THIN FILM

TIM GRIFFIN

If it's true that one sees things only when they begin to disappear, then architecture today is extremely noticeable. The past decade was made of glass: facades dissolved as architects used new technology to skim the surfaces of buildings with acres of glass, showing off radical developments in the refinement and diversification of transparency and translucency. Building exteriors became ever more animated, and pedestrians were provided with pervasive yet unfamiliar spatial experiences — the windows and walls allowing ordinary passersby to see variously forward and backward, interior and exterior, transience and stasis in subtler and more choreographed ways. In New York alone, laminated acetates appeared on the Chanel façade, and the Louis Vuitton building adopted a silk-screened ceramic frit. Glass laminated with privacy film appeared at Issey Miyake (the store-window surface itself actually attained a kind of celebrity status), turning opaque when observed directly but transparent when seen at an angle. Further uptown, the Lincoln Center Sony Theaters featured dichronic glass, which changes color according to the angle from which it is viewed. Ice-clear, low-iron glass — the result of new techniques for purifying sand — encased the revamped planetarium and high-end storefronts. And corporate buildings almost universally adopted sputter-coated glass, which knocks out most non-visible wavelengths of the spectrum to offer both greater internal energy efficiency and reduced external reflectivity.

translucency   and   transparency
in contemporary art

More disappeared globally. The architectural preoccupation with glass is international in profile, and, given the recent announcement by Rem Koolhaas's OMA that it plans to produce transparent cement, far from over. Fixed structures have been given over to poetic functions; entire buildings are being asked to "transmit light," while those that already exist are evaluated in an optical register. (MoMA curator Terence Riley recently described the surface dynamics of Jean Nouvel's Cartier Foundation Building in Paris as a "layering of images more familiar to the multiple exposures of the photographic eye or thin skeins of paint that lie one over the other."[1]) And this poetry finds its muse in a language that has been spoken for at least ten years now. Such visual dislocations arise in the
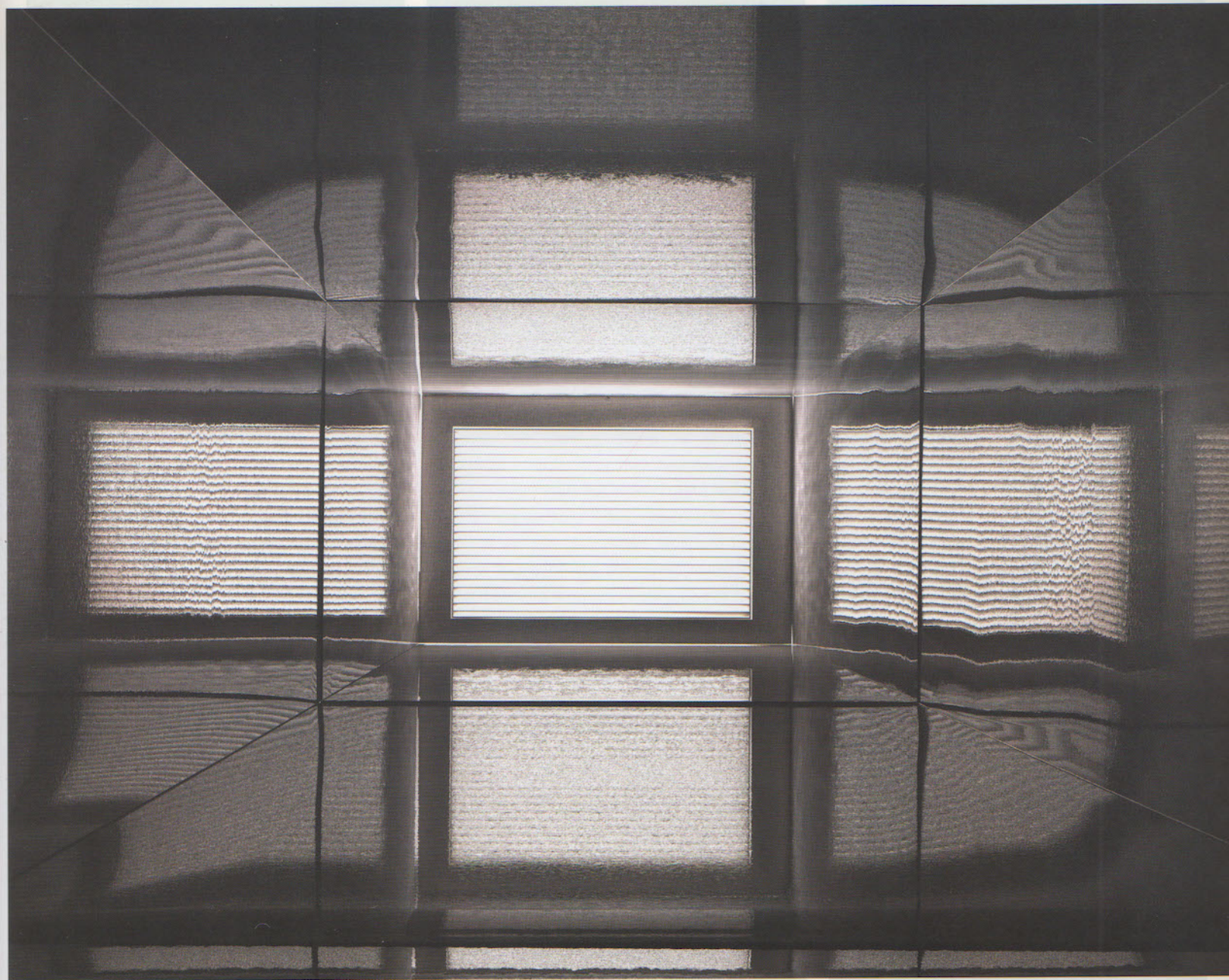
context of geographic ones; they have a parallel in the collapse of real distance and time. Communications technology (the tools of which have been disappearing on desktops everywhere, usually in a variety of colors) is in large part responsible, as it erodes any sense of near and far. At the same time, a decade of pervasive economic growth has enabled a generation of architects to create signature works around the world, often without deep consideration for context—which, in turn, erodes any sense of context that might previously have existed. Today, you may travel to the outskirts of Switzerland and discover a building of reductive geometries, clad in translucency, that could as easily have landed in Osaka, Utrecht, or Illinois. Cities around the world resemble each other more and

