.

18 *Íd.*, p. 12.

This leads Craig to evoke “those moving cities which, as they travelled from height to plain, over rivers and down valleys, seemed like some vast advancing army of peace.”<sup>18</sup> At this point, we may return to the urban panels in *X-Ville* and the mobility that is revealed by the mutable, intermittent life of stage scenery. Items the city is built from or abstracted into, like elements in a live sculptural assemblage: army of peace or utopia. Again we must resort to the cinematic camera’s ability to circumscribe within a bartering field the connections between streets and stage sceneries, acts and deeds, person and persona.

The items in the scenery-as-character are tools for the actors’ work; the *city’s* movements (translocations, *metaphorai*) are the actions through which they become a temporary, nomadic community. This theatrical format comes through as an architectural manifestation in its constructional, processual moment, but not in the finalized shape of a building: that’s when we reach sculpture. Besides, the cinematic medium that encompasses this process is also nomadic, replicable, portable. Objects require a certain activation, though not necessarily of the functional kind. Let us consider for instance the scale model of a phalanstery that agents in *L’avenir* (2011) carry through endless sands until they reach the spot where they decide to set it up and use it as backdrop stage for cooking and eating a paella. There’s much more wind and sand than scenery in the scene. While these agents (people) eat the rice and engage in inconsequential chatter, the wind from the delta seems to sharpen their tin boxes into Fourierist emblems. Once again, action goes beyond reference. The action is not representing a situation, but rather exposing representation itself to the rigors of the situation, with all its sweat and dust. Somehow we envision Charles Fourier’s text hanging from a clothes line stretched across a town hall square somewhere, like a sort of *readymade malheureux*.

“The theatre’s architecture, Erwin Piscator claimed, was intimately bound to the structure of drama; they determined each other. But the roots of architecture and drama reach deep into their epoch’s social forms.”<sup>19</sup> The blend of artistic media in Colomer’s works may be read as a further recombination of the languages that intermingle in Documentary Drama, and a commentary on Piscator’s political theatre. Once again we have theatrical performance, music, lights, discourses, screenings of films and

19 Juan Ignacio Prieto López, *Teatro Total: Arquitectura y utopía en el periodo de entreguerras*. Buenos Aires: Diseño Editorial, 2015, p. 154. My reflection in what follows may be seen as a commentary on Prieto López’s book and an attempt to link the illuminations his research affords to the cross-disciplinary, and historically wider, context addressed in this essay.

photos, but the discourses (though they are actually citations, such as music) unfold within the scene, which lies within the action, and the action in turn is encapsulated in the film, and the photographs are arranged all around it at the exhibition venue... The action reshuffles the stage scenery as *perpetuum mobile*, and in that mobility lies the actors’ (the agents’) work. Curiously enough, in Spanish the word for both the motive behind a crime or the motivation for the character’s actions in a play is *móvil* (“mobile”). Action is essentially displacement. In historical terms, it is safe to say that Piscator’s scenographic conceptions definitively and irrevocably consecrate the stage scenery as theatrical subject – a figure that had already featured in Frederick Kiesler’s electromechanical set for the staging of Karel Čapek’s *W.U.R. (R.U.R.)*, in Berlin in 1923:

The diaphragm opens up slowly: the film projector rattles, swiftly beginning to function; onto the circular surface a film is projected; the opening closes. To the right, as part of the scenery, a statuette-device. It opens and closes [...] The seismograph (in the middle) moves in bursts. The turbine control (center, bottom) turns continuously. The number of finished products changes. Blare of factory sirens. Megaphones convey orders and replies.<sup>20</sup>

20 *Íd.*, p. 57.

Newly arrived in America three years later, Kiesler includes in his International Theatre Exposition a model of his *Endless Theatre*, a stage set of spiral flows where “the drama can expand and develop freely in space”. The structure was “an elastic building system of cables and platforms developed from bridge building”.<sup>21</sup> This theatre’s egg-shaped outer shell anticipates the design of Kiesler’s most famous unrealized project, the *Endless House*, on which he worked for four decades.<sup>22</sup> In the *Endless House’s* seamless interior, the principle of continuity pushes each space to become something else: ceilings become walls that become floors that become staircases, casting a master spell on the whole structure. Finally, Kiesler also designed the Film Guild Cinema, built in New York in 1929, which he billed as “the first 100% cinema,” i.e. one specifically conceived for movies. The design was based on a megaphone-shaped auditorium where traditional elements such as the proscenium had been suppressed, enhancing the importance of the screen, whose central surface resembled a huge diaphragm or an eye

21 Richard Schechner, “6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre. Axiom Three,” in Jane Collins & Andrew Nisbet, eds., *Theatre and Performance Design: A Reader in Scenography*, New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 97.

