

empire

NEGOTIATING SPACE WITHIN THE VISUAL CITY.

BY LISA ANNE

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ABSTRACT

Empire, comprising of photography, sculpture and site-specific installation, explores a new perception on the city. By attempting to provide transformative views of the space of the city, this work hopes to initiate a new viewing and contemplation on how we negotiate the city and the space within it.

The sculptural form of *Empire* is a modelled city constructed of small and simplified “building blocks” which will attempt to visualise and represent a physical sense of the city. Within this portion of the work, the sense of scale is reduced, allowing for a close-up, detailed study of how the space of the city has expanded and has broken away from the city-countryside dichotomy. As the “micro,” it permits the questioning on how the space of the city is viewed and mapped.

The site-specific aspect of *Empire* is the installation of a billboard along the Princes Highway (city-bound), made possible with the generous assistance from Australian Posters. The billboard, which is of the image of the modelled city, proposes another view of the space of the city to those who travel towards the Sydney Central Business District (CBD). As the “macro” view, it allows the everyday city dweller/commuter to reflect and ponder the city in which they inhabit.

Between these two aspects of *Empire*, the sense of scale is displaced and hence the boundary between the micro and the macro becomes dynamic. In the viewer's engagement with the scale and detail of the works, what is revealed is an intimate relationship a subject has with the city. It is somewhere between these two aspects of *Empire* that a third form is expressed. The potential of a journey between the two sites allows the viewer to be able to negotiate and contemplate the "life-size" space of the city while travelling or existing within such a space. This experiential journey between the two sites, by navigating through Sydney to view and consume the work in its entirety is perhaps the true nature of *Empire*. It is in the accumulative effect that the moment of enchantment can be sincerely felt and experienced.

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INTRODUCTION

This research is about the city. It is about locating the “city” and being able to consider and look upon the space of the city with “new eyes.” As inhabitants of the city, we have, for too long, traversed its space, considering only our destination and the manner in which we can arrive in the shortest possible time. This body of work explores a new perception of the city, providing transformative views on how we negotiate such an urban space. Just as the Expressionists invented new painting styles and techniques to express their vision of Nineteenth Century life, the new contemporary city –

which this paper will argue no longer conforms to past definitions – requires a new reformed visual vocabulary.

Used as a noun, “empire” is defined as a unit having an extensive territory or comprised of a number of territories or nations, and ruled by a single supreme authority. An example that springs to mind is the British Empire: it was made up of a group of countries that were all governed by the authority of Queen Victoria. The term “empire” also conjures up the romanticism of colonialism and post-colonialism, but here as part of my research, *Empire* is not to be read as such. The term “empire” utilised here is meant as a quantifiable and countable unit, a measure of concrete architectural locations, physical territories and sites.

Within my research, *Empire* is a body of work that is comprised of a couple of “states,” and is scattered across a few locations in Sydney Australia. The primary outcome of this research is an installation of a photographic image of a modelled city, displayed on a commercial billboard along the Princes Highway in Sydney (made possible by Australian Posters). In conjunction with this is an exhibition of the actual modelled city within an urban gallery space: Phatspace in Darlinghurst. The work offers the potential of a journey between the two sites – or simply the viewing of the billboard site en route to the

CBD – allowing the viewer the opportunity to be able to negotiate and contemplate the space of the city while travelling to or existing within such a space.

Empire is an attempt at providing transformative views of a high-density urban landscape. The modelled city and the billboard will attempt to visualise and represent a sense of the city. Within the work, the sense of scale is displayed and questioned, the “city” is viewed and experienced as micro (the models), the macro (the billboard) and the life-size (travelling within the city to visit the two sites that make up the exhibition). The work is not meant to be seen as criticism on urban living; it is, however, about being able to re-experience the city, to allow the every-day city dweller to reflect and ponder – to find a sense of wonder in the everyday.

Structurally, it is my intention to chronicle theories in an autobiographical manner, mapping out initial ideas and how those ideas shift, veer and often develop. Throughout this unfolding process, I have woven in the evolution of ideas supporting the work itself, allowing a space for a deeper insight into the theoretical and visual concerns that I have been exploring. Both the paper and the body of work draw upon an extensive pool of research, including Marc Augé, Gaston Bachelard, Rem Koolhaas and the Xaveer De Geyter architects. I also look at the art

practices of Callum Morton and Gabriele Basilico, considering specific works – *Habitat* and *Berlin* respectively – and how they have informed *Empire*. My landscape of *Empire* is a product of an informed imagination; the modelled city is completely fictional rather than being representational of an existing or specific place.

The paper begins with establishing what a landscape – and landscape photography – is and could potentially represent in the wake of globalisation, the Twenty First Century and the second wave of modernity.¹ It then proceeds to introduce the idea of the “city,” how it was originally defined and what it has come to physically represent. It is within this section that I look at how the city has been represented in various art practices, particularly the photographic. The conditioning of how to read the space of a city from the diverse employment of photography, from satellite imaging to contemporary urban photography is also introduced.

The paper then proceeds to introduce the work of *Empire*, charting its methodology and development, as expressed through the first person. It is through the first person that the reader is able to understand how I deal with the process and the cathartic nature of the work – how it propels me to reconsider my own relationship with the city around me, renegotiating my own place in this space. The theory of Augé’s *non-lieux* (non place)

is also introduced at this point, supporting the transformation of the conception of the city.²

Throughout this paper and the body of work that is *Empire*, I am hoping to express my own relationship with the city space, my own sense of wonder and reflection of what has possibly become my “picturesque” landscape for a new age.

DEFINING THE LANDSCAPE AND THE PICTURESQUE³

Mention the word “landscape” and the imagery that becomes associated with it is one of pastoral scenery and garden planting. It is as if the traditional landscape image is one of inertia, passiveness, a romanticised antiquated medium. According to James Corner in *Recovering Landscape*, the landscape:

...typically viewed as the soothing antithesis to the placeless frenzy of technological urban life; few would share the view that the contemporary metropolis can be constructed as a landscape... or find it easy to imagine landscape other than the pastoral and the gardenesque.⁴

The gardenesque, the pastoral: nature, the natural, the traditional norm.

But this is not *my* landscape. My landscape is not gardenesque, nor would it even be considered picturesque (unless you have a preference for tarmac over grass). My landscape is not an Ansel Adams print. “Landscape” as I know it, is not of cascading waterfalls and deep ravines, and neither is it of majestic mountains and quiet valleys. The “landscape” that I have been brought to know and understand is a complex melding and potential dissonance of concrete, glass, metal and data, one of burgeoning skyscrapers that block out the sun and cast long shadows. One that is more concrete and steel than of hills and valleys.

I grew up in Singapore, an *island paradise*, if your idea of an island paradise is one of extensive underground networks of shopping malls and hotels. There is nothing remotely reminiscent of a natural “paradise” in Singapore. Leafy gardens and beckoning palms trees are only found in the pages of travel brochures, the foyers of expensive 5-star hotels and the National Botanical Gardens.^(See Plate 1)

Every hill on the island has since been bulldozed and flattened to allow for the rapid development of the country. Each high-rise, high-density housing estate is torn down in less than thirty years after being built to make way for yet a higher and denser housing estate. I recall, as a child growing up in an apartment that was 12 storeys high, then as a teenager, it was 25 storeys. Now, there is

nothing lower than 35 storeys in some of the new apartments. Singapore is a firm believer and practitioner of *tabula rasa* – continually abolishing only to begin again. It eradicated its history and the entire island was artificialised, having nothing that survived beyond a relatively short existence.⁵ There is no longer a horizon in Singapore, for the sky and horizon has been obscured. For, as Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas observes, the close proximity of tall buildings to one another ‘precludes any notion of escape... each perspective is blocked.’⁶

