Mixed Use, Manhattan

Photography and Related Practices, 1970s to the Present
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with Kristin Poor
The Powers of Removal: 
Interventions in the Name of the City 
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"Here, there used to be a bakery." "That's where old lady Dupuis used to live." It is striking...that the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: "you see, here there used to be...", but it can no longer be seen. Demonstratives indicate the invisible identities of the visible: it is the very definition of a place, in fact, that it is composed by these series of displacements and effects among the fragmented strata that form it and that it plays on these moving layers.

—Michel de Certeau

Silence occludes the ordinary, the implied, the everyday, the unexceptional—all that is not considered important enough to be mentioned. Yet the significance of past events appears in these ordinary moments and people. That's why the quotidian is the limit of understanding, and the limit for speaking of the past.

—Matthew Buckingham

In 1904, after twenty-one years abroad, Henry James returned to Manhattan, the city of his childhood. His account of rapid and ruthless transformation is, in one sense, a classic aristocratic lament about the horrors of modernization: James recoils in terror at Ellis Island's ceaseless "ingurgitation" of foreigners (a process he compares to "sword-swallowing"). He is annoyed by the "flash of innumerable windows" that offer viewers immediate visual access to buildings' previously screened interior spaces, revolted by the slapdash quality of so many of the new buildings, which "never begin to speak to you...with the authority of things of permanence," and outraged especially about the disappearance of his childhood house. As he approached the site, James's imagination had already erected a commemorative tablet memorializing his accomplishments as a writer. Once at the site he was disappointed to discover that there was no place to hang it, since "the very wall that should have borne this inscription had been smashed as for demonstration that tablets, in New York, are unthinkable." The upshot, then, is that New York offers no choice about whether or not to erect plaques, since any surface one might wish to saddle as support will soon disappear. And this leads to James's key, and perhaps surprising, insight about New York. Looking at several Lower Manhattan
churches and noticing that, as taller buildings rise up around them, their traditional symbolic position is eclipsed, James ruminates:

Afterwards, outside, again and again, the powers of removal struck me as looming awfully, in the newest mass of multiplied floors and windows visible at this point. They, ranged in this terrible erection, were going to bring in money—and was not money the only thing a self-respecting structure could be thought of as bringing in?  

James's horror of tall buildings, then, is not only that they dwarf churches and smaller structures that previously occupied their sites. It is also that this unarrestable process in turn acted to destabilize all buildings; thus, while contemplating any individual looming skyscraper, he was only able to imagine the even more monstrous tower that would eventually replace it in an infinite potlatch of hasty erections and violent removals. Unlike Marx and Engels's famous claim that in capitalism "all that is solid melts into air," and unlike de Certeau's account of urban places as structured, by necessity, around impossible instances of deixis, James evokes not a onetime loss or a failed gesture of pointing but a sequence of abrupt meltings and just-as-sudden solidifications.  

By the mid-1970s much of the modern industrial infrastructure had succumbed to the powers James observed, rendering Lower Manhattan (outside of Wall Street proper) a thinly populated facade. This is the city we see in Harry Shunk and János Kender's photographs from this period that show a decayed shell of once-glamorous, seemingly abandoned skyscrapers hemmed in by the dilapidated piers that previously sustained the world's largest harbor and pumped economic life into this downtown. And this is the view we see through the window in the Danny Lyon photograph of an abandoned room overlooking Lower Manhattan skyscrapers. From these ruins we see, in Shunk-Kender's photographs, the World Trade Center rising, blatant embodiment of the transition from goods to services, from production and distribution to financial management.

But what precisely has been removed from Lower Manhattan? Is it our grounding in and familiarity with specific buildings destined to meet the wrecking ball? Or the wide array of "uses" (what Jane Jacobsites characterize as "healthy urbanism": the integration of goods and services, of labor and leisure, no longer possible in an increasingly parcelled city) that steadily disappear, disaggregated to the outer boroughs? Or is it the loss of our belief in the idealism of a midcentury modernism—a modernism that replaced much of the fin-de-siècle urban infrastructure before giving way to a cynical barrage of heritage industry malls (as the geographer David Harvey would have it). Where should art with such concerns direct its energies? And what resources does this art have to figure these processes of removal, preserve modes of experience likely to otherwise vanish, and reflect on the general forces at play in urban transformation?
William Gedney, photographs of Myrtle Avenue view from Gedney’s next window, c. 1969
Plate 109-10  William Gedney, photographs of Myrtle Avenue view from Gedney’s apartment window, 1967
Plate 112  Roy Colmer, Doors N.Y.C.: East 7th Street between 2nd Avenue and Cooper Square, Odd Numbers, 1976
Stefan Brecht, double-page spread from 8th Avenue, 1985
These questions, often identified with the term *public art*, have been the underlying focus of many artists since the mid-1970s. Yet debates over what constitutes public art have given rise not only to widely discrepant examples but to fundamentally opposing models and definitions of “publicness.” Rosalyn Deutsche provides a sketch of two contrasting models:

One is based on a strict division between an abstract, universalist public and a private arena of conflicting, partial interests. Champions of this concept treat public space as a realm of social plentitude that has declined—even vanished in a “postmodern” epoch of conflict, heterogeneity, and particularity. A contrasting position holds that a unitary public space is not “lost,” but is, instead, what critic Bruce Robbins...calls a “phantom.” In this view, the singular public space is a phantom because its claim to be fully inclusive is always an illusion. What is more, the very notion of an undivided social space is irremediably deceptive, constituted by disavowing plurality and conflict.\(^{10}\)

Given the problems with the first model, Deutsche mounts a campaign to wrest the concept of public art away from such nostalgic and normative uses.\(^ {11}\) Though this is a project with which I am in sympathy, my own tack has been to cultivate terms at the other end of the spectrum, like coterie, that seem at first the self-evidently symptomatic opposite of the public or the community. Here the explicit partiality of coteries—social formations whose artistic or literary works eschew claims to universality and seem to address other members first—can allow for what I argue is paradoxically a robustly democratic politics.\(^ {12}\) Not succumbing to the myth of the once-great, now-fallen public, coterie writing or art can help anatomize the operations of the phantom public, can engage, that is, in an analogous attempt to critique the regressive and normative uses of the category of the public that Deutsche undertakes. Ultimately, though, I have doubts about whether it’s possible to recode a familiar word like public, whose regressive meanings have become so ingrained. For this reason I’d like to consider the concept of the public only tangentially, under the slightly different heading urbanism—a term that, despite its problems, does not carry quite the same normative burden. By urbanism I do not mean the neutral or technocratic domain exhibited in much urban planning, but rather the diverse critical discourse produced by art critics, expatriate novelists, architects, social activists, historians, semioticians, geographers, and artists themselves.

Even if we frame the debate around urbanism, however, we are just as certain to encounter a fundamental division between symptomatic and critical modes of involvement with the city. David Harvey, for instance, sees Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) as symptomatic of the regressive transformation of urban space brought on by neoliberalism.\(^ {13}\) Deutsche, by contrast, mounts a strong case that
Sherman's photographs are critical interventions; she claims they use the city as a stage in order to "appropriate and make visible the conventions that structure the cinematics images of femininity: lighting, gesture, pose, camera angle, focus, framing, address to the viewer." In regards to this debate, one might traditionally imagine a spectrum with two poles: totality, on one side, and contingent identity (or positionality), on the other. The former is associated with a belief in the possibility of accurate and objective overviews (Harvey's position), and the latter with the claim that views will be inescapably tied to their viewers (Deutsche's). While Deutsche's argument strikes me as the more persuasive of the two, what fascinates me about many of the works in Mixed Use, Manhattan is how they can be understood to remap the terms of this debate.

In the midst of the urban and economic crisis of the 1970s, James Nares, an art student having just arrived from London, produced a film called Pendulum (1976). The film tracks what looks to be a concrete wrecking ball as it swings from a second-story walkway traversing Staple Street, in Tribeca, just where it opens onto Jay Street, which runs only two blocks, bookended by fin-de-siècle steel-frame masonry buildings (lofts and warehouses). These are the kinds of buildings that might have seemed scandalously new in James's time but that had already become antiquated and largely abandoned by the 1970s. The setting is deserted, as it would have had to be for the filming of such an extremely heavy concrete ball swinging precariously through public space. But though we may periodically return to the dangers of the experiment and the social isolation required for it, Pendulum doesn't appear to have been intended as an audacious, confrontational public action. It rather asks us to study, even lose ourselves, in the wrecking ball's hypnotic motion. Over the course of the film's ample seventeen minutes and fifteen seconds, the angles and orientations change repeatedly. This denaturalizes any single perspective: from Jay Street (where the ball appears only at the end of its arc); from eye level; ground level; axially; from the perpendicular; the oblique, above (from the walkway), above even that (from the building overlooking the walkway); and finally from the orientation of the ball itself, as it glides through the air. Many of the sequences mesmerize: the ball rises toward us to fill the entire screen and then recedes, or cuts through shadows into visibility, seen against the backdrop of the sky above rooftops, stretching out at the far end of its arc against the downtown industrial architecture. Here we are immersed in a duration and movement not unlike motion-study sequences associated with Structuralist cinema. Even though Nares's film is not the record of a guerrilla event, it refuses to let the viewer forget that with any slight miscalculation or equipment failure the elegant pendulum could become a crushing, deadly menace. And this leads us to the heart of the film, where we find ourselves, in effect, keeping time with what looks like a wrecking ball: the isolation required for the film's occurrence and the deindustrialization that turned this section of Lower Manhattan into a ghost town are the same conditions that will eventually
Plate 114  Bernd and Hilla Becher, New York Water Towers, 1968
Plate 115  Sol LeWitt, Brick Wall, 1977
be addressed by the ball, itself an agent of historical destruction, and a keeper of time." What is difficult to place about Pendulum, then, is its seamless integration of motion study and urban allegory, structuralist fascination with moving mass and activist attention to transformations in the built environment—the former seeming to influence the latter, as we lose ourselves in the film's mesmerizing force and gradually read this force in relation to its site.

