

spatiotemporal  
explorations in  
landscape deixis

an

archi/tectonic

graduate

thesis

by

christopher perkins



SPATIOTEMPORAL EXPLORATIONS IN LANDSCAPE DEIXIS



For my family,  
My trusted comrades,  
And my frustrated advisor.

Thanks for the time.

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Abstract

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abstract



If there is a psychological urge that drives us to build, it must stem from a confrontation with emptiness. By *build* we may include physical structures (perhaps architecture), digital content, mental constructs, and interpersonal relationships. By *emptiness* we may include vacancy in physical space (perhaps the post-industrial landscape), a lack of stimuli, an absent mind, loneliness.

The practice of architecture, then, is an act of catharsis.

Buildings fill up the void, provide a framework for interaction, create a stimulus for activity and activation, mark a reference point in space and time for future memories, past actions.

In this way, we move through urban and tectonic spaces like the roman god Janus.

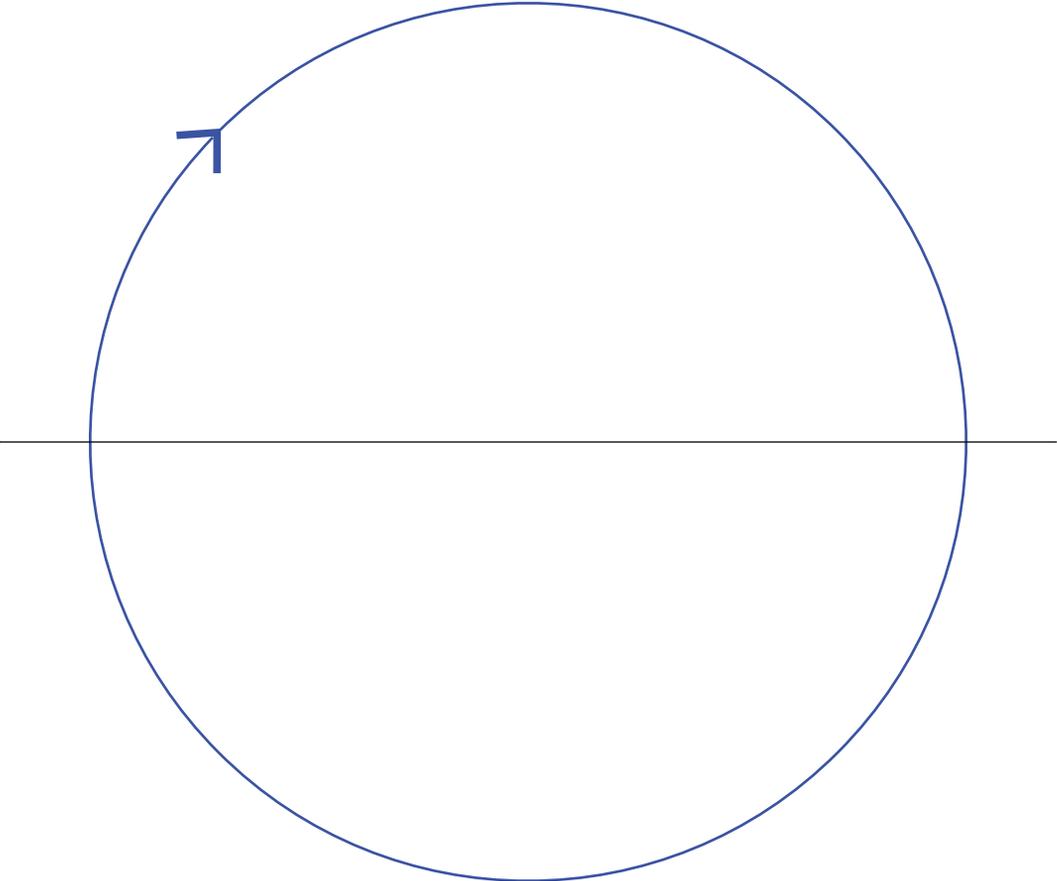
Janus was a god of transitions—of arches and thresholds and doorways—and thus a god of time. He had two faces; one to face the past and one to face the future. The normal human head is caught between, haunted by, *memories* and *constructs*. In the same way, the urban landscape holds a tension between the tectonic past and the unknown future.

The following work is an investigation of space, spatiality, time, temporality, and how we locate ourselves within those bounds. It is not an attempt to center the Janus head nor to cure the emptiness but rather a first step into the vast and transient blur of the momentous present.



content / discontent

THESIS



## CONTENT/DISCONTENT

*If a tree falls in the forest...  
If a house burns in the city...*

If architecture can act as a framework, a fabric, for contextualization in the landscape of space-time, then the individual must be point-zero, the axiom, for such spatiotemporal activation. Architecture is activated by a willing participant; a willing participant is activated by architecture.<sup>1</sup> Dialogs and dualities abound in this system. The interactivity between person and place exists at grade-level but beneath it is space in relation to place.

The obvious precedent of such a system is found in Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of smooth and striated spaces. The nomadic terrains of desert and field are smooth: unquantifiable, infinite, prone to fluctuation, unless acted upon, or overlaid by, an ordered, striated space.<sup>2</sup> This example provides much in the way of visualizing an organizing system but little in the relationship back to the individual.

Thus a parallel line of thinking stems from young Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. He describes the Greek tragedy as the highest form of art because of its combination of Apollonian and Dionysian elements. The dialogue and chorus, respectively, reflect the natural dichotomy of order and chaos which is essential for a sensation of collective participation—the primordial unity that binds all mankind.<sup>3</sup> To apply this concept back to the landscape is to engage with the sublime.