Tall dense buildings are the phenomenon of urbanisation and the ever-expanding population. The booming population and the mass migration to cities is inversely proportionate to the amount of land available to house them. In the 1966 May issue of *Asia Magazine*, it was predicted that tall buildings would be the norm rather than the exception.⁷ Koolhaas writes that many cities are now one huge urban jungle littered with concrete boxes and slabs that stand in militaristic form.⁸ High-rise and high-density buildings have become the model of choice for many cities. Besides making economic sense, there is less available space to accommodate an increasing population, hence the only solution is to build upwards.⁹

Drawing upon my own history of growing up in Singapore – which Koolhaas cites as ‘representing the

truly generic condition of the contemporary city'¹⁰ – has led me to question whether it would alter my understanding and concept of what defines a “landscape”? And would it be any less justified as its traditional counterpart? Our knowledge of “landscape” Charles Waldheim observed, has only ever been shaped through images, ‘as if landscape only existed through its picturing.’¹¹

Corner does not define “landscape” specifically, but rather suggests that it is a broad term that has come to be used in a number of extensive ways, not only making reference to a measurable plot of land and a property’s appearance, but also embracing urbanism, infrastructure and strategic planning. It is not just about the land or the environment anymore:

... its usage is diverse and rich, embracing... speculative ideas alongside the more familiar themes of nature and environment... landscape is less a quantifiable object that it is an *idea*, a cultural way of seeing, and as such it remains open to interpretation, design and transformation... landscape is understood as an ongoing project.¹²

Hence, according to Corner, my images, whether they depict buildings and international cities, or open fields and the ocean, are applicable under the broad umbrella that is “landscape.” But for the purpose of this paper and the accompanying body of work, the “landscape” image will be defined as one that is the visual representation of the urban city.¹³

Which brings us to deciphering a city.¹⁴ David Thorns in *The Transformation of Cities*, states that a definition of a city involves not just a concept of size (large populous), but is also the site for political and legal entities, economic operations and local government, and also the location for leisure and recreational activities. Thorns suggests that perhaps a city is really a 'complex set of human institutions.'¹⁵ He goes on to imply that a city would have had to have undergone significant change and transformation over time and this transformation would provoke an appreciation of the importance of the history of the city's development.^{16,17}

When I think of a city, I am immediately visualising a spectacular urban skyline, one not so unfamiliar to that of Manhattan. I see a city inundated by magnificent tall buildings and skyscrapers, steel, glass and chrome sparkling in the sun.¹⁸ New growth cities, especially in Asia, are catching up fast to first-world cities in building and developing their own verticality. It is expected that within the next half a century, there will be a doubling of the world's population, with the majority occurring in Asia.¹⁹ And for sustainable reasons alone, we must learn to live more densely. The development of tall buildings in many major cities, in particular the skyscrapers, has evolved from simply being an icon of aspiration and a signifier of a city's financial status to a necessity in sustainable living.²⁰

To believe that a city is simply the locale of skyscrapers, exclusively zoned as central business districts and home to international headquarters and commercial offices is perhaps a little rigid. The form of the city has become dispersed – its edges have opened up to include the suburbs as they themselves become denser. The city is now more of a sprawl without a discernible centre rather than the iconic verticality.

Sprawl is understood as the term for filling up the landscape, in particular referencing the spreading suburbs and according to many urban theorists, is considered the true form of the urban city. In order to understand the “sprawl,” one needs to abandon the dichotomy of the city (centre) and countryside (periphery), because the city is dispersing and spreading. Sprawl is not a negative term,²¹ but does come across as something chaotic and unstructured. One needs to set aside the city-countryside contradiction and realise that the sprawl has established a permanent place in the notion of contemporary city planning.²²

What I have come to understand of the visual concept of the city then is one of a densely populated physical space, expanding both vertically and horizontally, and yet I am not wrong to visualise skyscrapers and an urban skyline as iconic representations of what the city of the world is meant to resemble – skyscrapers and tall buildings define the image of the city.²³ [See Plate 2]

(The city) is still accepted as a noun, a substance, although it no longer designates a merely physical territory... The notions of center and periphery have lost their stability and validity... the city has lost its place, it tends to be everywhere and nowhere: it is an intangible space, a common, de-signified body which no longer forms an organism... while we struggle to catch up with keywords and periphrases...²⁴

Conceptually, I believe that the city is struggling to come to terms with its own identity and theorists are having a difficult problem in trying to understand the city, as they are attempting to define it. Words like “urbanity” used in arguing and conceptualising the city would be what Roland Barthes would call “empty signifiers.” Essays on the “networked city” alongside the “machine-city” attempt to make sense of how the city is no longer defined by its (rapidly erasing) borders and boundaries. Rather, it exists through the constant flow of information that moves in and out of it, feeding it through what can be considered a “feedback loop.” Articles on globalisation have cast doubt on the city’s ability to maintain its own specific cultural identity. In the wake of explosive population growths in developing nations, eroding geographic and cultural divides and the forces of international trade, travel and trans-migration, the term “glocal” is yet another term that attempts the obvious; defining a city as being no longer specifically “local” and yet, not completely “global.” And finally, the introduction of the concept of a city being a “non-place.”^{25,26} Traditionally tied to the idea of place, Augé’s defines “non place” as a construct that is

not concerned with identity, relationality and history. It is the opposite to the idea of “place” which is concerned with such concepts.

In terms of citing a physical spatial example, which few have done, Belgian cultural philosopher Lieven De Cauter sticks his head out and publicly citing New York as a “model city” as he considered it to be ‘modern enough for (him).’ It is his writing that has helped me in establishing, and perhaps confirming, what the physical model of a city might be:

... because (New York) enjoys the largest number of mythical streets in the world, the most famous park and perhaps the most famous square, too.²⁷

New York’s notoriety as the “model city,” is continually built upon further through popular culture. If one of the many characteristic traits that allows New York to be considered a model city, its panoramic skyline of famous buildings should be amongst them.²⁸ The Empire State Building and the Kreysler Building – to name two – are significant landmarks that exist as part of the Manhattan skyline. They have become immortalised over time as monuments within the skyline, which itself has become iconic.²⁹ One cannot watch American television programs without having the Manhattan skyline thrust upon them in the first couple of seconds of the opening sequence (*Sex and the City*, *Law & Order*). Matteo Pericoli’s graphic illustration of Manhattan (both the East and the West

Side) – reproduced as the cover art for the Beastie Boy’s 2004 album *To the 5 Boroughs* (Capitol) – is a prime example of Manhattan being both this vertically and horizontally expanded and densely populated space.^(See Plate 4)

Throughout my research and reading, I seem to have come away with an understanding of what a city *can* include. The city comes across as all encompassing of the above-mentioned terms, ideas and concepts, and yet it is neither one or the other but a strange hybrid of every idea and none at all. The city has been heavily theorised, and it has been viewed through various metaphors.³⁰ It is, however, through popular culture and my own history of residing in Singapore that have undoubtedly forged an idea of what the “ideal” metropolis/city should physically resemble. I feel the need to ‘protect (myself) from the language,’ so ‘let us call a city a city’ for *now*.³¹

**FOR ALL ITS APPARENT COMPLEXITY,
ONCE YOU KNOW THE RULES, A CITY IS EASY TO BUILD.³²**

The early stages of the work are proving troublesome. I have begun to notice that I have subconsciously arranged the modelled city in a rigid grid, and the “buildings” are taking on similar sizes and forms. This is causing the modelled city to look rather forced and awkward – its skyline is coming across as prosaic and homogenous.^(See Plate 4) Developing the modelled city of *Empire* seems to be a little more fastidious than I had initially imagined. I suddenly realise that a city, though constructed and mapped out by engineers, town planners and architects, develops and acquires its own dynamic energy – expanding and contracting over time to achieve

a life and design of its own. Streets get redirected, intersections vanish, and entire estates are uprooted.