Other sites that host, and seem to invite, both exploration and removal are evident in the work of Charles Simonds. These, by contrast, are less fully intact than those experienced in Pendulum. While some are literal ruins—heaps of bricks from recent demolitions in now-vacant lots—others are just unresolved "seams" between functional buildings: gaps, cracks, ambiguous interstructures. In overlapping areas such as these, Simonds sets himself up—clad in a puffy down parka, tweezers in hand, mounds of clay excavated on-site—and begins to model (in clay) one of the miniature temporary sculpture-cities he began constructing primarily on the Lower East Side, in the early 1970s. Simonds describes the project in the 1972 film Dwellings, a documentary on his work shot by David Troy, claiming that the structures are designed for "an imaginary group of little people who are migrating through the city...each dwelling tells part of the story of these people...including what they believe...some of the dwellings are ritual places...ruins...settlements."

In a later film on Simonds made by Rudy Burckhardt, Dwells Winter (1974), we see a jarring image of a burning car in the very lot where he is working. Eventually, firefighters arrive and put out the fire and restore disorder, while Simonds, unfazed, quietly tweezers-in tiny bricks to his emerging structure. Scenes like this—which typically end with a long pan of the completed artwork in its blighted context—suggest that Simonds ultimately winds up with his own spatially manageable ruin, contained within a sprawling, uncontainable, life-size ruin—the neighborhood itself. Periodically, groups of curious onlookers gather and ask questions. In the David Troy film, for instance, they (and therefore we) are told that Simonds's fictional little people are "dependent upon the flow of life around them and the kind of treatment they receive" and that "most people try to protect the little people." A few onlookers pause on the ethical implications of this injunction: "It's wrong to break them," one teenage boy announces for the camera, the tone of the question becomes that of the statement. The David Troy film, like most of Simonds's early critics, presents the art as redemptive. His work, in this regard, is viewed as exemplary: a creative intervention in a wasteland that incites initial curiosity in onlookers who were previously passive but have now been prompted into action and social responsibility. "These dreamlike miniature places are ephemeral and timeless," Lucy Lippard suggests, "but they also act as specific social metaphors, sparks for more permanent reconstructions of abandoned neighborhoods."
Part of this impetus toward action stems from what critics take as clear references to the architecture of previous cultures. Here, again, is Lippard:

Simonds's personal fantasies expand into political consciousness-raisers for his street audiences in part because by reinstating a sense of their pasts he allows them to identify with their own patches of the city and to consider molding their own futures. His tiny adobe houses and sensuous clay landscapes are a surprisingly universal image. In workers' neighborhoods in New York they recall Puerto Rico; in Paris, Tunisia; in Germany, Turkey.¹⁹

This reading mobilizes history into a seamless and universal source of identifications: each present viewer finding his cultural past is thus inspired and empowered to begin neighborhood-changing activities. But if Simonds's work does provide a "dreamlike peephole into other times and possibilities,"²⁰ what makes us assume that such times and places must be understood as purely empowering? The work in its context could also be read as an analogy between past and present ruins, between colonized or eradicated societies (like those of Native Americans in the Southwest) and current ones visibly undergoing crisis.²¹ Simonds, thus, evokes a distant, anthropological future, a vantage from which one might "look back," paradoxically, onto the present—a kind of postapocalyptic temporality that invites us to imagine Manhattan itself as precisely the kind of ancient-day ruin it hosts within its crumbling infrastructure. This displacement casts each of Simonds's viewers as a future anthropologist, while each "intervention" emerges with a cool finality, the powers of removal figured not in generational, but in nearly geologic, terms.