The sublime is the awe-inspiring sensation of terror: transience, mortality, entropy, decay. It is found in knowing that an end approaches, that everything will soon be over, returned to emptiness. And yet, "what is sublime," said Lyotard, "is the feeling that something will happen...within this threatening void, that something will take 'place' and will announce that everything is not over."<sup>4</sup>

Barnett Newman proclaimed the sublime is now.<sup>5</sup> The now-ness to which he was referring was not the now of 1948, when he wrote the statement in a titular treatise on the state of art, but rather the now of the present—any present. His idea was that one could connect to that exhilarating terror only through a dialog with time itself. A year later, in an unfinished monologue, he wrote: "My paintings are concerned neither with the manipulation of space nor with the image, but with the sensation of time."<sup>6</sup>

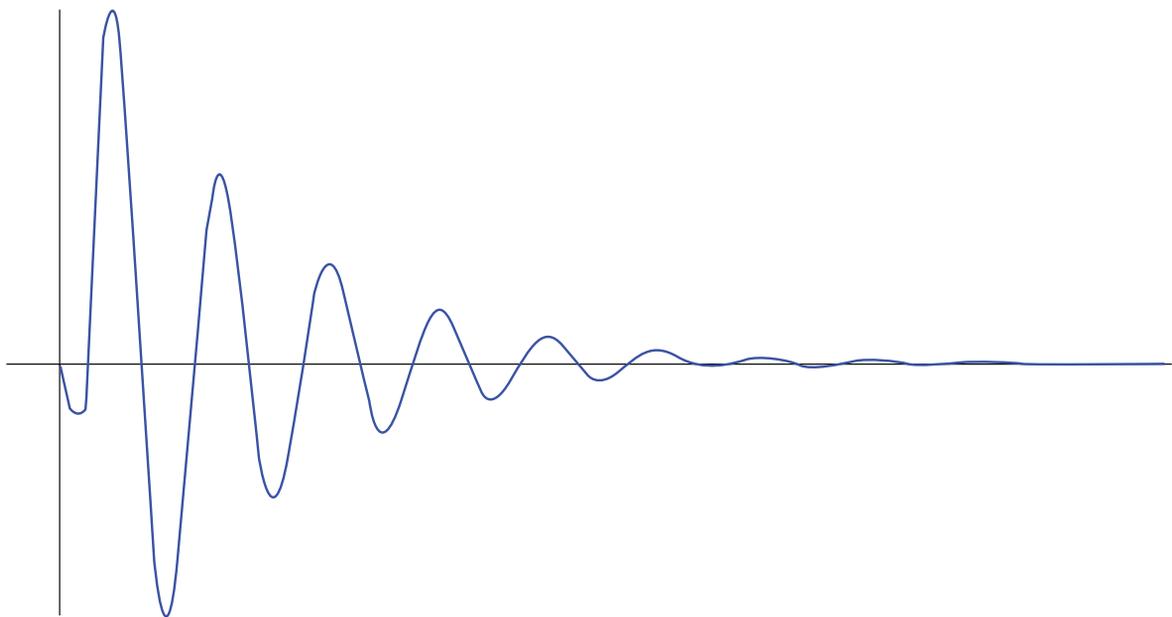
Newman trails off before explaining how this idea may become manifest.

To continue his thought (as, in many ways, this thesis did) is to regard the blur of the present. Here, there are Janus-like oscillations between conditions and systems, between pasts and futures, between memories and constructs.

Within the contemporary zeitgeist, [everything oscillates](#). So claims the MetaModernist manifesto, whose author Luke Turner posits that our time is one of a pendulum swing from modernism to post-modernism, and this flux results in immediate obsolescence.<sup>7</sup> Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to this as liquid modernity, fulfilling Marshall Berman's prophecy that all that is solid melts into air. He finds the post-post-modern age to be one of fragments and networks; dissolutions and [diminishing returns](#).<sup>8</sup> A time crisis, indeed.

"All things are caught within the irrevocable slide towards a state of maximum entropic dissemblance... The present is a symptom of the twin birth of immediacy and obsolescence. Today, we are nostalgists as much as we are futurists."<sup>9</sup>

This is the rapid movement between the styles and worldviews of the modern and post-modern. The sincere and ironic, universal and relative, calculated and chaotic.



Modernism was destined to fall into instability. The bleached white bones finally succumbing to decay.<sup>10</sup> And this idea can be applied at nearly all scales. The materials we build up, the content we create, all subject to diminishing returns. [The content of our discontent.](#)

As Charles Baudelaire lamented in the 1850s: "Old Paris is no more...Paris changes but naught in my melancholy has stirred."<sup>11</sup> Detroit's story is no different; equally melancholic, equally hyperbolized. The urban sprawl and disinvestment resulting in a post-industrial landscape of ruin and terrain vague. The terrain vague itself, as Ignasi de Sola Morales Rubio explains, is the "relationship between the absence of use, of activity, and the sense of freedom, of expectancy... Void, absence, yet also promise..."<sup>12</sup>

In spaces such as these we find the same oscillations, the same Janus vision. Always looking either backwards or forwards, there is a tension between the tectonic history of a site and its unknown future. The terrain vague caught between urban collective memory and an intangible future construct.

A linguist would refer to this as deixis: that is, any word that acts as a reference point for personal, spatial, or temporal contextualization. In contemporary film theory, a deictic shift is the moment when the viewer becomes cognitively immersed in the visual narrative of a film.<sup>13</sup> Thus landscape deixis is the answer to, or at least the visualization of, the question of a blurred present. It is Nietzsche's apex of participation, Newman's sublime moment. It is a system that begins inward, radiates outward, and is reflected back inward once again.



*The challenge is to reappropriate and utilize that tension, that dissonance and discontent, to design spatiotemporal reference points, in a participatory, deictic landscape.*



EIGENWELT  
memento mori

## MEMENTO MORI

The photo essay Memento Mori is a first step into personal deixis by way of self-portrait. This is the *eigenwelt* in existential psychology: the self's relation to the self. Fragmented, like a post-digital dissociative identity disorder, and frozen in time. Recursive, looking at yourself looking at yourself, and blurred in the momentous present.

There is a sense of ecstasy—which literally means to be beside oneself, as if from an out-of-body experience—which is fitting enough as *memento mori*, the macabre phrase, means "remember [that you have] to die."<sup>14</sup> Or perhaps, simply, remember to die... As if the sublime could somehow carry one into immortality. This is surely an underlying intention and reasoning for the prevalence of the self-portrait today. The front-facing camera exists not so that others can see us more easily, but so that we can see ourselves.

As Walter Benjamin said, "a remembered event is infinite because it is merely a key to everything that happened before it and after it."<sup>15</sup> Thus, through seeing, remembering; through remembering, immortalizing.

Those two selves, the experiencing self and the remembering self, actually exist almost simultaneously, says scientist Daniel Kahneman.<sup>16</sup> By taking a photo on your phone and putting a retro filter over it you can experience immediate nostalgia (which is always followed by immediate obsolescence). Yet, simultaneity is only an illusion. The brain is technically incapable of multi-tasking, it simply moves from one task to another at a rapid pace. In fact, the difference between what the brain perceives as "present" and "past" is a mere two seconds.<sup>17</sup>



Ecstasy









Janus





temporal investigations

## TEMPORAL INVESTIGATIONS

In a series of paint studies, the notion of a two-second present is examined. In the first, [2000 Brushstrokes](#), one stroke of paint was added to a canvas board every two seconds for 66.6 minutes resulting in 2000 brushstrokes.