Walking is the best way to explore and observe the city, but rather than a *flâneur* that is obsessed by tiny specifics – the texture of bricks, the crack in the asphalt, the vague imprint of a graffiti tag appearing through a new coat of paint – I notice the city on a larger and more general scale. That roads do not always run straight: they bend, curve and then taper to a point, joining up with another road that was once running parallel to it. That buildings of varying shapes and sizes, age and orientation huddle together and form interstitial spaces that throb with life. That a city, though originally thought up on paper, then engineered according to plans and blueprints, is ultimately ever-evolving, fluid and ironically organic.

The city is expansive, extensive and conceptually difficult to grasp. It also has the ability to render us – as a viewer – passive. By existing as both banal and sublime, alienating and enticing, images of the city continue to overwhelm. The expansion of grid-like street planning and numbered or lettered streets (and apartments/housing units) hint at the ever increasing inability on the part of city inhabitants to map the space they occupy and negotiate its size.³³ The size and scale of the city is what makes it hard to contemplate it: like a task too large, one needs to

divide it into smaller portions in order to tackle it and begin to understand it. Hence, one way to see the city, understand it and to decipher it, is to shrink it.

Photographing the city is one of the many ways in which one can negotiate the city in sizeable portions, and it is in this shrinkage of the city that we can begin to study it. By photographing the city, I am literally using a magnifying glass to draw attention to the portion of the city that inhabits my image. Like a scientist viewing his subject through a microscope, the details that were lost to the naked eye now become compound and complex. Whether it is in the reportage of a journalist, snapshots of the *flâneur*, or conceptual art hanging in a gallery, photography has captured and studied the city in a multitude of styles, angles, and points of view.

When I photograph the city around me, I am interested in seeking out some angle, some point of view that might go unnoticed by passers-by – a unique scene existing in a much larger landscape that gets ignored. It is only through the camera, and the image printed, that the composition or narrative is able to thrive, let alone exist. I look for juxtapositions and angles not normally accessible to the public, and scenes that would otherwise not be considered photogenic or worthy of being photographing.³⁴ I recall when I was first given a camera – my mother's old

Minolta SLR – friends and family stood around perplexed when the photographic prints contained nothing but the details of a concrete wall, or of the painted lines on the side of the road. All the photographs were not of me standing in front of some monument, acting as some kind travel souvenir of incontrovertible proof that I was *indeed* there. They were of the rows of burnt out lanterns swaying in unison as they were blown by the wind. I believe that my ability as a photographer lies in being able to deduce and witness the exact scene before me without having to rely on the camera. What I do is to convert what I see in my head into a photographic image so that all around me can see the world, my city, as I see it.

The late Susan Sontag wrote that photographic images are not just ‘statements about the world,’ but are just as much pieces of it, existing as ‘miniatures of reality that anyone... can acquire. (They) fiddle with the scale of the world.’³⁵ By creating a miniature, one is creating a discrepancy of size. A discrepancy of size is a form of distortion, and distortion shocks us into paying attention. Another manner in which to shrink the city into manageable portions would be to literally create a miniature, a model of it:

... the city and the miniature, both of them powerful icons... One is huge, the other tiny. One is authentic, the other a simulation. One is not easily taken in at a glance, the other unfolds before our eager eyes. We can live in one but not the other... both the city and the miniature offer rich insights into space, seeing, habitation, colonisation, and desire. Both turn us into spectators.³⁶

An artist who recently utilised the notion of scale was Callum Morton with his work *Habitat*.

CALLUM MORTON'S HABITAT

Habitat is a 1:50 scaled model of an urban housing complex, based on a residential project (by Moshe Safdie) that was built in 1967 in Montreal in which Morton's father, himself an architect, worked on. However, *Habitat* is not simply just another architectural model. A timed multimedia experience that includes lighting changes (indicating the passage of day into night, dusk into dawn), a highly orchestrated soundtrack that animates the lives within the complex – *Habitat* requires 28 minutes of your time before it can unravel its script (28 minutes is 1/50th of 24 hours).^[See Plate 5]

When *Habitat* begins – with “dawn” breaking – light slowly bleeds into the giant diorama, illuminating the model softly. Gradually, the light grows stronger and the physical form of *Habitat* is made clearer. The soundtrack of alarm clocks ringing, buzzing, and beeping kicks in, signalling the start of a new day for the “inhabitants” of Morton's *Habitat*. The soundtrack then dissolves into kettles whistling, babies crying, toilets flushing, and then someone clearing his throat at the bathroom sink. The

light gets brighter, and then you hear doors opening, closing, muffled conversations, radios coming on, people going off to work. The lighting program and soundtrack continue to guide us through the rest of the day until the inhabitants return home, watch television, argue, laugh and slowly wind down to sleep. Lights within the individual apartments flicker on and off, and then twilight creeps up, blanketing *Habitat* in the cover of night and stillness – if not for a mere moment – before the lighting and soundtrack find themselves looping all over again for yet another 28 minutes.

Watching *Habitat* works its way through the accelerated day-to-night cycle is pure voyeuristic entertainment mixed with a meditative quality, until you realise that perhaps this calm and mild-mannered exterior is not exactly what you should be paying attention to. Critics and curators constantly talk about this mundane cycle of *Habitat's* denizens' day-in, day-out routine and how they are 'unable to reach escape velocity from the orbital pull of their daily routine and entrenched cynicism, despite the best intentions of architects.'³⁷ Stuart Koops, curator of both Morton's shows at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) respectively, points out that Morton is engaging the audience to witness the endless drama resolving and repeating itself, and the juxtaposition of the

architects' intent and dream of social transformation alongside our own desperate need for the routinized. Elizabeth Farrelly perhaps described it best at the symposium *City Talks* as part of the Year of the Built Environment, stating that: 'people do not want to be... perfected,' they just want to come across as perfect.³⁸ To me, *Habitat* comes across as the hardcopy version of the PC game *The Sims* (EA Games), with the exception that there is an absence of its inhabitants. With *The Sims*, players engage in this voyeuristic control of their binary citizens, telling them when to have a shower, what to eat and who to fall in love with. In Morton's world of *Habitat*, the control is absent, and yet you still stay on and watch, envious of a world in which you cannot partake, let alone control.

Koops draws a comparison between *Habitat* and the Moebius strip,³⁹ stating that despite the big dreams of architecture hoping for greater things for us as a society, it is always destined to fail due to the reality of life for us as a species: bringing us back to the very beginning. Yet we continue to go on day after day, not so much as a form of progress, but just because.

Callum Morton is perhaps in a privileged position to critique architecture and all its "best" intentions.⁴⁰ His other body of work entitled *Local +/- General* is a satirical

look at what occurs when high architecture (culture) is combined with ruthless transglobal corporations (commerce). The end result is a colourful body of digital prints that is both visually appealing (its use of vivid colours) and socially unnerving (converting an architectural icon to a medium of mass-consumerism). Morton's art practice comes across as wanting to challenge us to look at our own relationship with the built environment. He wants us to consider how we relate to the buildings around us on a daily basis: contemplating how we use them, lay claim to them, occupy them and finally condemn them, and yet, he is not out to attack us. Morton places neither society nor architecture on a pedestal – they are both equally taunted. The city is neither the allegedly wondrous achievements of Mankind nor the monuments to the architects, but are: 'columnar charts indicating the growth of the city; the more people, the more shit, the taller the buildings. Morton's work... pinpoints where the city reveals itself as a sewer.'⁴¹

The appeal of the miniature resides in our desire of having a sense of control – this utopic idea that we are able, or would like to preside over and possess *our* world. In the larger (and more realistic) scheme of things, however, this would prove rather difficult, if not impossible. Gaston Bachelard, in his exquisite book *The Poetics of Space*, dedicates an entire chapter to the concept of the miniature. In it he argues that once a character realises he is within a smaller space, like a miniature house, he suddenly is able to see its vast number of rooms, and from within the interior, he discovers interior beauty:

Here we have an inversion of perspective (of size)... the values become condensed and enriched in miniature. Thus the minuscule opens up an entire world, (and) like all worlds, contain the attribute of greatness. In looking at the miniature, unflagging attention is required to integrate all the detail... Everything is small because he is so high. And since he is high, he is great, the height of his station is proof of his own greatness.⁴²