22 Commissioned by New York’s MoMA, and using numerous notes and drafts, Kiesler finished a model of his *Endless House* which was shown at the 1960 exhibition “Visionary Architecture.” As extant photos document, the model was itself an unstable work in progress that began as a floating egg-like form and then mutated into cavities and bulbous shapes. The 2015 “Endless House” exhibition at MoMA attests to the influence of Kiesler’s processual design on later architects and artists. See Jason Farago, “Review: ‘Endless House’ Expands the Definition of Home,” *The New York Times*, 28 August 2015.

(thus suggesting the identity of both). Some people compared the movie-going experience at the Film Guild Theatre to “being inside a camera”.<sup>23</sup>

In 1927, in the wake of both Kiesler’s approach and the Bauhaus’ own theatrical aspirations, Walter Gropius’ *Totaltheatre* pushed the principles of dynamic scenography to analogous scales. Originally conceived for a project commissioned by Erwin Piscator a year before,<sup>24</sup> the *Totaltheater* became a landmark reference in the history of “immersive theatre.” In Gropius’s design the stage scenery not only played a continuous role, but it also activated the rows of seats and the house’s structural elements, enacting the fusion of building and stage-house at the architectural level, and cast and audience at the social level. Different turntables could rotate both stages and rows of seats in multiple directions, redistributing the performance and the viewers in space. Passive and active structures blurred into one another: the public, willingly or not, was dragged into the movement of the whole. The workings of this architectural machine went well beyond the needs of theatrical performances, and offered a venue “for hosting political rallies, conventions, meetings,”<sup>25</sup> whose protocols and formal features would have ended up being reshaped by the *Totaltheater*.

All these immersive, moveable, multi-theatrical structures display similar key features: at one level, the vision of a barely manageable totality where countless actions are happening simultaneously, performed by humans or machines or both in cooperation; and added to this, a reformulation of modern life as part of a vast contraption, which in turn becomes the environment for existence itself, within which Le Corbusier’s *Wohnmaschine* is but another gear in the machinery. In the theatrical enactment of this totality, there is no boundary between all these dramatic subjects, whose cooperation ultimately results in constant role-reversals. The archetype of this totality – and the object being multi-theatrically represented – is the City. Total Theatre in any of its forms is but a densely compressed scale model – synthetic miniature version, stage scenery – of the City.

Mention must inevitably be made here of Walter Ruttmann’s film *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* (1927), if we want a primeval image of that dynamic totality. Ruttmann’s *Symphony*

23 Lisa Philips, “Architecture of Endless Innovation,” in *Frederick Kiesler*, exhibition catalogue, New York: Whitney Museum of American Art & W. W. Norton & Co., 1989, p. 16.

24 As Prieto López points out, Piscator decided to commission Gropius after it became evident that working with Kiesler, then in New York, was not an option. See J. I. Prieto López, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

25 *Íd.*, p. 171.

flattens together all the elements of Total Theatre into the continuous, smooth surface of film, and, on account of its story-less structure, may be regarded as a circular work: a scale model in motion. The machines in the movie – crudely presented as humankind’s vanguard – are both actors and scenery. They become subjects not simply because they act, but also because they rule over and lead the working masses to action. This aimlessness and lack of humanist narrative in Ruttmann’s work was precisely what inspired Sigfried Kracauer’s negative review in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. As Stéphane Füzesséry points out, for Kracauer the film’s neutrality and lack of engagement with the issue of poverty and squalor in the city betrayed Ruttmann’s formalistic approach.<sup>26</sup> The latter’s fascination with the domination of machinic production over human life shows through in the film’s editing, which mimetically replicates the droning whirl of turbines, wheels, and pistons. Ruttmann’s *Symphony* is an attempt at rhythmic and mimetic indoctrination into the new order, as well sensory acclimatization into the frantic reality of the metropolis – an effort to picture its logic, rather than its physical extension. Abstraction in human relationships and behavior is matched by increased mimeticism in non-human items, and the outsourcing of affect onto work’s mechanical, disembodied elements. With hindsight, it may be said that Kracauer’s criticism turned out to be prophetic: after a two-year collaboration with Piscator in the documentary *Melodie der Welt*, Ruttmann joined the Nazi party. Kracauer wrote his own account of urban life in *Die Angestellten* (1930), a study on how the dullness of machinic work overflows beyond proletarian life into all of the rhythms of waged society. It’s the monotony of work that fuels – like the engine of a timeless projection – the workers’ dream of utopia, a dream that industrial society allows to flourish only in seclusion and privacy.<sup>27</sup>