This led to [The Blueprints](#) series: the canvas board used for 2000 Brushstrokes was chemically and physically stripped of its paint and layers of blue paint were added and removed continually. A superimposition of destruction.

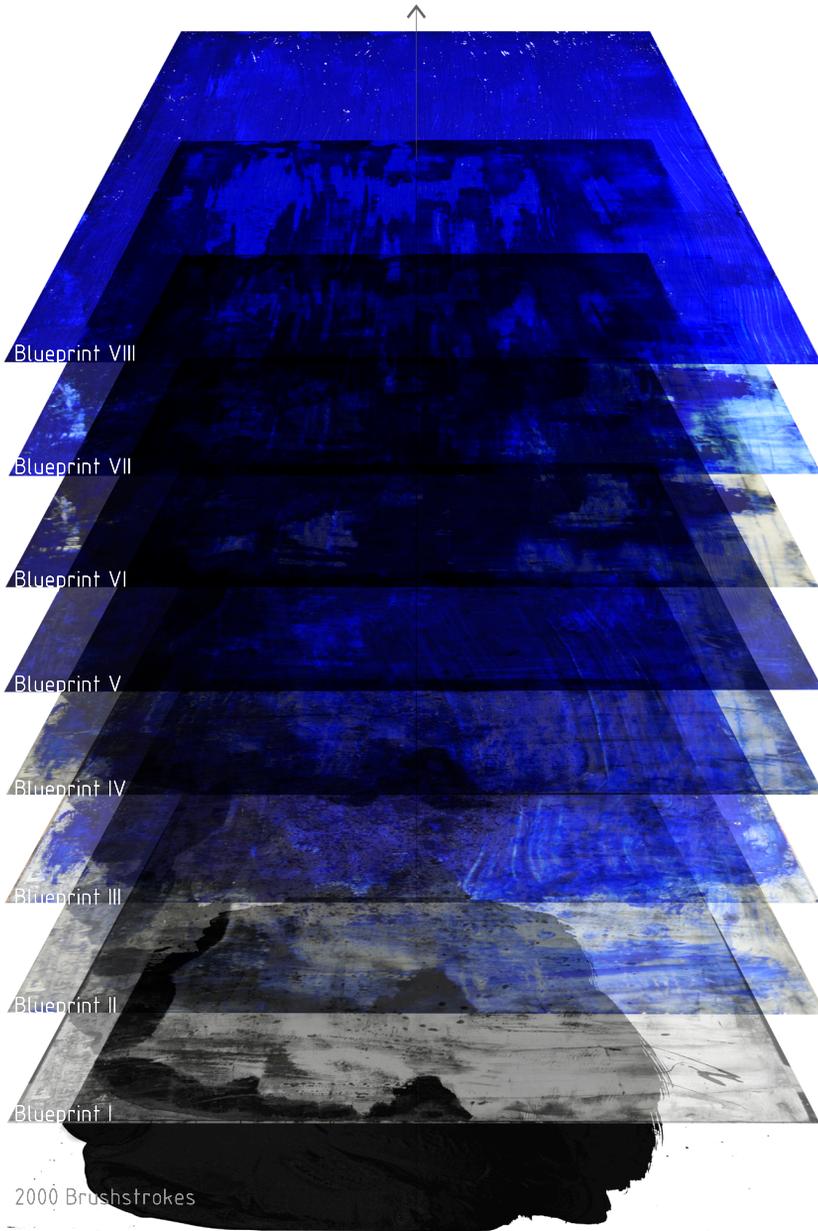
This developed into an apoptotic system. Apoptosis is necessary cell death—it carves out organs and forms fingers in the womb, fights cancer, and spells the doom of 50 billion cells in an adult body every day.<sup>18</sup> It is destruction as creation.

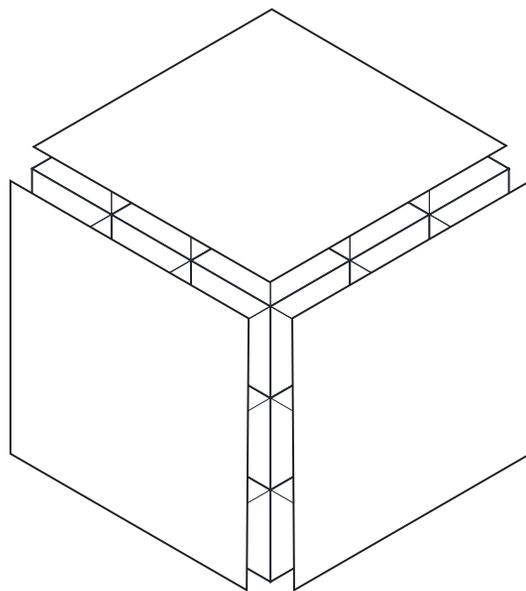
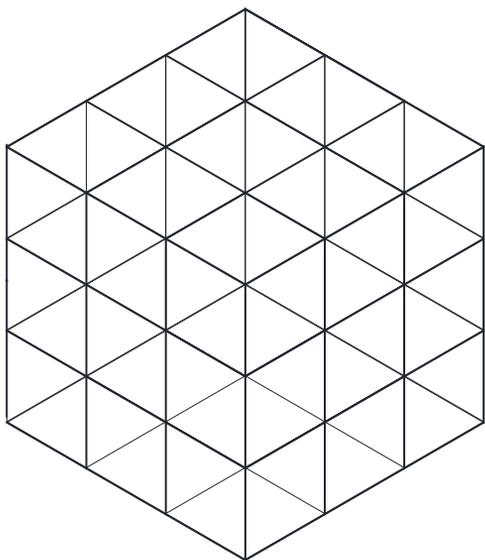
[Flashbulb Memory or We Will Become Silhouettes](#) visualizes the remnant of an event. The design is only the remnant, the residue, of a literally explosive, momentary event. Scientifically, a flashbulb memory is cognitively evoked through an unusual, often traumatic, event that persists as a vivid memory.<sup>19</sup>