In terms of foreign and uncommon perspectives, which also force us into paying attention, none come quite as close as to the experience of viewing satellite images of cities. In June 2003, the *Sun Herald* produced a two-part lift-out magazine that was dedicated to the satellite imaging of Australia. The first issue, *Our Great Southern Land*, was of various aspects of the country and the second, *Sydney by Satellite*, focused entirely on the city. In such photographs, the landscape was redrawn and buildings, towns and infrastructure became unrecognisable,

functioning less as specific entities, but more as abstract elements coming under scrutiny and observation. The immense real-life city becomes manageable on a smaller scale. In such images, one is witnessing the city from a very unusual point of view – above, or as Michel de Certeau calls it, with the ‘celestial eye.’⁴³

Contemporary German photographic artist Andreas Gursky photographs the mouth of the Singapore River from a higher vantage point onshore, with the final image displaying a stark contrast between the constructed lines of the harbour and the natural curves of the coastline.⁴⁴ In Gursky’s *Singapore*, one is able to study and witness many sections and areas of the island’s coastline that would otherwise be difficult, and perhaps go unnoticed by many unable to access such a vantage point. This same region in Singapore is also captured from the Landsat Satellite, and in it, we can see that it is the same area as featured in Gursky’s image, even if at first, we might be a little uncertain. Having lived in Singapore, it still took me some time to recognise and identify specific buildings and landmarks when I first came across this image. The attraction of the image seems to lie in the abstraction of the form of the city. The angle in which we are viewing this image is somewhat more inaccessible than Gursky’s, and is perhaps what renders this section of the city – which I should know so well – completely foreign.^[See Plate 6]

1°16'N 103°51'E #1 and 1°16'N 103°51'E #2 from the 2002 body of work entitled *Home* were the only two images that simulated this similar “Icarus” effect of being able to look down on the city and creating a sense of panopticism.⁴⁵ Whilst not the same vantage point as say the Landsat’s, *1°16'N 103°51'E #1* and *1°16'N 103°51'E #2* mirrors the angle of Gursky’s *Singapore*, and these two images perhaps prompted me in working towards capturing and observing the city from a “different point of view.” And such different points of views and perspectives like worm’s eye, bird’s eye, and the Celestial-eye relate to the strategy of defamiliarisation.^[See Plate 7]

Revisiting images of the city that I have captured from a higher vantage point over the years, the city looks more and more like a Lego set, a constructed diorama. The buildings resemble simplified blocks and cubes, abstract graphic shapes rather than actual housing estates and office towers that contain real-life human occupants.^[See Plate 8]

The charm and fun of Lego derives from reducing the organic to the modular; a zebra built of little cubes...⁴⁶

I navigate through the city not simply as a long-time inhabitant but more recently as an artist trying to understand and comprehend my role in the city and with the city as my muse. My role here is not of the prophet proclaiming enlightenment, or an urban theorist defining

a new state of mind. I exist in this space as the poet-cum-anthropologist-cum-pedestrian that can move through the interstitial spaces, reconsidering the panopticism of the city.

There is a long history of the city being an inspiration to many photographers. During the early Twentieth Century, society looked upon the city with a sense of wonder and awe – the wonder and awe aimed squarely at the skyscrapers and various other tall buildings. Propelled by industrialisation, urban growth and innovations such as steel framing, fireproofing and the passenger elevator, buildings rose to new heights.⁴⁷ The public's fascination at how such tall buildings were engineered – and miraculously stayed upright – guaranteed a place for the skyscraper in the minds and psyche of an entire generation. Magnum photographer Rene Burri's 1930s image depicting four men walking on the rooftop of a sunlit Brazilian skyscraper was quintessence of how people chose to interpret and represent the skyscraper; with simple fascination and a revered respect.^[See Plate 9]

Now in the third millennium, the skyscraper and its predecessors can be found in almost every developed and industrial city on earth. So much so that there seems to be an apparent homogenisation amongst the various urban skylines of many international cities. Once thought to be

indicative of a city's status – representative of urbanity, density and modernity – the high-rise high-density tower blocks have now become, for this generation, a scar tissue: a grim reality of what *really* became of that utopian dream. The sparkling of glass and stainless steel illuminated in the sunlight, has given way to skyscrapers overcrowding the streetscape and subsequently blocking out the sun's rays. Their ability to amaze is rapidly disappearing. Unimaginative in ideas, design, materials and engineering formulas, these towering blocks are nothing more than empty shells constructed to fulfil the primordial purpose of offering a burgeoning populous shelter. They have lost their appeal – their sparkling personality has dimmed.

Photography's obsession with the city over the decades has developed a myriad of styles and genres that contemplate the physical space of the city. From the earliest conceptual montages of a utopian metropolis during the Cubist movement (1900s), to *Neue Sachlichkeit* / New Objectivity (1925), to the style of the Bernd & Hilla Becher (1959), to the contemporary street-photography of Andreas Gursky and Wolfgang Tillmans, the pictorial discourse is as diverse as the current debate on how to coin an identifiable term for such a movement of image-making.

“Street-”, “urban-”, “cityscape-”, “anti-landscape-” – these are but a few of the prefixes that have been used in recent

decades to categorise and label the photographic response in dealing with the city. In order to make sense of it all, we need to understand what the various photographers were attempting to achieve with their own response to the city, and where the city is heading within the gaze of photographers.^[See Plate 9]

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Thomas Struth and Andreas Gursky demonstrated an acute understanding for generic urbanism. Their images captured the diluted urban landscape: architecture standing exposed in their naked everydayness. Gursky in particular had a sensibility for *non-lieux* as described by Marc Augé, capturing transitional public spaces like airports, shopping malls, banks and other residual unidentifiable spaces. Gursky seemed to allow the very individual fragments of the posturban space to exist on its own in its own reality. There's no glossy sheen to Gursky's metropolis – everything is as is: a housing apartment block that is the everyday; nothing fancy or special unlike its predecessors.

Like Gursky, Gabriele Basilico has turned photographing the city and urban spaces into an art form unto itself. In the same manner in which Gursky influenced my previous body of work, and subconsciously still to this day, Basilico is however a more consistent and steadier photographer in capturing the city/the urban space via architecture.

GABRIELE BASILICO'S BERLIN

Berlin is a definitive collection of silver gelatine prints of what is considered by Basilico himself to be ‘certainly the European city... on a symbolic level.’⁴⁸ According to the photographer, there has perhaps never been another European City quite like it, which represents the most significant events that have shaped and formed the Twentieth Century.

Basilico looks at space in order to represent it, he looks at surfaces and volumes as a single entity and yet when you actually view his photographs, ‘one passes from a notion of surface to a notion of volume almost without realising it.’⁴⁹ Basilico – an architect by training – somehow manages to capture famous buildings alongside lesser known and ordinary ones, eliminating the status of architecture on the pedestal. All the buildings in his images seem to be existing on the same plane, or carrying a similar degree of notoriety – none. It is not the specific buildings that Basilico is interested in portraying. He never uses architecture per se, but the urban landscape as a whole to define the image and tell his tale. This sensitivity allows the audience, not to get caught up with the specifics and details of “this building by so-and-so” or “that building built when,” but really concentrate on the entirety of the image, of the urban space within. One ends up reading the image and moving through an anonymous space.^[See Plate 10]

Basilico seems to want to develop a notion of a global place constructed from fragments of different places. Steven Jacobs, in his influential introduction to *Post, Ex, Sub, Dis.*, cites Basilico, as the one, more than anyone else, who 'has charted the urban bric-a-brac...(and whose pictures) do greater justice to urban chaos.'⁵⁰

Berlin allows me to read the image and the space without actually realising I am reading the landscape of Berlin. The choice of photographing the city in black and white, rather than in colour, serves to aid in the anonymity. And so I am able to read and view these images without any preconceived misgivings or preoccupations about the space or about Berlin. In fact, the anonymity of the space is so successful that I actually find myself reading the landscape of Singapore within the images.