### Towards the Outskirts (Hinterland)

Despite the (dampened and half-forgotten) impact of WWII and the decades that separate us from Piscator and Kracauer, the perception of the city as autotelic stage and productive subject has not vanished in our times. Baudelaire’s clichéd *forêt de symboles* hasn’t stopped growing ever thicker, to such a point that signs already outstrip the city,<sup>28</sup> whose parts we can see engaged in language-like permutations all around us. Nothing

26 Stéphane Füzesséry, “Le choc des métropoles,” in *Architecture et cinéma*, Paris: École nationale supérieure d’architecture de Paris-Malaquais, 2015, p. 427.

27 See Siegfried Kracauer, (1930) *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany*, Eng. trans. by Q. Hoare, London: Verso, 1998, pp. 92-93.

28 Under cognitive capitalism, signs beget machines, and not the other way round.

fails to imitate and expand language. Michel de Certeau talks about ‘semiocracy’ and an ‘inflation of reading’ in the city. Far from leading to exhaustion, the repetition of work, toiling, transactions, and rites constantly rekindles the need for expression. A threefold operation defines the city: the production of an autonomous, self-sufficient space; the synchrony of work opposed to “tradition’s stubborn and elusive resistance”; and the city’s acting as a subject “in the fashion of a proper name [...] which affords the possibility to build space from a finite number of stable, isolable, mutually articulated properties”.<sup>29</sup> Within this pattern of calculatedly controlled rhythms, the city elicits the proliferation of margins and resistance – and not necessarily in a topographical sense. “Marginality’s current incarnation is not the small group, but mass marginalization; the activities of people not engaged in cultural production are unreadable, without signature or symbols, and remain the only possibility for all those who nevertheless purchase the spectacle-products through which a productivist economy is spelled out. Marginality becomes universal; the marginalized turn into a silent majority”.<sup>30</sup> The notion of a “silent majority” has ambiguous, even sinister, undertones,<sup>31</sup> and de Certeau carefully avoids ascribing it to any political orientation. Its nature is unstable, corresponding to off-the-grid shifts that may propagate terror as much as indifference, revolutionary rage, solidarity, or chaos. De Certeau defines the processes of resistance within this type of mass marginalization as forms of “tactical craftsmanship,” amongst which rites and tricks coexist with all the “combinations of power without readable identity, [...] evading discipline without thereby fleeing the space where discipline is exercised, which should lead us to a theory of everyday practices, of lived space and the uncanny familiarity of the city.”<sup>32</sup> This marginality-without-margins moves below the grid, and may be safely assumed to maintain its practices in constant flow regardless of their content – it’s not about the “what,” it’s about the “how.” Here we might again turn to the action in *X-Ville* to catch a glimpse of how this other, dissonant, and un-symphonic synchronicity works in bursts and jolts, with all its random serendipitous moments, and its ceaseless, unscripted toil.

In the historical interval between Kracauer and de Certeau we may trace the completion of the process whereby the masses are marginalized and marginalization becomes massive, as well as the embryonic transformation of those same masses of

29 Michel de Certeau, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

30 *Id.*, XLIII.

31 How useful this notion may prove to be for the populist right has been borne out by Donald Trump’s election as 45<sup>th</sup> president of the USA.