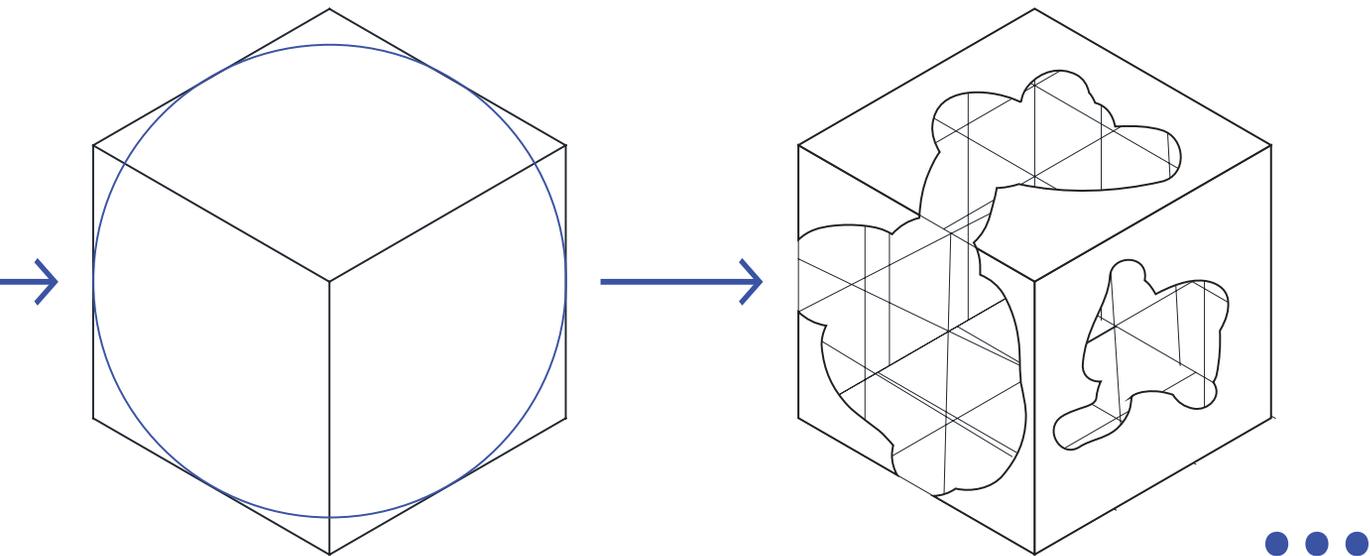
In the final study, a circle was drawn, continuously, every two seconds, and after 43 minutes and approximately 1290 circles, the [Mile Circle](#) was created.

Within these studies are notions of transience, ruin, the blur of the momentous present, but it was still a narrow study. If these were landscapes, there was only room for one person to inhabit them.



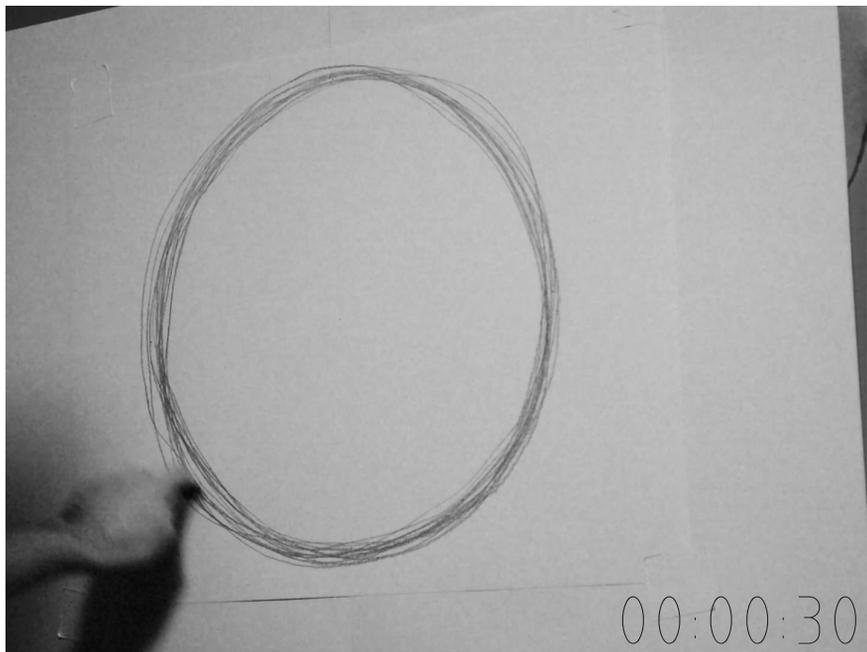


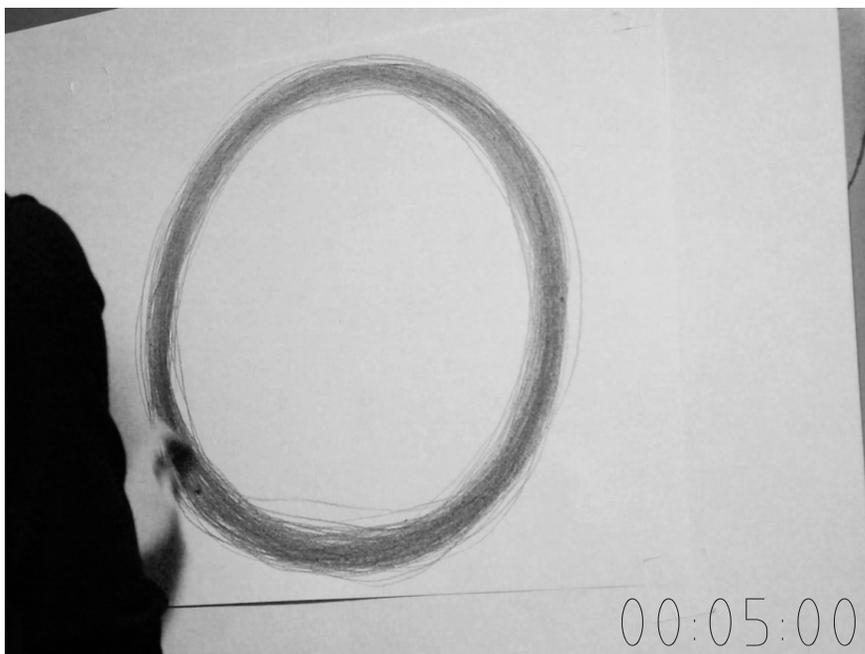


















DÉRIVE  
rückenfigur



## DÉRIVE: THE INITIATIVES

The Initiatives expand the notion of deixis from the temporal investigations into the urban realm. There is palpable connection between the 100 initiatives and the Situationists' psychogeographic derive, a process of creative disorientation where individuals would "drift" through a city, blindly following the directions from a map of a completely other city, for example, or with the help of hallucinogens.<sup>20</sup>