Basilico, through both clever editing and sensitivity in his photography, literally guides you and moves you through the city/urban space. In the first few pages of *Berlin*, you become aware that with every image, each subsequent image is taken a little further down the road from the previous, taking your journey through the city just round the corner, across the road or up the street. You, as the reader, are traversing through the urban space that is Berlin as the pages turn, with Basilico as your guide, urging you along.

Ironically, while Basilico was developing *Berlin*, it was documented that his Berlin apartment was stuffed with guidebooks and volumes worth of photos stacked high on chairs and tables. His walls were papered with city maps, and that he would go over ‘spaces between abandoned buildings metre by metre.’⁵¹ This meticulous degree of attentiveness to the city and space within, alongside his architectural training, does seem to set Basilico apart from other “city” or “urban” photographers. Basilico is looking for something, and wants you to see it too.

Basilico is acutely aware of his role as he tries to capture the urban space with his camera, package the image and deliver it to the reader in the form of a printed page: ‘the immeasurable worlds, is radically transformed into a tiny rectangle, into a reduced and two-dimensional portion of space.’⁵²

This is the paradox in which photography attempts to react and respond to the city. The dichotomy of the utopian ideal-dystopian reality (of the city) has become so deeply ingrained in popular thinking that, not unlike defining the city, photographing the city is perhaps just as challenging.

Stefano Boeri in his essay *On Some Paradoxes...*, calls

on the city to be looked upon with new eyes and that photography needs to challenge the manner in which it represents the urban setting. He states that there are paradoxes existing in the relationship between the city and photography. One of the problems that Boeri talks about is how the city is stripped of any idiosyncrasies when compounded to exist in a frame. It is as though we are merely looking at buildings that bare no architectural, social or economical value.⁵³

I wish to suggest that there is a potential to view this “frame” quite differently. I enjoy the distance and the ambiguity of the buildings I am confronted with both in the role of viewer and photographer. I see buildings and I see an abstraction of form. Personally, the little demarcations of value, history and size have the ability to be distracting. I enjoy the city as a space obsessed with space: everything gets taller to compensate for the lack of land allocated. There is a beauty that resides within the franticness of it all. And from the singular building that occupies an entire image, I find myself moving on to capturing it all. I do not want to look up at the city any more.

Around this time of reading Boeri and researching the problems photography has with “authentically” capturing the city, I was preparing to exhibit six prints at the Photo Technica Exhibition Space for a show entitled *Built Worlds*.

BUILT WORLDS

PHOTOTECHNICA EXHIBITION SPACE, 12 JULY – 9 AUGUST 2003

Over the past four years, my work has focused on the dense urban landscape and has resulted in a collection of large-format images, shot primarily with large-format cameras. In 2002 I documented expansive public/mass housing estates in Chicago, Singapore and Sydney. I utilised the high-rise, high-density mass-produced urban housing and the singular home unit as metaphors for the masses and the individual respectively in relation to the home. I was interested in the visual metaphors suggested by such housing with an emphasis

placed on the motifs and their rhythmic repetition of the structures of the units and the windows. The homogenised exterior of the housing debased individuality and yet it was in the tiny details within the façade – usually found in the windows – that laid out clues and hints about the individual inhabitant. In this interior space was the demarcations of the individual and all of his/her distinct and unique characteristics. The body of work, *Home*, in its entirety also addressed the problem with the homogenisation of such architecture – despite being photographed and collated from three distinct locations (Chicago, Singapore and Sydney), a large percent of the audience was not able to distinguish one location from the other.⁵⁴

Built Worlds is a series of photographic images inspired by the built environment. The work arises out of an interest in constructed spaces and the ways in which we encounter them. These locations are purpose built, and the images highlight the contrasts between the public and private spaces that our lives revolve in and around. The exhibition explores the environments that we construct for ourselves to occupy, and our relationship to these built worlds. Interiors, constructions and high-rise buildings all reveal something of the inhabitants obstructed from view.⁵⁵

The turning point where images from *Home* became something more, occurred in the group show *Built Worlds* held at the PhotoTechnica Exhibition Space in July 2003; it was curated by Karra Rees. Two out of the six images shown (*1°16'N 103°51'E #1* and *#2*) were exhibited with the rest of *Home* in 2002. *1°16'N 103°51'E #117*, *#252* and *#315* were taken at the same time but were not included due

to stylistic differences. Only *Modular 8 Ball* was a developed specifically for *Built Worlds* under Rees' direction.^(See Plate 11)

The show took the images from being a singular focus on individual buildings to a composition of a built landscape. *Built Worlds* heralded a shift: no longer was I concerned with a lone building, but rather the graphic relationship and aesthetic nature that was born out of an accumulation of buildings, creating a "landscape," rather than a "portrait." The images made me step back to view the city not through individual architecture, but through the giant chaotic mass of different shapes, size and materiality that really defines a city. This landscape needed to be tackled with a slightly different sensibility, and yet it was still all the same.

To photograph yet another round of buildings, this time in a larger mass would just be a slight variation of *Home*: safe yet boring. The city continues to appeal to me in the picturesque, but it needed to be challenged differently.

Now, it was no longer about photographing an existing city, documenting its infrastructure and architecture. I needed to capture a city that was not so much a blueprint for future cities to come, but rather a sense of what cities are now like. I needed to capture this blank canvas of a "city" that referenced cities all around the world, and

photograph it utilising angles and perspectives that was not readily available to me. I had a vision of a city in my head that I need to extract and photograph. This was the maze that I needed to navigate through.⁵⁶

EMPIRE

Photography is inextricably linked with reality and yet this concept itself fluctuates as the phrase “representational of reality” comes across as paradox. Photography remains, however, the primordial embodiment of this process of representational of reality and along with all its paradoxes. *Empire* is, however, not an illustrative example of any particular site or reference to a specific city. Though informed by various sources, the work remains a construct of the imagination. In *Empire*, I am trying to provide transformative views of high-density urban landscape, in particularly high-rise cities and satellite suburbs. Through the exhibition of a large-scale

billboard vinyl print – with the assistance of Australian Posters – of hundreds of scaled concrete building models, I aim to develop a sense of how cities are planned and have expanded or grown, while providing other views about urban and architectural progression.

The scaled concrete building models, made of aerated concrete, are cut into a variety of shapes, (ranging approximately from 1” x 1” x 1” to 3” x 3” x 9”).⁵⁷ As simplified and reduced representations of buildings, they lose the capacity for individual expression. The indistinguishable nature of the “building blocks” serves the idea of creating a modelled city based not so much on a reference to a real city, but rather the creation of an anonymous city. Organised and laid out in a haphazard (and naturally occurring) urban grid, these models simulate the expansive and claustrophobic cities – towering, bleeding into each other and spilling out to create the “sprawling” satellite towns. The models become an analogy for the infinite grid that perpetuates not just in the urbanscape but extends even to computer games like *SimCity* where instead of being an escape from the urban daily grid, repeats it.^[See Plate 12]

Capturing the city from angles that otherwise do not fall within the common gaze of “the-pedestrian-at-street-level,” the large-scale, high-definition colour billboard

print presents a view that hovers over the city, just above the roof of the high-rise buildings. In this elevated (and un-Cartesian) view the sense of scale is displaced, and hence the boundary between the micro and the macro, the subject and space, becomes dynamic. In the viewer's engagement with the scale and detail of the image, what is revealed is an intimate relationship a subject has with the city.

The work is designed not as a critical comment on urban existence, but rather, aims to explore a more neutral position; introducing another experience of the urbanscape, allowing the viewer to project his/her own reading onto the image and its relationship to the city. The work is not intended to alienate views, as it is important to consider the effects of site-specific art and the different audience it ultimately attracts. The transition from giant imposing buildings to small, more abstract patterns allows for a new reflection on the impact of such ways of living and designing our towns. While the individual experience cannot be denied, my work focuses on the cumulative effect of many of these experiences in a restricted and ordered space.