32 *Id.*, pp. 145-46.

people into agents of emerging cognitive capitalism: crowds of hyperactive semi-literates whose cyber-connectivity re-routes their tactical craftsmanship potential towards the sole space of digital representation. The prospects for labor emancipation in this context are detached from any notion of crafts. As John Roberts points out,

It is not the distended labour of the crafts that is able to drive the wider dynamic of labour emancipation. What is of greater importance is the *control and disposal of time as such* (...) The emancipation of labour is not about winning back for the labour process the “unalienated” labour of the medieval craftsman, but about winning control over the labour process itself (...) and correspondingly, in the interests of expanding freely determined leisure time (...) There is nothing to presuppose that the autonomous labours of the industrious artist will be the only model of emancipated labour developed outside of the “unalienated” labour and necessary labour of the labour process. Outside of the labour process, human activities may have no charge and ambition other than the cultivation of laziness or one’s garden or the development of life skills: of caring for others, of talking and listening, of noting and taking pleasure from nature.<sup>33</sup>

Organizing the city as a factory line was a major element in the conceptualization of urbanism developed by the Radical Architecture movement in the 1970s (with leading figures such as Friedman and Pettena, alongside Andrea Branzi or Mario Tronti), a vision that still relied on the assumption that all employees are workers in mechanical industries.<sup>34</sup> That premise is not only untenable under conditions of cognitive capitalism, but should also lead us to question the fate of material/manual labor under semiocratic regimes of represented or virtual reality. Work in the traditional sense of the term, what might be called *construction work*, is today seen as marginal – not so much with regard to society in general, but rather in terms of the cognitive sphere in particular, where new types of proletariat already exist (e.g. call-center workers, click-farm workers, etc.). In this context, public blindness about the city’s workings may be seen to have increased in step with the scattering and virtualization of the forces that kept it alive.

33 John Roberts, “Labor, Emancipation and the Critique of Craft-Skill,” in Kozpowski, Kurant, et. al., *Joy Forever* London: Mayfly Books, 2014, pp. 112-14.

34 See, for example, Pablo Martínez Capdevila, “The Interior City. Infinity and Concavity in the No-Stop City (1970-1971)” in *Cuadernos de Proyectos Arquitectónicos*, no. 4, 2013, p. 131.

And yet the city is still there, with buildings constantly growing as incomprehensible emblems. They are abstractions. The workers-actors in *X-Ville* need little else besides cardboard in order to efficiently bear the effigy of a city whose fate ceased to belong to them long ago. Their work imitates work with the – sometimes hilarious – ineptitude of someone who has forgotten about it. If there is a dimension of epic theatre in the action in *X-Ville*, it lies in the collective attempt to recondition a ruin into stage scenery, in order to turn it into an ever-unfinished construction. Sculpture here does not aspire to become architectural, but is rather architecture's second life. The reactivation of discourses, the retrieval of labor practices, all the tricks of tactical craftsmanship, no less than modern theatre as memory – all these materials must necessarily unfold in a no-man's land, off the grid. This might be what Rosi Braidotti calls "remembering in the nomadic way".<sup>35</sup>

It's not clear whether the action in *X-Ville* takes place in a park or at some empty grounds, nor is there any clue as to the site's location with regard to the city;<sup>36</sup> however, it suffices to imagine the place as a margin, as hinterland or back country, as derelict suburb in the city center, as internal residue.<sup>37</sup> Most of Colomer's works are located in city outskirts: "a generic space that belongs to everyone, perhaps more intensively than other places because it's more clearly perceived: in their particularity, [these spaces] hold something essential."<sup>38</sup> In such a space erosion may change course and processes of construction and ruination may cooperate in a two-way game. "Crossroads. Way station. Space inscribed into its own exile. Interval".<sup>39</sup> This is where Kenneth Frampton's Critical Regionalism – as expounded in a canonical manifesto of postmodernism – might be staged and brought into play. If there is an architecture of resistance, it must move (*metaphora*) to the rearguard, detaching itself from both Enlightenment myths and any illusion of return to a preindustrial past, avoiding any resurrection of what Frampton calls "the vernacular."<sup>40</sup> Suburban space is the gray belt "liberated" by erosion where unskilled multitudes drift; it's the framework for entropic-creative processes, and "ever-perishable" constructions. The question is not whether it is possible to build something, but rather whether what's built must be petrified into some conclusive edification or relocated inside an endless cycle of ever-shifting forms. The process whereby sculpture sheds its goals and the sculptor becomes a performer is familiar to us

35 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 234.