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.<sup>21</sup>

As Guy Debord said, the primarily urban character of the *dérive*, in its element in the great industrially transformed cities — those centers of possibilities and meanings — could be expressed in Marx's phrase: "Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive."<sup>22</sup>

The Initiatives are a similar process of disorientation and reorientation, though more focused and multi-scaled than the *dérive*. The Initiatives are an invitation to engage with strangers, with the urban landscape, and with the terrain vague that has become such a prevalent typology. Creating a sense of extrastructure, that is, to be outside of normal infrastructures of control. To quote Lefebvre, who had his own psychogeographical system of *rhythmanalysis*, "Social emancipation guarantees political emancipation."<sup>23</sup>

**THE INITIATIVES** acts of intentional disruption to the passivity of personal infrastructure meant to induce a state of reflexive de x s

*Initiatives must be performed without accomplices. Initiatives can be performed in any order save for 100 which must be last.*

- 1: Test the flexural strength of your phone, test the flexural strength of your thumb
- 2: Use your phone as your mirror for a day, use a mirror as your phone
- 3: Pass through a doorway, pass through a door
- 4: Go for a jog on the freeway
- 5: Follow someone but only as long as they stay in public spaces
- 6: Get invited into a stranger's house, invite a stranger into your house
- 7: Attend a birth
- 8: Attend a funeral
- 9: Stare at a clock and see how many images you can conjure in 1 second
- 10: Engage in a staring contest with your computer screen
- 11: Get to the highest point you can find, see how far you can look
- 12: Draw a self-portrait in the dark
- 13: Walk around your house blindfolded for a day
- 14: Take apart your watch
- 15: Take apart your phone
- 16: Breathe water
- 17: Attempt to carry your car to work
- 18: Drive in silence with all of your windows down
- 19: Use your non-dominant hand for a day
- 20: Write a poem for every text you send in a day
- 21: Write a story for every email you send in a day
- 22: Walk up and down stairs backwards
- 23: Eat paper for a day
- 24: Get lost
- 25: Attempt to live underwater
- 26: Build a new house inside your house
- 27: Buy a new car, return it
- 28: Jump off of a bridge
- 29: Do what a billboard says
- 30: Drive until you blink, walk the rest of the way
- 31: Use emoji as your facial expressions, use your facial expressions as emoji
- 32: Keep all your doors open
- 33: Turn on every light in your house
- 34: Start a fire
- 35: Dream while you are awake, do a math problem in your sleep
- 36: Pick a fight with yourself in the mirror. Lose.
- 37: Max out the data you can store on your computer, max out the data you can store in your mind
- 38: Build something with a child
- 39: Build something with an elderly person
- 40: Jump out of a plane
- 41: Hold your breath for 3 minutes
- 42: Squat in an abandoned building
- 43: Drive through a bad part of town
- 44: Walk through a bad part of town
- 45: Eat coffee grounds
- 46: Camp out in front of a store, don't buy anything
- 47: Construct your own clothes

- 48: Induce vomiting
- 49: Bite through a rock
- 50: Stand in place for 4 hours
- 51: Sit in place for 6 hours
- 52: Swallow fire
- 53: Use a window as a door, use a door as a window
- 54: Count stars
- 55: Write your stream of consciousness for a day
- 56: Plant something
- 57: Bury something
- 58: Stretch
- 59: Take a self-guided tour of an office building
- 60: Lead a tour of your home
- 61: Record yourself sleeping
- 62: Be someone else for a day
- 63: Break into your own house
- 64: Donate money to an organization you are against
- 65: Unplug everything in your house
- 66: Plug everything into your house
- 67: Sleep for five hours a night
- 68: Explore a new city
- 69: Introduce yourself to yourself
- 70: Use your GPS to find something you weren't supposed to
- 71: Wear all of your clothes
- 72: Count everything you own
- 73: Sleep outside
- 74: Hum the same tone as electronic noises
- 75: Stay awake for a week
- 76: Delete your history but back it up first
- 77: Memorize every number in your phone
- 78: Unfriend everyone, friend everyone
- 79: Turn a campsite into a colony
- 80: Turn a city into a petting zoo
- 81: Read every book on a shelf in a library
- 82: Schedule a doctor's appointment
- 83: Stop the sun from setting, stop the sun from rising
- 84: Communicate with an animal
- 85: Write your eulogy
- 86: Unveil next year's model of yourself
- 87: Don't lie for a week
- 88: Don't lay for a week
- 89: Never break eye contact when speaking to someone
- 90: Don't talk to anyone except in person
- 91: Learn a new word every day, use it every day
- 92: Slow down everything you do quickly
- 93: Speed up everything you do slowly
- 94: Count as high as you can
- 95: Wear a mask for a day
- 96: Dance in front of people that are watching
- 97: Document all of your experiences, destroy the documents
- 98: Repeat one initiative that you previously failed
- 99: Make a list of 100 new things to do
- 100: Evolve

# RÜCKENFIGURS

Following the logical thread of the Initiatives leads to a study of urban spatiality. Rückenfigur is a photo essay inspired by the Romantic style of painting, of the same name, in which a person is seen from behind, looking out towards a landscape.<sup>24</sup>

The Romantic Movement was, in many ways, a memento mori for the Enlightenment. Lost in the minutia of empiricism, dulled by the bludgeoning of the French Revolution, it was a return to subjective contemplation. The movement was an admission that rationalism could not account for human suffering.<sup>25</sup> The rückenfigur looks out on a different kind of violence—towards the natural sublime.

In that way, this society of wanderers begin to engage and move through the sublime landscape that reflects its grandeur and terror back onto the viewer. One becomes connected to the space, if temporarily separated from oneself, and is stronger for it. Thus the landscape becomes the canvas—the space of activation, the space of deixis.