One of the intentions of the work is to engage the public to have to contend with the city and contemplate how they exist and move around within it. The other intention is to allow a quiet image to exist within a frantic city, and

allow the every-day city dweller to reflect and ponder – to find a sense of wonder in the everyday.^[See Plate 13]

The idea of utilising the billboard as both canvas and exhibition site came about during a trip to the city that started it all: Manhattan. Walking around the gallery district of SoHo in 2002, I came across two billboard sites, which perhaps in keeping with the concept of the area being deeply ingrained in the arts, publicly proclaiming: “No angst for art” and “To feel or not to feel this is the answer.” Large black Helvetica type set against a white background was displayed along one of the many overhead bridges that ran through SoHo.^[See Plate 14]

The commercial billboard as both canvas and site was extremely enticing and yet theoretically problematic, because the establishment of the billboard incites selling something. Billboards are immensely associated with advertising and any image displayed in such a space must be conforming to such an ideal. Advertising induces skepticism, and unfortunately as a media-savvy consumerist society, we have become cynical and suspicious of everything.⁵⁸

The problem with *Empire* being exhibited on a billboard is that the idea of the billboard has become ingrained in the public’s psyche as an incessant bid for money: yours and mine. What lies ahead is how *Empire* can become

untangled and unaligned with the notion of the billboard's affiliation with corporate advertising. While *Empire* – as art – is obviously not associated with any particular brand or product (though it itself a product), the viewing public (the same media-savvy public) will no doubt view and regard it with mistrust. So what sets *Empire* apart from the billboards selling Nike or Pepsi? How does the image of concrete blocks representing an anonymous and imagined city differ from Nike's super athletes or Pepsi as the preferred beverage of Britney Spears?

I am also acutely aware of the short life-span of a billboard: they go up, promoting a new album, a concert, a drink and within weeks (my billboard goes up on January 5th and comes down on January 31st), they are gone. Stripped down only to be replaced by yet another billboard selling something else. This is perhaps the sign of the times as much as it is the *tabula rasa* nature of contemporary cities – building up and tearing down upon itself, continuously in this incessant loop.

Commercial billboards have a tendency of *emptying out information* to the viewing public: telling you what to wear, how to look, what to eat, what not to eat and how to live, but *Empire* is the opposite. Disembodied from the traditional trappings of advertising: information – there are no text that would suggest or hint at what this image

is implying or where it is coming from. *Empire* is free of any written information that would advise the public of what it is, who did it, and what they are meant to do with it. In comparison to the SoHo Billboards mentioned earlier, *Empire* is free of these devices: the viewing public is liberated to read into it what they would like, hopefully encouraging them to look, pause, think, digest, reflect and then interpret.

With Sydney as the backdrop to the work, the work about the city exists within the space of the city and becomes site-specific with its location on the Princes Highway (corner of Belmore Street in the suburb of Tempe, heading towards the CBD). It is in this space of the city and more specifically, the highway that *Empire* finds itself engaging with the idea of “non-place.” According to Michel de Certeau, *space* was considered a physical entity defined by boundaries, while *place* was associated with identity, relationality and histories. de Certeau’s city was an animated space, not just about the physicality of high-rise buildings and its skyline. The city was an experiential space, and yet naming it was considered reductive, reducing it to the absence of “place.”

Marc Augé, in his influential study *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, goes further, claiming that if place is concerned with identity,

relationality and history, then a 'non place' is not concerned with these concepts. A non place is a place that could be anywhere and somehow somewhere. A non place continues to reference the place it is in and yet both "place" and "non place" are like 'opposed polarities.'⁵⁹ "Place" and "non-place" do not exist in pure forms and yet they can neither absolutely disappear nor be thoroughly established; 'the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed.'⁶⁰ What Augé is implying here is that you cannot have a place without referencing a non place, and vice versa.

Everything in a non place is being addressed to the individual, to you and only you constantly. However, a non place is not interested in addressing a specific identity, but rather *you* of the masses.⁶¹

Interestingly enough, Augé is eager to establish travelling and the traveller's space as the archetypal non place. In his prologue, there is a character named Pierre Dupont, a travelling businessman. We follow him as he makes his way along the freeway to the airport and finally the plane, interacting and moving through the city that no one would be unfamiliar with: withdrawing money from the ATM, driving along an expressway/motorway, parking his car in a multi-storey garage, and finally making his way through the airport and onto the plane. Augé

constructs the experience of the traveller – Dupont – as this reversal of the gaze whereby ‘the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle,’ and that this ordeal of solitude ‘is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality.’⁶²

Moments of solitude are generated whilst moving through such a non place. A non place is a semiotic construction: signs telling you which lane you can be in if overtaking, where to turn left, how many kilometres away, rest stop to your right, no speeding, no entry, have your toll ready. Non places are governed by control, tied to a dichotomy of permission and prohibition, regulated systems managed by procedures.

By rushing through such a space, the traveller – or ‘spectator’ as Augé makes reference to – is not contemplating the landscape. This discontinuity in experience ‘prevents (the traveller) from perceiving it as a place, from fully present in it, even though he may try to fill the gap with comprehensive and detailed information out of guidebooks... or journey narratives.’⁶³

NON PLACE AFFILIATES ITSELF WITH ADDRESS, SOLITUDE AND SEMIOTICS.

The non place allows for narcissism through the solitary experience of the individual, in particular: the travelling self, and with particular reference to Augé's archetypal non place of the traveller's space.

Which brings me back to *Empire*. I have come to understand *Empire* as being conceptually multi-tiered. From constructing a model of a city, to photographing it and displaying it on a commercial billboard situated within Sydney – in particular along a motorway which leads into the city – this work spans and straddles several ideas.

Firstly, it would be naïve of me to believe that the modelled city that I created could ever exist in a vacuum where it could be free of institutional ideas, agendas and concepts. Unwittingly, my modelled city would imply to some the idea and perhaps techniques of the “architectural model,” where materials like balsam wood is preferred, and ratios of actual measurements are indicated. Where an architectural model is perhaps more specific in referencing a city or a specific site (and scale), my modelled city on the other hand exists more as a sign or a suggestion of a city.⁶⁴ Or a “form” as it (the word) would be ‘precisely subjected to the functions of its linguistic descendants: *informing*, *transforming*, and *performing*.’⁶⁵ Or as according Peter Eisenman in *Diagram Diaries*, a “diagram,” because a diagram ‘appears... to operate precisely *between*

form and word... that it is a *performative* rather than a representational device (i.e., it is a tool of the virtual rather than the real.)'⁶⁶

At this point it becomes necessary to clarify Eisenman's definition of what a "diagram" is:

Generically, a diagram is a graphic shorthand. Though it is an ideogram, it is not necessarily an abstraction. It is a representation of something in that it is not the thing itself. In this sense, it cannot help but be embodied. It can never be free of value or meaning, even when it attempts to express relationships of formation and their processes. At the same time, a diagram is neither a structure nor an abstraction of structure. While it explains relationships in an architectural object, it is not isomorphic with it... The diagram is not only an explanation, as something that comes after, but it also acts as an intermediary in the process of generation of real space and time.⁶⁷

Hence my modelled city would be closer aligned with "simulacra" or "phantasms," rather than "copies."⁶⁸ And then there is its transition from its representation of a city to being represented in the photograph (on the billboard). The transformation from the concrete blocks to the photograph explores a particular notion of representation. In mentioning "representation" I am not suggesting that the transformation – or photography – flattens or diminishes the reality and dynamism of the concrete models. It is about the attempt of each medium (blocks and photographs) "trying" to mimic each other. It is the attempt of referencing. The photograph of the models do not represent the concept laden in the blocks, but expresses its own being. And each engagement we have with the photograph and/or

concrete blocks affects new relations. This inability to say what is exactly being expressed, allows the photograph of the modelled city in becoming other than itself. The photograph expands and contracts into many territories but never folding to reveal the same basic idea.