Who, then, are the agents of removal? Are they knowable forces within the economy, familiar narratives of outsourcing and deindustrialization? Are they periodic reappraisals of the idea of the functional city? Or is removal's logic always alien, distant, mysterious? There is, in fact, a long history in the United States both of imagining narratives at the sites of mute anthropological ruins and projecting current conflicts onto those ruins. Perhaps the classic document of such reanimation and displacement is William Cullen Bryant's poem "The Prairies," begun on his 1832 trip to the wilds of Illinois, a state then just on the cusp of settlement by the westward movement of the seaboard population. Contemplating more thoroughgoing white settlement of this region and the consequent displacement of Native Americans, Bryant projects this drama onto a previous struggle between these Native Americans and the race of "mound-builders" they were initially thought to have displaced:²² "The red man came— / The roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce, / And the mound-builders vanished from the earth."²³ What is most fascinating about this poem, though, is the distanced commentary Bryant uses to manage this transition:
Muheaskantuck—Everything Has a Name screening on board a water taxi on the Hudson River, New York, March 2008. Photograph by Matthew Buckingham

Matthew Buckingham, stills from Muheaskantuck—Everything Has a Name, 2003. 16mm film; color; sound; 40 min.
Thus change the forms of being. Thus arise
Races of living things, glorious in strength,
And perish, as the quickening breath of God
Fills them, or is withdrawn.24

Abandoned mounds, like the crumbling bricks of Native American buildings, give us
the occasion to contemplate the glories of this sequence of risings and perishings—
regardless of whether or not we want to trace them back to a breathing God. What is
unacceptable to a reader in 2010, of course, is the amazing passivity of Bryant’s formu-
lation—the implication that we are always somewhere off-screen when the violence of
succession goes down.

Matthew Buckingham seeks to address both American historiography
of this sort and its specific relation to Manhattan in his film Muhheakantuck—Everything
Has a Name (2003), which consists of a single view, shot from a helicopter as it flies
from the Verrazano Narrows Bridge, up the Hudson River to a point near Ossining,
New York, where it turns around and flies back.25 The film is accompanied by a recording
of Buckingham’s own voice, as he meditates on historiography, violence, and
language, among other topics, that seem to unfold with the landscape below.

In the context of urbanist artworks that seek to reframe our experience
of the island and, in particular, to figure those looming “powers of removal” that lurk
within built or crumbling architectural sites, Buckingham’s film represents something
of an end-move. The history I’ve sketched so far—James’s lament about modernization
at the turn of the century, Nareś’s and Simonds’s various engagements with deindus-
trialization in the 1970s—implicitly accepts some version of built Manhattan (emerging
or declining) as a given. Buckingham instead asks us to contemplate the previous
removal of the Lenape tribe that made the settling of the city possible. In the film, we experience
“Manhattan” only as a slowly passing and distant constellation of dully colored slabs
(seen in grainy tint of magenta). The city is shown rising above a river, and while we
recognize this river to be the Hudson, we are reminded by Buckingham that it was once
called Muhheakantuck, the “River that Flows in Two Directions” (based on the fact
that saltwater flows up the river about 150 miles).26 As Michel de Certeau writes:

[Names] detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define and
serve as imaginary meeting-points on itineraries which, as metaphors, they
 determine for reasons that are foreign to their original value but may be recog-
nized or not by passers-by. A strange toponymy that is detached from actual
places and flies high over the city like a foggy geography of “meanings” held
in suspension, directing the physical deambulations below.27

What de Certeau has in mind are the names of urban places (Parisian names, for ex-
ample, like Saint-Pères, Concorde, and Place de L’Étoile) that are not up for contestation
per se but have become uncoupled from any set or family of descriptive attributes, any definitive collection of associations—this because the experiences that might be associated with them are simply too broad to pin to any narrow collection of images. If this is a problem associated with all proper names (and indeed all language), then ostensibly urban proper names stage it in a particularly vivid way: press just slightly on their promised concreteness and one arrives at an abyss of contingent association. Buckingham, however, aims to take this problem a step further, by imagining the deactivation of a name like “the Hudson,” which has served as a gathering place for such associations for hundreds of years.

But before he can do this, Buckingham must first address his own vantage point and claim to knowledge. Accordingly, the opening lines of his voice-over initiate the kind of masterful overview of the river and the city that the helicopter’s aerial perspective seems to offer: “The dream of vertical ascent and hovering flight was first expressed in China in the form of a toy—a bamboo dragonfly that lifted straight up though the air when spun quickly.” This dream, we are soon told, is one “of suspending time through distance, of cutting oneself off from the ordinary measures of time—surface time.” In criticizing this fantasy, Buckingham situates his own journey not only up the Hudson but through the central harbors and canals of urbanist discourse, where the possibilities and limitations of suspended, vertical, even totalizing views of cities have generated some of the most important debates. Three of the texts I have already referenced seem especially relevant: first, de Certeau’s previously quoted “Walking in the City,” a semiotic account of urban walks as potentially subversive speech acts (“parole”) within the “langue” of the city, which begins with a rumination on the view from the top of the World Trade Center. Next, David Harvey’s appropriation (in The Condition of Postmodernity) of that same elevated view toward ends conspicuously different from de Certeau’s—that is, toward a more singularly economic and totalizing picture of the city. And finally, Rosalyn Deutsche’s critique of Harvey, which highlights the difference between de Certeau and Harvey’s desired uses of de Certeau, as well as pointing out problems in Harvey’s extension of his symptomatic and singularly economic account of postmodernity to the domain of art practice.