36 *X-Ville* was performed and shot on location in Annecy, France, and more specifically near Lake d'Annecy at the Haras compound, a former army stable long disused and recently re-opened to the public by the Jardin-Fabriques association. On the day of the re-opening, *X-Ville* was screened at the "Volcano," a wooden amphitheater that also features in the video.

37 As far back as 1961, Jane Jacobs identified the perishable nature of suburbs in the US: "The semi-suburbanized and suburbanized messes we create in this way become despised by their own inhabitants tomorrow. These thin dispersions lack any reasonable degree of innate vitality, staying power, or inherent usefulness as settlements. Few of them, and these only the most expensive as a rule, hold their attraction much longer than a generation; then they begin to decay in the pattern of city gray areas. Indeed, an immense amount of today's city gray belts was yesterday's dispersion closer to 'nature.'" Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. 445.

38 Jordi Colomer, Interview, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

39 Juan Muñoz, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

40 Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism", in H. Foster ed., *Postmodern Culture*, London: Pluto Press, 1983, p. 20.

ever since Allan Kaprow's first happenings, and especially Bruce Nauman's studio performances. Substituting a collective for the individual sculptor, and replacing the studio with a park, a disused warehouse or a waste ground, we come closer to *X-Ville*'s sculptural field.

### Mimesis of work

Vous avez déjà vu dans la rue des chantiers se faire. On installe une simple petite palissade et on peut passer à côté d'un trou, d'un tuyau ou d'un arbre, mais lorsqu'il s'agit d'un bâtiment, on ne peut pas y entrer, alors que c'est pourtant le même travail. Tout chantier devrait être ouvert au public et ce n'est pas plus dangereux que de passer dans une rue où un pot de fleurs est posé sur une fenêtre, où la vitre armée d'un carreau de fenêtre qui claque peut éventuellement faire tomber des éclats de verre sur les gens (...) Il est donc honteux d'interdire d'aller sur les chantiers.<sup>41</sup>

We've all seen how such construction works are carried out: a simple hole, some planks, and some drilling tool may suffice. We've also seen stage sets put together with the barest possible means: a carpet, a chair, an empty corner – not to mention those films that, as Godard once said, only need a girl and a gun to get going. Actually, only a small group of organized people is required to move things around and build something that may be made to endure indefinitely through time. Displacing objects or spilling water constitute what we might call an abstract drama.

The term *drama* derives from the Greek *δρᾶν*: to do. "If one thinks of theatre as drama and as imitation, then action presents itself automatically as the actual object and kernel of this imitation. And before the emergence of film indeed no artistic practice other than theatre could so plausibly monopolize this dimension: the mimetic imitation of human action represented by real actors."<sup>42</sup> This mimetic action represented by "real actors" is certainly strange. Cinematic cameras allow us to find action anywhere, landing us in *medias res* at some location that might be an old warehouse or a studio set made to look like one. The conventions of documentary or fiction also allow us to distinguish actions that have been pre-arranged to be seen onscreen from those

41 Jacques Kébadian and Patrick Bouchan, "Construire autrement", in *Architecture et cinéma*, Paris: École nationale supérieure d'architecture de Paris-Malaquais, 2015, p. 53.

42 Hans Thies-Lehmann, *Post-Dramatic Theater*, London and New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 36.

43 Regarding the figure of the “building site spectator,” Colomer (in recent correspondence) suggests a key reference: José Luis Guerin’s film *En construcción* (2000), which depicts the transformation of the Raval neighbourhood in Barcelona in the 1990s. Certain moments in the film document the habit (widespread among unoccupied, and especially retired, people, but also among children) of watching ongoing construction work, highlighting its nature as public event. A significant passage in Guerin’s film dissects the moment when the demolition of an old block uncovers Roman archeological remains under the surface. Swiftly the people from the neighbourhood gather together at the excavation site, where chisels and brushes have replaced hammers and bulldozers. There’s a speed and phase change. The public crowds around the pit and, almost in assembly-style, speculate and comment on the human remains found among the ruins.

44 J. M. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, South Australia: University of Adelaide, 2014. Online edition, accessed February 2017: [https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/keynes/john\\_maynard/k44g/complete.html](https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/k/keynes/john_maynard/k44g/complete.html).