Secondly, by exhibiting a major portion of *Empire* within the confines of an actual city – on a commercial billboard situated along the Princes Highway enroute to the CBD – requires the work to be viewed differently. Viewing the work comes down to having to abandon the “idea” and “space” of the city the way in which one knows of and allow for the viewing and seeing of this artwork with memory and meditation. It almost requires one to forget a specific city. It calls for one to first experience and contemplate *Empire* not as specific representation of a city but to contemplate it as an “abstraction,” an “idea” of a city. So that when in the moment one spends time and engages with the image, the image relates to the audience not in terms of distance but in experience – an existential moment, an enchantment.

Each communication with the image of the modelled city) itself starts to bear its own idea and/or ideal. The experience of the diagram of the city is thus purest now. So in a strange but pleasant way, the photographs of the concrete blocks move the “attention” away from the issues

of urbanity and the city, to one of communication between “subject” and “object”; of negotiating the idea of existing within a city. It is the affect of the photograph that deals not with the issues of urban utopia or dystopia. Even if there was no photograph at hand, but just the cement blocks, its “primary” and natural intention is with the conditions of being with the blocks (and us), never about the city, let alone an actual city.

Thirdly, the manner in which *Empire* is displayed in – both on the motorway and as a billboard – makes reference to Augé’s non place: the traveller’s space, “sign” and “semiotics.” And also as the transitional space that acts as the blurred threshold between the CBD and the sprawling suburbs.

Another aspect of the exhibition of *Empire* is a secondary (documentary) site at Phatspace Gallery in Darlinghurst. Phatspace will host the exhibition and installation of the concrete modelled city. This installation will serve as the threshold between the macro and the micro, taking the audience from one “view point” of the city to another. The gallery will also exhibit a large-format colour print of the site of the billboard. This is for documentary purposes but also assists in allowing the public to “view” the work if they are not able to make their way to the site on the Princes Highway.

Perhaps the genuine quality of *Empire* lies not solely in the billboard or in the gallery installation, but rather is located in the experiential journey between the two sites. Navigating through Sydney to view and consume the work in its entirety is perhaps the true nature of *Empire*.⁶⁹ The billboard and the gallery installation are but “diagrams,” mere road signs along the way.^[See Plate 15]

Hence what emerges from this body of work is not so much the last word, or the absolute attempt to locate the city or to define it. It is more of a prompt to reconsider the city that more of us have come to inhabit and occupy over time. By prompting journeys back and forth, through the exhibition sites, the space of the city and time; through the places and locations all across the world and its location in our minds, it is perhaps possible to reflect and contemplate that the urban city is equally grand and picturesque. It is in the accumulative effect of *Empire*, the negotiating of space while travelling through the city – with the contemplation that the city, its skin, can be beautiful – that the moment of enchantment within these faded walls can be sincerely felt and experienced.

END OF EMPIRE

ENDNOTES

¹ The first phase of modernity was moulded by the industrial revolution. The second wave of modernity – or supermodernity – is a product of the rise of electronics, global travel and communication technology as marked out by both Marc Augé and Ulrich Beck.

M. Augé, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, Trans. John Howe, Verso, London, 1995.

U. Beck, A. Giddens & S. Lash, Reflexive Modernisation, Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in Modern Social Order, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994.

² Augé, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-60

³ This chapter argues and attempts to define what a “landscape” image is, or what defines “landscape.” This was triggered by a fellow photographer who, upon attending my solo show “Rising” held at Kudos Gallery in 2003, remarked at my ability to capture what was quintessentially “the anti-landscape image.” The term “anti-” would suggest that I was not at all photographing the “landscape,” but creating something that was in contradiction to it, or the opposite to what was understood as the “landscape” image. I am trying to suggest that there is no distinct division in my work, and that the notion that my work is of the “anti-landscape” is perhaps a little inaccurate and off the mark.

⁴ J. Corner, (ed.), Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, p. 2

⁵ R. Koolhaas & Harvard Design School, Mutations, Bordeaux : ACTAR & arc en rêve centre d’architecture, 2000, p. 310.

⁶ R. Koolhaas & B. Mau, S, M, L, XL. Office for Metropolitan Architecture, The Monacelli Press, New York, 1995, p. 1037.

⁷ “The Future of Asian Cities” in Asia Magazine, May 1966, pp. 5, 7, 8.

⁸ Koolhaas, S,M,L,XL, p. 1021.

⁹ Or down.

¹⁰ Koolhaas, Mutations, p. 309.

¹¹ C. Waldheim, “Aerial Representation and the Recovery of Landscape,” in Recovering Landscape: Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999, p. 127.

¹² Corner, *op. cit.*, p. ix, x, 1.

¹³ But we need to go beyond merely renaming, recontextualizing the landscape. The whole entity of landscape needs a “new” name:
landscape made up of open fields of grass and rolling hills:
“Landscape #1”;
landscape made up of motorways, skyscrapers and sprawling suburbs:
“Landscape #2.”

They are still dialectically bound. The “trick” is to decipher how to escape this binary – the latter is often mistaken as a progression of the contemporary landscape. Maybe it is no longer to see “Landscape #2” as opposite, or a transformation from being “Landscape #1.” It is to see “Landscape #2” as its own model and original. No amount of description of “Landscape #2” with its urban features is going to assist this project if I continue to mention “Landscape #1” and how landscapes have “changed.” So let us abandon the idea of “Landscape #1” for the purpose of this project.

¹⁴ “There is no word in Japanese for city or architecture until these Western abstractions were introduced into its vocabulary, for better or worse.”

G. Bekaert, “The Hereafter of the City,” in After-Sprawl. Research for the Contemporary City, Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2002, p. 10.

¹⁵ D. C. Thorns, The Transformation of Cities. Urban Theory and Urban Life, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 2.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 2-4.

¹⁷ The concept of the city emerged around 3000-4000 BC in the Nile valley and Mesopotamia.

¹⁸ The images of the Manhattan skyline are so deeply ingrained is because Manhattan is an island. Hence the method in which its skyline has been photographed – either from the sea or from the air – lends a sense of the “absolute” urban skyline. Through the various popular mediums of television, film, and photography, Manhattan has become one of the more recognisable skylines and cities. The Empire State building, the Kreysler building, the late Twin Towers, and the Brooklyn Bridge - to name a few – have become cultural icons, not just because of architectural significance or historical events, but also because they are part of what can be considered one of the many epicentres of power, wealth and culture.

¹⁹ Koolhaas, Mutations, p. 6.

²⁰ W. Pedersen, “Preface,” in Skyscraper. Designs of the Recent Past and for the Near Future, London: Thames & Hudson, 2003, p. 6.

²¹ But is often used this way.

²² Bekaert, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-21.

²³ E. Höweler, “Vertical Now: The Skyscraper at the beginning of the 21st Century,” in Skyscraper. Designs of the Recent Past and for the Near Future, London: Thames & Hudson, 2003, p. 8.

²⁴ N. Tazi, “Fragments of Net-Theory,” in Mutations, p.43.

²⁵ *Non-places*, according to Augé, are those characteristically unspecific areas that can only acquire and maintain a sense of identity, history and relation via the population that interacts with them. Non-places are found almost everywhere and anywhere – from corridors to

freeways, hotel rooms to airport terminals. These are the spaces that witness everyday rituals and transitions. A 'place' can be defined as having specific identity, local history and anthropological relations. Subsequently a 'non-place' is defined in opposition to these. However, neither the 'place' nor 'non-place' exists in pure form and yet the two are in opposition; they can never absolutely disappear nor be thoroughly established.

²⁶ Rem Koolhaas, Marc Augé and Walter Benjamin have all left me without a clear comprehension of what the city really is or has become. Honestly, I have even less of an idea of what is a city now than when I began this body of work. I once thought it was simply an architectural space I inhabited that contained the workings of commerce, industry and culture: a "physical" space.