Buckingham’s self-positioning in this debate is complex. Statements throughout the film suggest his identification with de Certeau’s model of daily life. Buckingham has told us, echoing de Certeau, that “silence occludes the ordinary...the everyday,” but that “the significance of past events appears in these ordinary moments and people.” Therefore, for Buckingham, the quotidian becomes “the limit of understanding, and... speaking of the past.” This implies that the film might be understood as a corrective to the dream of vertical ascent, with both its surface time and its totalizing or synoptic view: a newly calibrated temporal measure that might help us unlearn the overly familiar (surface) cultural image of Manhattan, great modern city on the river explored by Henry Hudson in 1609. But Buckingham’s recalibration of New York’s
time and history will have to win out over just the sort of distanced and abstracted view he has brought in for questioning. Almost perversely, his entire film presents only a slowly moving overview of the city, its environs, and a substantial swath of territory north of it along the river.

Perhaps, then, we are to take the intervention of Muhheakantuck not as the literal view it offers (and implicitly critiques), but as the story it reframes. From this vantage, Muhheakantuck avoids the pitfalls of Russell Shorto’s The Island at the Center of the World, in which New Amsterdam’s nascent capitalism is seen as inherently aligned with progressive tolerance. Buckingham’s narrative instead provides an account of consistent European barbarism hitched to three main causal agents: the instrumentalizing machines of early capitalism like the Dutch East India Company; the larger culture of violence that produced the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), in which an estimated 7.5 million Germans alone died; and the ethnocentrism of the Dutch explorers that caused them to disregard native names and native languages more generally. Meanwhile, the voice-over also develops a series of destabilizing metanarrative aphorisms that we are invited to read back into the film’s own process of storytelling. “Stories condense time the way that maps miniaturize space. But somehow, condensing time seems to distance the past from us rather than bringing it closer. What unfolds in a story, what really happens in a story, is language.” In Buckingham’s language, then, the clear division between corrective historical intervention and destabilizing metahistorical aphorism allows him to bring forward a new history of the river formerly known as the Hudson while at the same time casting doubt on “history” more generally.

Do these two seemingly opposite currents in Muhheakantuck ever meet or flow in unison? At one point, Buckingham ruminates precisely on this seam between the overview and the partial view: “In the dream of vertical ascent and hovering flight, we glimpse the cartographer’s view, a fictional disembodied eye suspended high in the air. But as soon as we follow one line, or one river, and not another, a journey emerges, even if it is only a dream. And of course that journey unavoidably becomes a story.” Given these terms, we might position Buckingham within the urbanist debates I’ve sketched by saying that while his journey (his historiographic task of reframing the river) could be accommodated within Harvey’s model of main causes, solid words, and full-enough pictures, Buckingham’s story—his reflection on what he himself has discovered in relation to what one might discover—is cast in the fluid semiotics and contingent social positions of de Certeau and Deutsche.

But inasmuch as de Certeau’s concept of the everyday has been a claimed point of departure for Buckingham, one might certainly imagine another journey into this territory—perhaps we could call it Supplement to Buckingham’s Voyage—in which surviving seventeenth-century objects themselves are used as the jumping-off spots for narrative: “the implied, the everyday, the unexceptional—everything not considered important enough to be mentioned.” Certainly, attention to such everyday
Plate 121  James Nares, still from Pendulum, 1976
Plate 122  James Nares, still from Pendulum, 1976
Plate 123  James Nares, still from Pendulum, 1976.
Plate 124  Charles Simonds, still from Dwellings, 1972
Plate 125  Charles Simonds, still from Dwellings Winter, 1974
Plate 126  Gabriel Orozco, Island within an Island (Isla en la Isla), 1993
Plate 128  Gabriel Orozco, Foam, 1992
objects (albeit from the recent, not the distant, past) has been one of the guiding principles of another current of urbanist art, including some of Buckingham's own work.