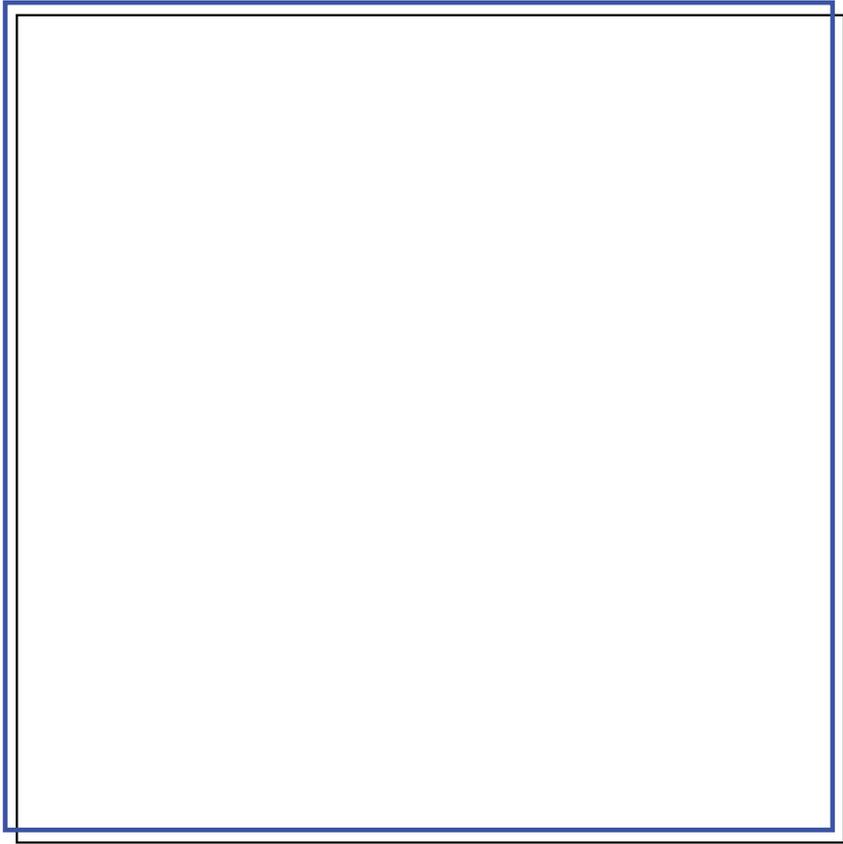








LANDSCAPE  
apoptotic collages



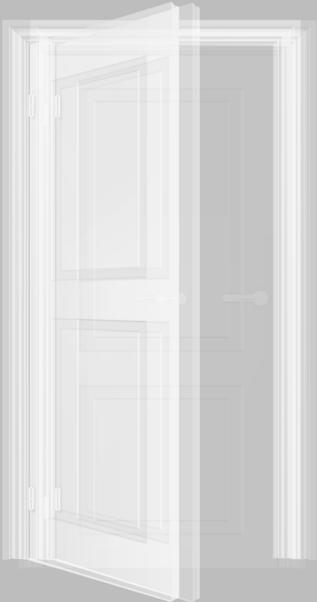
## THE DIPTYCHS

The Diptychs started to expand and synthesize the notions of apoptosis, psychogeographical transience, and participatory landscapes. Through collage, participation is made possible with any viewer. The first three diptychs are a narrative series that move up in scale: Possession/Possession is a dialog with architectural object, Rapid Movement a dialog with site and terrain, and Odyssey a dialog with landscapes in their full potentiality.

In each set, there are fragments of terrain vague, architectural memory, organizing systems, ruination. Returning to the dissociative nature of the Memory-Construct, if these are zeitgeists, they are spirits that haunt. It's about flanerier becoming an odyssey through engaged tourism. Through dissociation and encountering the sublime. It exists in the moment between ecstasy and ennui. Between memory (collective and personal) and future constructs. It's about a haunted, layered architectural world which can only be understood by becoming like it—by becoming a ghost—and harnessing those new powers.

The diptychs are landscapes of exploration so the narratives are meant to be discovered through the viewer's interaction. On a pragmatic level, diptychs are about reconciling the two panels. A diptych is made whole, made into a tryptic, by the viewer, through visual exploration.