more. And glass, in all its permutations, provides a visual language of reflection and refraction, transparency and translucency, for that sense of being everything and nothing, everywhere and nowhere at once.

As author Hans Ibelings writes in *Supermodernism* (1998), there is a brave, unresolved sense in architectural circles that "everything can happen everywhere, if need be, simultaneously."[2] Those words, which resonate with such incredible, implicit faith in technology, could have been spoken 50 years ago, or more. But it's key to note that Ibelings (who offers one of the more succinct accounts of this global renaissance of transparency) cites a specific difference between the International Style and today's Everywhere Aesthetic. Namely, that no

symbolic program underlies today's simple geometries, and no bold attempt to describe some universal principle yet exists. Rather, "The impression made by this architecture is created not at the level of messages to be articulated, but at the emotional level, by the atmosphere."[3] Utopia no longer figures except as an anthropological motif, and the apparent mutability of real space, demonstrated by the use of new materials in contemporary architecture—specifically, the more precise control of transparency and translucency—offers welcome sensations. (This phenomenon also might help explain the intuitive resonance today of artists like Bridget Riley, whose canvases operate on a similarly phenomenological register, and even invoke some nostalgia for the jet-set glamour that infuses

late modernism.) A kind of controlled disorientation pervades contemporary architecture. Places exist, pleasantly, in drift.

The idea of "drift," of course, was once a means to engage a modernist ideology that had passed largely unnoticed into the hands of corporate architecture. Much of the vocabulary of today's architecture, in fact, derives from Situationist projects. Only their discussions of "deterritorialization" and the continuous traversal of space—which people pass through but never identify with in any meaningful way—have turned to cool analyses of airports and shopping malls, the emblems of spatial channel-surfing, and other intellectual one-night stands. Today, space is stripped of ideology; and Marc Augé, from whom Ibelings takes many of his supermodernist cues, refers to the geographic points that fill it as "non-places."[4] Perhaps that should come as no surprise, given that people now discuss market forces in the same way that they talk about the weather. (Turning Rousseau's Natural Man on its head, capitalism has become an unquestioned property of the environment itself.) Yet in this context, it's all the more important to ask if there are certain artists who reintroduce the idea of ideology in architecture—not by attempting to resuscitate modernism, or by offering any definitive alternative, but simply by noting that its remains are embedded in the things around us.