Let me conclude, then, with a few projects turned in this direction—both within *Mixed Use, Manhattan* and without. If the easy criticism of such works is that they appear “slight,” it’s worth remembering, first, what I’ve implied above: that because of pervasive presuppositions about the nature of significant “content” it will always be an enormous challenge to turn attention to those elements in city life most likely to escape documentation, to remain implied, unstated, and therefore transient; and second, that most urbanist artwork involved with concepts of the quotidian proceeds through a serial logic in which an individual image is less important as mimetic proof of itself than as an element within a collection, to be understood comparatively. Here I’m thinking of a group of Manhattan–based photographic collections: Zoe Leonard’s gum deposits, Gabriel Orozco’s pools and leaf patterns, Christopher Wool’s leaking fire hydrants and discarded furniture, Moyra Davey’s newsstand typologies, Roy Colmer’s doorways, and Stefan Brecht’s irregular sidewalk patches along 8th Avenue. All these works gather detritus or the overlooked rather than focusing on the dramatic, conflictual elements of urban life.

But if such work can be thought to “record” or “document,” it does so not simply by preserving images, by arresting the ever-changing surface of the built world. For most of these works, all of the sensuous particularity of an individual image only comes into focus as such with the invention of the category of which this image will have been an instance. “Now we will notice sidewalk gum deposits,” Leonard’s photographs seem to say, and so they both alert us to these as a condition and produce an archive: a taxonomy of chewing-gum-based sidewalk stains. But such photographic speech acts always articulate something more. They seem to say: “If this can be a category, then imagine how many other categories are conceivable!” Therefore, one taxonomy invites you to invent another and to speculate on the contingencies of so many that already exist. When urbanism steps beyond assumptions about the economic as the master category, it can initiate indispensable discussion about its interpretive categories per se: this, rather than any specific version of materialist history, is what makes Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, for instance, such an exemplary text; it invites reflection on the production of interpretive categories, on their juxtapositions, on the gathering and organizing of material.

Perhaps the richest work in this direction I have encountered is that of the group ENDCOMMERCIAL, for which the analysis of typical, recurrent, but unconceptualized (or unarticulated) phenomena in New York City gets organized by an enormous, playful taxonomy whose largest categories (“system,” “order,” and “identity”) each branch off into three subcategories. “System,” for instance, covers “property phenomenon,” “dysfunctional speech act,” and “commerce.” Under “dysfunctional speech act,” then, we find enormous collections of images organized by “misspelling,” “fading
markets," and "empty signs." Each of these final categories might give rise to dozens of images of signs without messages, signs with almost illegible messages, or signs with garbled, overwritten, or simply misspelled messages. Emphasis, again, is not on the singularity of the image but on the articulation of a category. Others include taped-up car windows, welded tags on steel road plates, and spray-painted digging directions to pipe excavators. Each image is presented by juxtaposition with others within its grouping.

But rather than end with a paean to Benjaminian categories, let me instead conclude with a project that combines the quotidian mapping impulse of the above works with a more explicit performative dimension: Jimbo Blachly's *About 86 Springs* (2002), in which the artist, following the lead of a hundred-year-old guide to the springs and wells of New York by the classicist/hydrologist James Reuel Smith (1852–1935), revisits each of the now-blighted spring sites, documenting its current condition. The force of the project is not just the juxtaposed images of then and now (the sylvan glades become sloping sewage drains); nor is it a tale of ecological decline in the face of modernization. All of this is predictable. What is less so is what occurs when Blachly actually visits each of these sites, when he tries to occupy and move within this collection of overlooked, neglected, or abject spaces. The result is a remapping of the city through the medium of the walk—a remapping that combines the kind of urban taxonomy mentioned above with a more explicitly performative dimension. As de Certeau says: "The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be." To occupy all of these seemingly unoccupiable locations is what is at issue in *About 86 Springs*: the backs of minivan lots and fast-food restaurants, the fenced-off interior courtyards of large housing complexes, damp concrete abutments below cantilevered office buildings. This is the map that emerges from Blachly's tour of the sealed portals of inspiration.

What is crucial, then, about James's "powers of removal" in the context of urbanist art is not the familiar articulation of loss, the claim that some previous experience of plentitude is now definitively over. James instead points to a seemingly endless chain of erasures and reconstitutions. But rather than understand this process as an inevitable cycle that would contain and neutralize any intervention he could imagine, he makes it his job to investigate the affects associated with each temporary crystallization of the urban world, the microenvironment that each version of the built world produces. The result is a plotless quotidian "history" of New York unlike anything else. If we extend James's concerns to the contexts of historiography, and in particular an urbanist historiography of daily life, we might suggest that here, too, removal is at issue not merely because discrete historical truths have been replaced by inaccuracies but because our dominant models of thinking historically remain limited by the symmetrical logic of traditional stories and their critical revisions.
Endnotes


2. Ibid., p. 76. This judgment translates a key problem for James's protagonists to the scale of the city. Consider, for instance, the first sentences of his short story "The Jolly Corner," about a New York–born writer who returns to the city after thirty years and spends his time fantasizing about how he would have turned out had he remained in the much smaller city: "Everyone asks me what I "think" of everything," said Spencer Brydon; and I make answer as I can—begging or dodging the question, putting them off with any nonsense. It wouldn't matter to any of them really; he went on, 'for, even were it possible to meet in that stand-and-deliver way so silly a demand on so big a subject, my "thoughts" would still be almost altogether about something that concerns only myself."