45 “Show that you are showing! Among all the varied attitudes / Which you show when showing how men play their parts / The attitude of showing must never be forgotten. / All attitudes must be based on the attitude of showing.” B. Brecht, *Poems, 1913-1956*. Ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim. London: Methuen, 1976.

46 Bertolt Brecht, “Messingkauf Dialogues,” in *Brecht on Performance: Messingkauf and Modelbooks*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, pp. 18-19.

simply recorded opportunistically. Suspending or avoiding those conventions, however, does not automatically enable a work to qualify as “docu-fiction.” Besides, it’s a well-known fact that many retired people (at least here in Southern Europe) are fond of watching ongoing construction work, a pastime they much prefer to watching films like *Symphony of A Big City*. They watch buildings and parking lots being built, and they seldom stay till the end. They leave at a certain time: their gaze is an unfinished construction.<sup>43</sup> If they ever by any chance happen to see the completion of the building work, they never applaud, but they simply leave, half satisfied, half disappointed. As viewers, they would probably much rather witness the famous scene described by John Maynard Keynes: “If the Treasury were to fill old bottles with banknotes, bury them at suitable depths in disused coal mines which are then filled up to the surface with town rubbish, and leave it to private enterprise on well-trying principles of laissez-faire to dig the notes up again (the right to do so being obtained, of course, by tendering for leases of the note-bearing territory), there need be no more unemployment.”<sup>44</sup> Shooting a film and asking actors to do stuff, but not to act, is delicate work, especially if it results in actors also *playing make-believe, pretending like they are doing* certain things. “Das Zeigen muss gezeigt werden,” demands Bertolt Brecht in a poem: *Showing must be shown*.<sup>45</sup> Somewhere else, through some generic character called “the Philosopher,” Brecht speculated on the possibility of hiring actors to perform entirely prosaic actions requiring no artistic behavior: stuff such as falling or just moving about. This would be called “thaeter,” a term that, as opposed to *theater*, designated the “purposeless imitations” that he sought: a kind of mimesis aimed not at conveying theatrical meaning but at the observation of actions and incidents. The Philosopher is consumed by an insatiable curiosity about people, “the way they socialize, strike up friendships and enmities, sell onions, plan military campaigns, get married, make tweed suits, circulate forged banknotes, dig potatoes, observe the movement of the planets”.<sup>46</sup> The goal is to observe how society functions, to observe the world much like someone watching a building under construction. To set up an alternative system of “imitations” for that purpose does not entail in any way an aspiration for those imitations to be taken as realities. Quite the contrary: the goal, as William Gruber succinctly puts it, is “imitation but not dissimulation.” For Brecht, imitation “describes a multi-leveled series of repetitions and reproductions [...] during

the performance, these several modes of imitation overlap.”<sup>47</sup> Let’s consider here *Le dortoir* (2002), one of Colomer’s earliest videos, where all the actors (except a baby and a man climbing a ladder) pretend they are sleeping. It’s another abstract drama. In *Pianito* (1999), a character smokes, quietly meditates, and mimes playing a cardboard piano. This is reminiscent of a work by Swedish Fluxus artist Bengt af Klintberg, whose title I have forgotten or perhaps never existed, that involved “playing of feigning playing the piano.” Fluxus concerts were *musical dramas* that consisted in deliberately creating weird happenings or events like, say, pouring out a bottle of lavender perfume in the auditorium and then disappearing.<sup>48</sup> Nothing bars us from thinking of the various actions in *X-Ville* as musical numbers. Modes of imitation overlap, representational media become inter-mediated. Without doubt the most believable actors in *X-Ville* are a dog and a cockerel, protagonists in a kind of sketch, a chasing game with no beginning or end. The cockerel crows quite well. At a given moment, he decides to leap over a long red tube, which lies coiled upon itself on top of a pallet pretending to be a sculpture. A man nearby stirs sand with a shovel. He’s building an orchard on a wooden floor. A woman will come to plant pieces of vegetables in it later.

When the inhabitants of X-City mime sweeping the floor or exchange counterfeit money, it’s no simulation, they are not pretending to be working: they are showing us a representation of labor, and in doing so they are actually working. The play wants us to watch them. They are building a place to tear it down later, or tearing it down, endlessly, with fragments from another one. When they pass a dwindling volume of water around or reshuffle the fragments of an imaginary city, they are mobilizing the elements of a possible representation at its margins. They are working. The boundaries of representation and those of the city meet here.