²⁷ Bekaert, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²⁸ Ironically, it should be noted that Hong Kong has more skyscrapers than New York. If quantity is the key here, then Hong Kong would surpass New York as the model city. And yet, Hong Kong's skyline remains less instantly recognisable than New York's.

Pedersen, p.7

²⁹ Now we can estimate the production timeline of a particular television series or movie depending on whether the Twin Towers are visible in the panoramic shots: there is a division of "pre-" and "post-" Twin Towers.

³⁰ M. A. Caws, (ed.), City Images: Perspectives from Literature, Philosophy, and Film, New York: Gordon & Breach, 1991.

³¹ Bekaert, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

³² Harvard Project on the City, "How to Build a City," in Mutations, p. 11.

³³ K. Lynch, The image of the City, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960, pp. 2-6.

³⁴ "Memorialising the achievements of individuals," and recording pieces of memory have always been the public's approach to photography, for was it not Kodak that "relied on selling (its) film as prosthetic memory, encapsulated in their slogan: 'It's a Kodak moment.'"

S. Sontag, On Photography, Penguin Group, London, 1979, p. 8.

N. Mirzoeff, An Introduction to Visual Culture, London: Routledge, 1999, pp.88-9.

³⁵ Sontag, *op. cit.*, p.4.

³⁶ S. J. Higley, "A Taste for Shrinking: Movie Miniatures and the Unreal City," in Camera Obscura 47, Vol 16, Number 2, Duke University Press, 2001.

- ³⁷ S. Koops, "The Story of Architecture," Callum Morton. More talk about buildings and mood, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, p.20.
- ³⁸ E. Farrelly, "City Talks. Architecture, Media and Fashion," Sydney Town Hall, June 1, 2004.
- ³⁹ A Moebius (Möbius, or Mobuis) strip is a loop of paper with a half twist in it. It is the discovery of the first one-sided surface and it was established by A. F. Möbius (1790 -1868). Sometimes it is alternatively called a Möbius band. If you were to draw a line along the length of the strip of paper, you would find yourself continuously drawing over and over again on the line, and yet drawing over both sides of what was once a strip of paper with two-sides.
- ⁴⁰ E. A. Macgregor, "Director's Forward," Callum Morton. More talk about buildings and mood, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003, p. 3.
- ⁴¹ P. Brophy, "The City is a Sewer," Callum Morton. More talk about buildings and mood, Sydney: MCA, 2003, p. 61.
- ⁴² G. Bachelard, "Miniature," in The Poetics of Space, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958. Recent edition, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1994, pp. 148-82.
- ⁴³ M. de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. S. F. Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 92.
- ⁴⁴ Singapore is one of the few countries that have slowly reclaimed land from the sea, expanding its landmass and dimensions on a steady scale since the 1960s. It is expected that by 2030, Singapore would have increased its landmass by 100km², up from its 1990 51.5km² increase since 1960.
- <http://library.thinkquest.org/C006891/reclamation.html>, Accessed April 28, 2004.
- ⁴⁵ "To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp (to become) an Icarus flying above these water..."
de Certeau, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
- ⁴⁶ D. Coupland, Microserfs, London: Flamingo, 1996, pp. 82-3
- ⁴⁷ Höweler, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.
- ⁴⁸ U. Obrist, S. Boeri and G. Basilico, "A 'Perhaps' City," trans. R. Taylor, Berlin, London: Thames & Hudson, 2002, p.11.
- ⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p.6.
- ⁵⁰ S. Jacobs, "Shreds of Boring Postcards: Toward a Posturban Aesthetics of the Generic and the Everyday," Post, Ex, Sub, Dis. Urban Fragmentations and Constructions, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2002, p.47.

- ⁵¹ R. Siebenhaar, "Meeting," Berlin, p.177.
- ⁵² Obrist, et. al., *op cit.*, p.9.
- ⁵³ S. Boeri, "On Some Paradoxes in the Relationship between Photography and the Contemporary City," in Post, Ex, Sub, Dis. Urban Fragmentations and Constructions, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2002, pp. 96-99.
- ⁵⁴ *Home* (or aspects of) was showcased at First Draft Gallery, Drive-In (Penrith Regional Gallery), College of Fine Arts, Kudos Gallery and PhotoTechnica Exhibition Space.
- ⁵⁵ <http://www.phototechnica.com.au>, Accessed Aug 31, 2004. #19
- ⁵⁶ It should be noted that at this point of time of the research, I was playing the computer PC Game *SimCity 4*. It is a simulated strategy game that allows you to build town, cities and metropolises, in the roles of God (forming the natural environment: hills, rivers and plains), and Mayor/City Planner (zoning for residential, commercial and industrial sites). The player has the choice of building the ideal money-making mega-tropolis or the ultimate slum of decay.
- ⁵⁷ As a technician making this model, heble bricks are affordable, light in weight, easy to transport and cut, plus are readily available from the local Mitre10. Conceptually, it is really a matter of using the material that IS the basis of the city – but whilst the actual "real" physical city is made from perfectly cast concrete panels, columns and the likes, I'm looking for a materiality that isn't quite so perfect. The aeration makes the blocks brittle – not fragile. This challenges the notion of sturdy and dependable buildings that provide safety and shelter. It gives off the "post-apocalyptic" look by accident. What I really wanted was a simplified, abstract city, but the pock-marks lend a sense of being tactile, and irregular/not perfect/hand made, which in turn is the irony of the aerated concrete blocks. That it itself is mass-produced, but its reduction and simplification into my city blocks is indirectly cast by hand.
- Wood would have me challenging the history and theory of architectural model making which I'd prefer to avoid. Glass, or perspex, would have driven me to bankruptcy, and would have brought to the forefront the argument of private and personal versus public and exposed. Metal would reference sci-fi heavily: too minimalist, creating an alien landscape.
- ⁵⁸ Despite the fact that some billboards are promoting ideas rather than product, that their intent is for the general good rather than cash – think Benetton – they are still overtly selling something, we mentally relegate them as attempt to manipulate our conscience towards the purchase of product.
- J. Buddle, "Artists' Billboards – An Oxymoron?" in Arts Editor, http://www.artseditor.com/html/april00/april00_billboards.shtml, Accessed October 30, 2004.
- ⁵⁹ Augé, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 79.

⁶¹ When you are driving along a motorway (or freeway) in – for instance – a car, you carry with you identification. Your driver's license in your wallet and the car registration sticker on the window reference you as a qualified driver and identify that this car is registered to you. You drive along the motorway and there are all these road signs addressing you: "63km to Sydney," "Wrong Way Go Back," "Turn Left for Scenic Route," "Police Targeting Drink Driving," "80km." However, you are not driving in a bubble, you are driving on the motorway along with many others. You now exist without a specific identity because nothing on this motorway is addressing you as the distinct individual of who you are, but rather "you" as part of the travelling masses that moves along the motorway at any given day and any time. Like the road signs that address everyone travelling on the motorway and at the same time, no one in particular.

⁶² Augé, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-87.

⁶³ *ibid.*, pp. 84-85.

⁶⁴ It is here that photography's paradox of being a "representation of reality" is realised. Even in "fiction photography" (Nineteenth Century *misé-en-scène* and costumed poses) ultimately become "realistic" in so far as it remains a historical fact that Nineteenth Century bourgeois people did put on costumes to pose for such tableaux.

⁶⁵ R. E. Somol, "Dummy Text, or the Diagrammatic Basis of Contemporary Architecture," in Diagram Diaries, London: Thames & Hudson, 2001, p. 14.

⁶⁶ P. Eisenman, Diagram Diaries, London: Thames & Hudson, 2001, p. 8.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁹ The establishment of a website will aid in the understanding of the work as well as provide all necessary text and details of Empire, including a map between the two sites. ^(See Plate 15)

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