3. As Ren Koolhaas famously frames this process: "Its plot is: barbarism giving way to refinement. From these givers, its future can be extrapolated forever: since the exterminating principles never cease to act, it follows that what is refinement one moment will be barbarism the next. Therefore, the performance can never or ever progress in the conventional sense of dramatic plotting: it can only be a cyclical restatement of a single theme: creation and destruction inextricably interlocked, endlessly repeated." _Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan_ (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), p. 27.


5. The result was that the urban density James had noticed in southern Manhattan was now only a nine-to-five phenomenon, and limited to small areas within the financial market. Catherine Opie's more recent (2001) photographs of the Wall Street area on weekends and early mornings suggest something similar: a scene completely void of humans, a single-use Manhattan in frightening diagram form. These photographs, however, were taken after Lower Manhattan had grown more populated than it was in the 1970s.

6. This is the view we see through the window in the Danny Lyon photograph of an abandoned, even rundown room—broken casements on the littered floor amid glass shards and wooden fragments—overlooking Lower Manhattan skyscrapers.


8. Deutsche frames this project as follows: "Since the 1980s, art critics on the left have tried to reframe aesthetic debates about public space by abandoning normative evaluations of the word public in favor of functional analyses that examine its uses in particular historical circumstances." Ibid., p. 290.

9. I develop this argument in Frank O'Hara's _The Poetics of Coterie_ (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), which discusses the coterie as a potential critique of universality and the public not based on identity politics. This critical potential includes not just the coterie social formation itself but also how that formation operates within literary and social history. This is because coterie involve contingent models of social alliance rather than organic models of illusion; members select one another, just as they select their relevant predecessors. This significantly contrasts coteries from families and nations—the two structures most commonly elucidated to explain social or aesthetic linkages. Certainly one of the most influential economic interpreters of New York urbanism (and of postmodernity more generally), Harvey sees rampant neoliberalism not just as the new economic system that ruthlessly transformed Manhattan but also as the cultural engine that gave rise to early postmodern work like that of Cindy Sherman, which he understands essentially as a symptom. Thus, he sees Sherman's exploration of fluid feminine roles, instantly recognizable and endlessly transforming, as an ideological fiction the city tells about itself. He writes: "The photographs depict seemingly different women drawn from many walks of life. They take a little while to realize, with a certain shock, that these are portraits of the same woman in different guises. Only the catalogue tells you that it is the artist herself who is that woman. The parallel with [Jonathan] Raban's insistence upon the plasticity of human personality through the malleability of appearances and surfaces is striking, as is the self-referential positioning of the authors to themselves as subjects. Cindy Sherman is considered a major figure in the postmodern movement." David Harvey, _The Condition of Postmodernity_ (London: Blackwell, 1989), p. 7. In _Mixed Use, Manhattan_, for instance, one of Sherman's photographs presents a kind of vampish woman in a moment of pained introspection (licking wounds, plotting revenge?), the staginess of the pose brought out by the dilapidated Hudson piers and the Holland Tunnel ventilation tower in the background. Allenated, inward, gone to the city's margin's for some "fresh" air and time to think, this is an image of a recognizable subject position rather than a singular empirical subject; in another, we seem to capture a woman in the Civic Center, who, with her dark shades, raincoat, and hand over her face, is trying too hard to avoid being spotted. Our position downstairs and through a railing suggests that the photograph might be the work of a private detective or paparazzo. For Harvey, however, the very fluidity between these roles, and the fact that they all actually emerge from one human being (the photographer herself), suggest a mystified idea that cities specifically and postmodernism generally offer us an infinite realm of subject positions we can try on, and discard, an unlimited domain of situational selves, Cities, and the neoliberal economic regimes that have ruthlessly reshaped them, want us to think this, and Sherman has unwittingly produced their press releases, while their "truth" (based on hard exclusions and immutable class divisions) is of course very different. Luckily, Sherman has been well defended by Rosalyn Deutsche and others.
Deutsche, Evictions, p. 233. Cf Harvey's critique, Deutsche writes: "He sets up a single difference in social philosophy: an opposition between a preconstituted unity of relations that is the basis for political action versus pure difference that is the basis for political escapism" (Ibid., p. 217). Thus for Deutsche the "evictions" of her title are not merely those of people from cities but those of discourses like feminism from the dominant domain of what I'm calling urbanism.