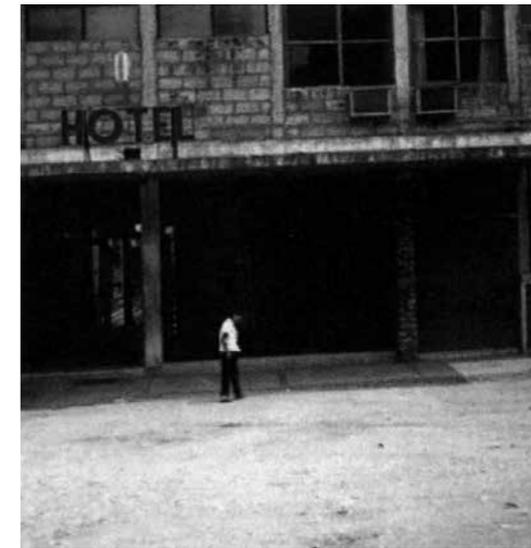
What else are sculptures made of, if not little bits of cities?

47 William E. Gruber, “‘Non-Aristotelian’ Theater: Brecht’s and Plato’s Theories of Artistic Imitation”, in *Comparative Drama*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Fall 1987, pp. 204, 205

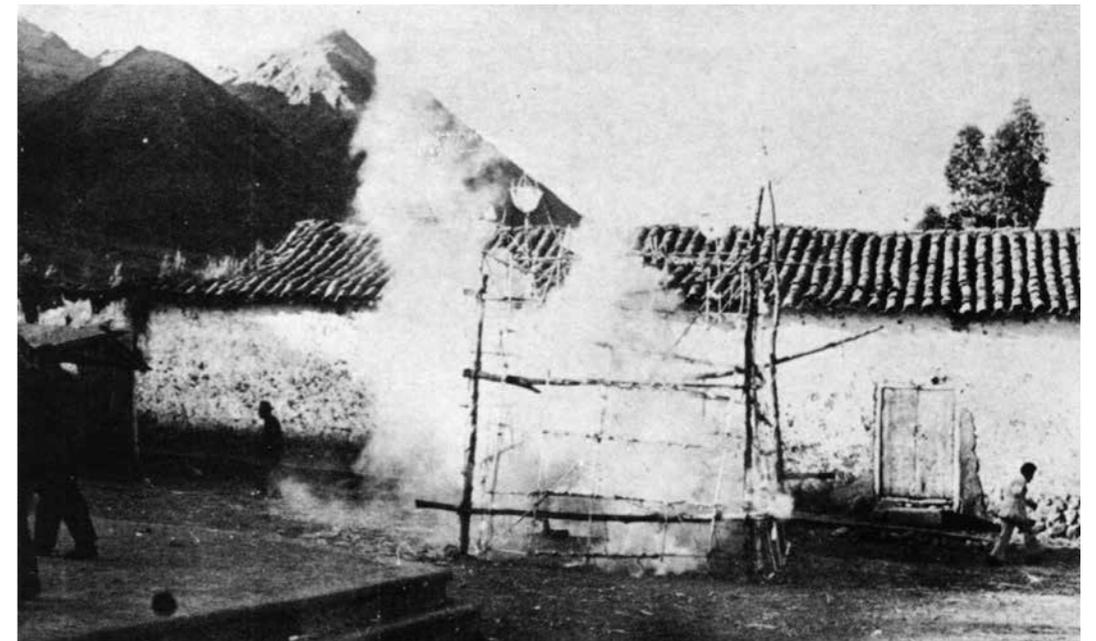
48 I’m referring to Carl Friedrich Reuterswaerd’s (aka Charles Lavendel) March 1963 concert in Stockholm. See Bengt af Klintberg, “Fluxus Games and Contemporary Folklore: on the Non-Individual Character of Fluxus Art,” in *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, Vol. LXII: 2, 1993, p. 118.



Gianni Pettena, Clay House in Salt Lake City



Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque*



La Posa in Zurite. Image accompanying "Segment", a text published by Juan Muñoz at his exhib. cat. of The Renaissance Society of Chicago / Centre d'Art Contemporain, Genève, 1990. Courtesy of the Estate of Juan Muñoz