Possession/Possession





Rapid Movement



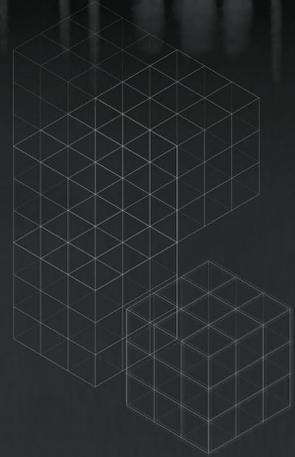


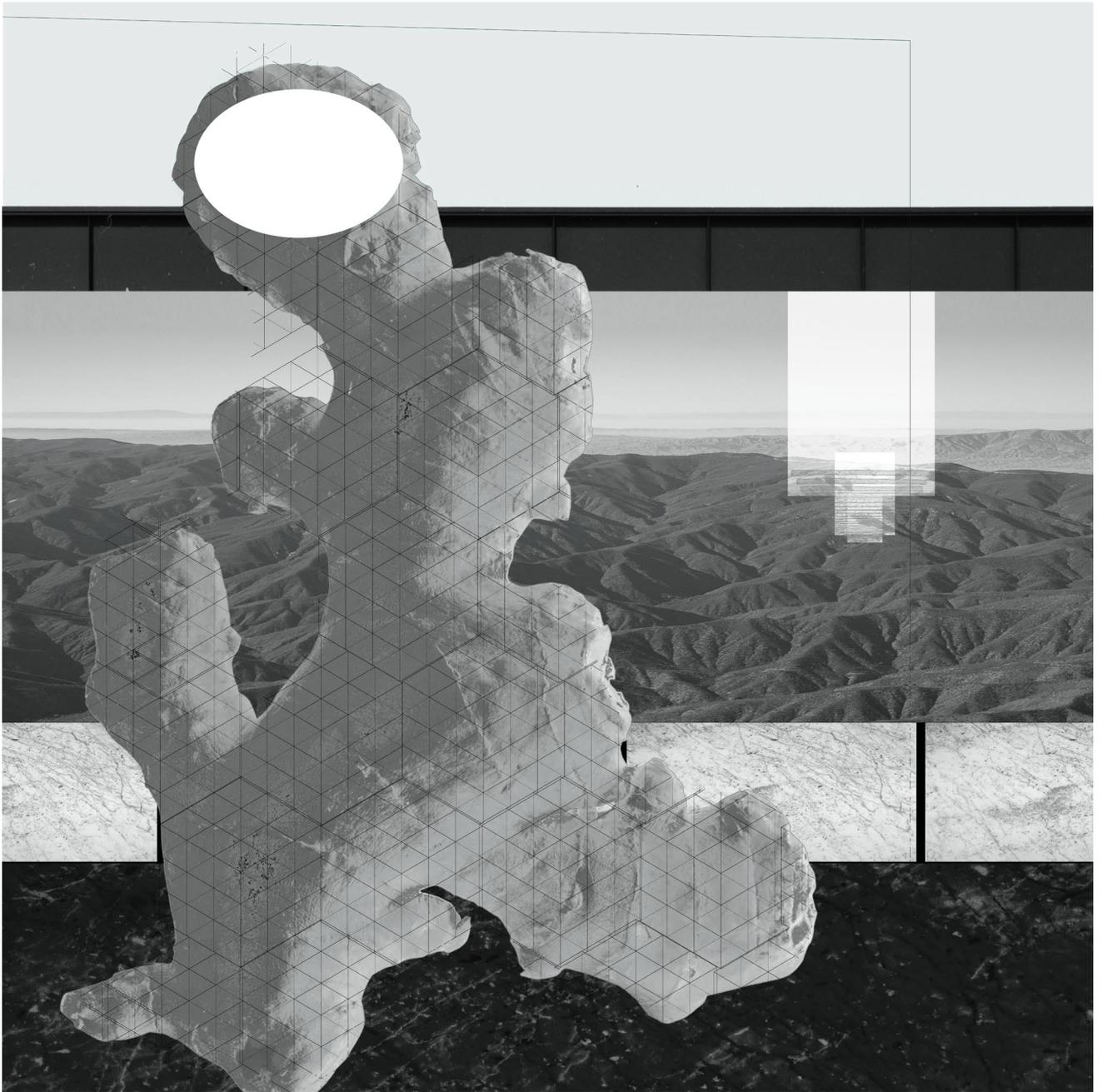
Odyssey





# The Orders





# The Titans





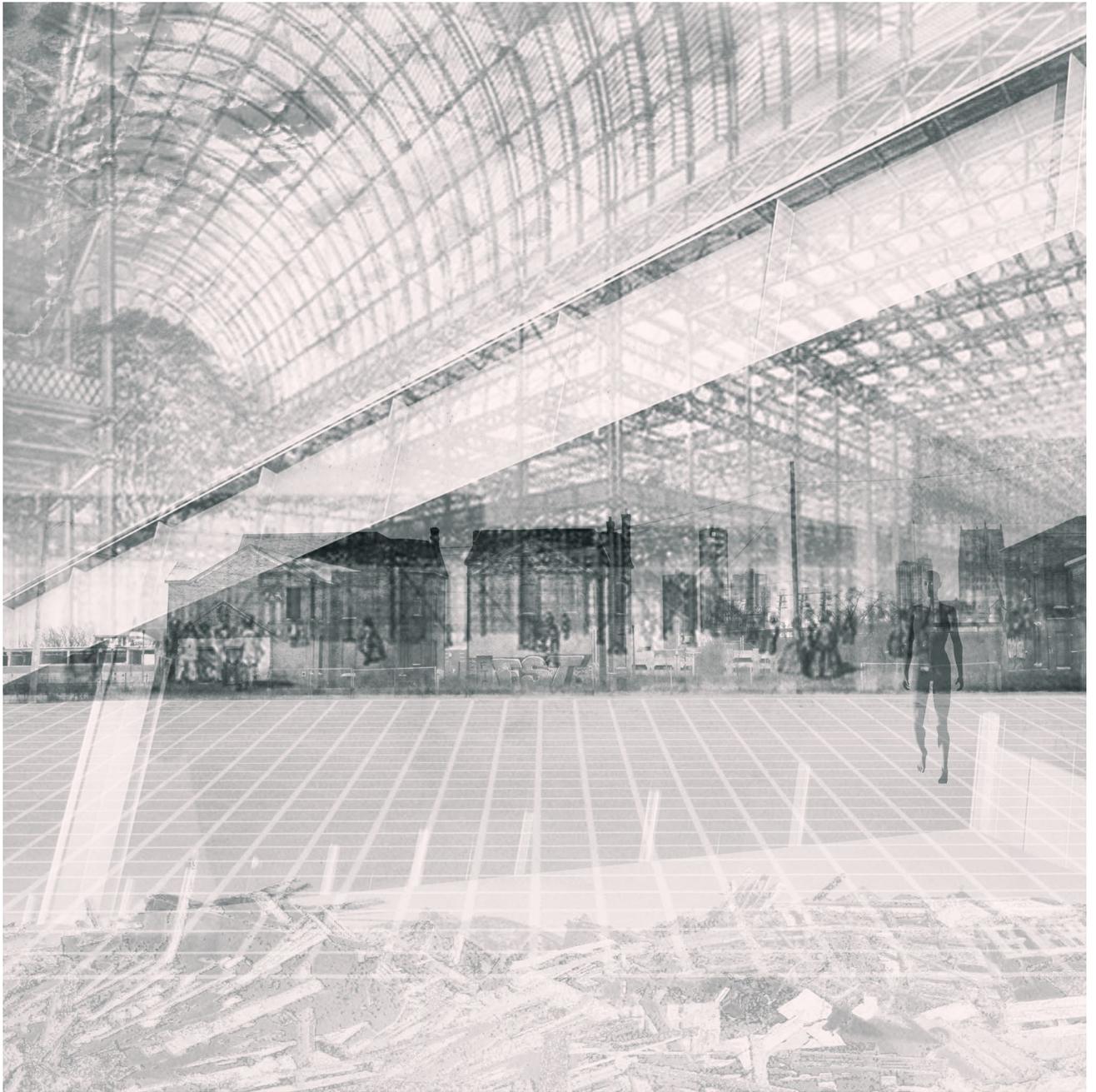
# The Paragons





# The Heavens





## THE MEMORY CONSTRUCT

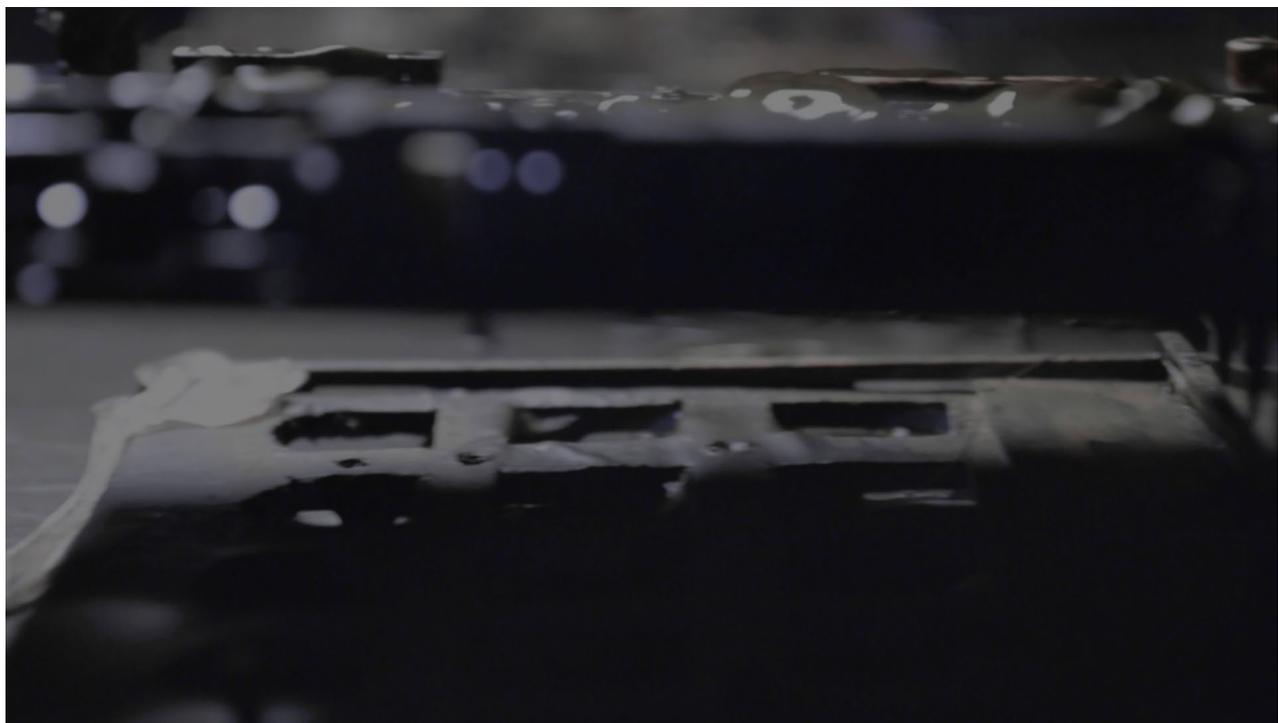
The Memory Construct, then, starts to develop a 3-dimensional landscape of exploration through bricolage. Built on the same canvas used for the temporal paint investigations. The site elements range from architectural models I've built over the last five years and found materials like old electronics. The Memory Construct is meant to be dynamic... changing with each return to it like shifting tectonic plates. In this way it starts to become an object of [deixis](#)—providing a spatiotemporal reference point through that restructuring.

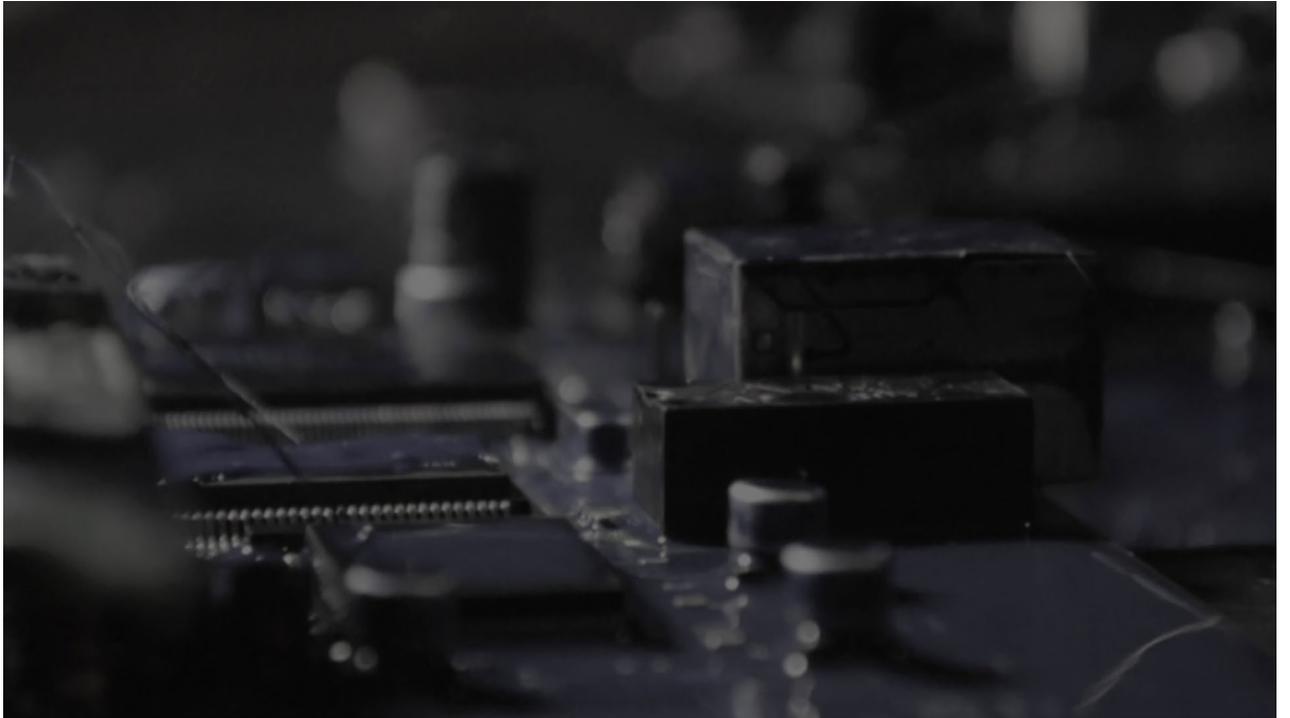
The images provided here are fragments from the final investigation, a video, [Three Movements in Landscape Deixis](#).

Video was the best way to actualize the kinetic potential of all the earlier studies and create a truly participatory, active space. The video (a remnant of which can be explored at [chrisonconstructs.tumblr.com](http://chrisonconstructs.tumblr.com)) is a dialog between the evolving Memory Construct model and real urban landscapes. The deindustrialized landscape appears to be a remnant of its former urban glory; from a time that none who remain were around to remember. And yet, the collective memory in these all-but-abandoned-spaces is strong. The history is at once distant yet undead. The spirit of the times? Detroit's is a ghost. Haunted by the same thing that haunts architecture, man, and landscape: [spatiotemporal discontent](#).

Ruin stands in the uncomfortable apex between its own tectonic history and its unknown, looming future. The Memory/Construct duality. And the one who witnesses it will feel the same. But if Newman was right, that the sublime exists in the present, then this dissociative moment is exactly the space that should be dwelt in—not in some foreign past or vague future.















*Like the diptychs and the project itself, the video follows a progression in scale that is less about finality and more about investigation. It continues to challenge how we process the oscillations between memory and construct, how we interact with a landscape on a spatiotemporal level, and how we react to transience—the rapid forward movement toward a perpetual end.*

[chrisonconstructs.tumblr.com](http://chrisonconstructs.tumblr.com)







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