Possibly Naes has friends watching from around the corners to be sure that people don't stumble into the deadly scene. But it's not clear. At one point, a car does drive by, but this is the only sign of other human beings than Naes himself and a woman with whom he works.

I learned only afterward that the ball is in fact a hollow copper sphere filled with water; whatever the reality of the prop, its evocation of a wrecking ball is both unmistakable and convincing.

At the very moment the film was made, just one block to the west, a huge three-block swath west of Hudson Street had been torn down, making way for 'Independence Plaza North'—three forty-story high-rises looming over a public school, the Borough of Manhattan Community College, and a tiny constellation of relocated historical row houses.


Weiber, p. 235.

Ibid.

John Hallmark Neff suggests that Simonds "evokes the presence of civilizations seemingly very remote from ours, cultures whose customs we reconstruct from the archaeological evidence of their dwelling sites, specifically those values embedded in their architecture. It is from the types of buildings, their detailed construction, apparent damns, and selective re-use that we are led to imagine the civic and religious priorities, the mind-set, the cosmology of these unseen builders whose very invisibility frees us to consider parallels with our own lives and futures." Neff also presents Simonds's pieces as temporal variants of the same site: "One can make the case that each of his pieces, whatever its size, in itself implies the entirety; that each part of the sequence (an open-ended, expanding class as opposed to the closed groups of a series) deals only with the same work in a different moment." John Hallmark Neff, "Charles Simonds's Engendered Places: Towards a Biology of Architecture," in Charles Simonds (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 1982), pp. 10, 13.

Archaeologists are now agreed that the mounds were in fact built by Native Americans, primarily during what is known at the Woodland period, roughly 1000 BCE-1000 CE. For an account of the debates in the United States that surrounded initial interest in the mounds (they had been noticed in the sixteenth century but were not closely examined until the 1770s), see Gordon M. Sayre, "The Mound Builders and the Image of American Antiquity in Jefferson, Bartram, and Chateaubriand," Early American Literature 33, no. 3 (1998), pp. 225-49.


Ibid., p. 54.

As Buckingham describes it: "the film / flight turns around a little bit after the Tappan Zee Bridge near Ossining. There are two 20 minute rolls of 16mm (the longest continuous shot possible in that gauge) joined together to make up the film image. There was no deliberate significance to turning around at Ossining, this was the distance we were able to cover in that amount of time flying 160 miles per hour from a starting point below the Verrazano Bridge in New York Harbor... At Ossining we lingered in the air for a few minutes while I changed magazines and then flew down-river just past the Statue of Liberty. We had strong headwinds from the south, so that trip was slower." E-mail to the author, March 8, 2010.

As Buckingham puts it in the voice-over: "What feels familiar is actually unknown because we think we already understand the things that are familiar to us."


In Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coteries I offer an account of how the problems that philosophers encounter with proper names (their reliance on, but inability to ensure, a secure set of associations) are precisely what recommend them to a poet like O'Hara—perhaps the twentieth-century American poet of the name.

Part of Buckingham's strategy for achieving this effect is emphasizing the many senses in which Hudson did not "discover" anything. For instance, in his voice-over, Buckingham says: "Far from being the first, Hudson's trip actually ended the period of visitation that preceded European colonization." Though Hudson was credited with the discovery immediately, his name did not actually become the main designation for the river until the nineteenth century.

One of the defamiliarizing gestures is to begin the narration proper (after the aphorisms on vantage points) with the lines "On September 11th, 1609, Henry Hudson and his crew sailed into the mouth of the river that would later bear his name." Certainly no viewer in 2003 could look at an image of Manhattan and hear the words "On September 11th" without thinking of 9/11. While Buckingham does not explicitly address the shared dates, the very form of his narrative asks us to step outside a framework in which 9/11 will be the ultimate point of paths.

Russell Shorto, The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan, the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

Though in the broad view Buckingham is not simply wrong, he does simplify the matter: we know that Adriaen van der Donck, for instance, paid extremely close attention to the language and culture of the Mohawks and Mahicans; see Shorto, Island at the Center of the World, p. 136, and also van der Donck's published writings, especially A Description of the New Netherland (Lincoln, Nebraska University Press, 2006), pp. 93 and ff.

For instance: "The fiction of history is to imagine the real. History makes reality desirable. It has the illusion of speaking itself, as if it simply happened." Another is: "The unknown is more than an occasion for possibility; it is a provocation that propels one on a journey, a route of unknowing, in which we experience many of the ways that we do not know something."

See Florian Bohn, Luca Fizzarone, and Wolfgang Schappe, ENDOCOMMERCIAL/Reading the City (Casselberg-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002).