Which artists, willing to see these "ghosts," approach the literal and phenomenal transparency of contemporary architecture with a subjective eye that recalls Jeff Wall's night vision of the Philip Johnson house, articulated in *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* (1991)? Comparing the modernist home dweller to a vampire who fears the reflections that inevitably arise in glass when night falls, the photographer writes: "The most relevant aspect of his symbolism ... is that the vampire signifies not simply the unwillingness of the old regime to die, but the fear that the new order has unwittingly inherited something corrupted and evil from the old, and is in the process of unconsciously engineering itself around an evil center. This presence of the phantasm of the vampire in the modern signifies an unresolved crisis in the creation of the modern era itself."[5] I would argue that the motifs of modernism pervade contemporary art, but few artists consciously acknowledge its ideological baggage. Fewer still are interested in reanimating that history, so that one may see how such elements of the past still wander through the corridors of today, if only as haunting reflections in glass. For that would demand a move beyond pastiche toward some transformation of terms. As in Graham's reflective menageries, which realigned architecture to lay bare its socioeconomic underpinnings, it would create a kind of modernist "undead"—with all of the uncanny implications.

Craig Kalpakjian is especially noteworthy in this regard. The artist's computer renderings are intrinsically linked to high-end technology, yet they absolutely invert the architectural vocabulary that surrounds that technology. While transparent materials are regularly used by designers to create seductive workstations that contour to the human body—and building exteriors are increasingly permeable (Ibelings describes Nouvel's Cartier Foundation Building as "hardly a building at all")—Kalpakjian depicts environments that are more in tune with rectilinear corporate campuses of previous decades. Darkened, windowless hallways stretch into the distance in mute palettes, their characterless surfaces uninterrupted except for the vapid repetitions of florescent lighting fixtures, electrical sockets, or Styrofoam ceiling paneling. The ethereal light that passes freely through today's corporate environments (as a signifier of mobility, accessibility, and infrastructure) is here frozen solid in the flat planes of incredibly accurate computer renderings—which are, after all, composed of controlled light.

The theme of control is central to Kalpakjian's work. To mirror their own digital wire frames, many of his renderings feature the "invisible eyes" and other remote-viewing sensory devices that map actual space with blankets of virtual electronic surveillance. Indeed, these depictions of space suggest that technology infiltrates and augments the material world, and irrevocably changes our perception of it—offering previously unavailable images of the world and (given that first-time audiences often mistake his art work for photography) unfamiliar experiences with media. If a sense of dislocation or controlled disorientation through technology is a hallmark of our era, Kalpakjian articulates it perfectly. The images are not based on any models. (It's interesting to note that his earlier sculptures consisted of, for example, bullet-proof glass at bank teller windows—the concrete signs of legislated space—and he first became interested in computer renderings when conceiving exhibitions,

eventually deciding to allow his renderings to stand by themselves. At the same time, the imagery presents impossible points of view—an aspect that is most obvious when Kalpakjian strategically places an empty mirror where a viewer's shadow or reflection should appear. Both object and subject are completely dissolved. Augé's "non-places" find expression in what the artist calls "completely abstract points."[6]

And, as in "non-places," Kalpakjian's imagery of empty corridors and staircases certainly implies a similar kind of meaningless traversal of space (none of his spaces feel like "home"). Yet there is a key distinction: a viewer here, lured by soft light falling around a corner, can't help but wonder what remains hidden from view. Subtle imperfections in the walls, or warped surfaces in duct systems, suggest that something lies behind the surfaces, outside the architectural framework. The sensation is most powerful in his renderings of duct systems, the metallic, air-funneling networks whose branches are embedded inside walls, within the infrastructure of buildings. Refracted light disperses among all their planes, blurring the boundaries between solid and permeable surfaces. While these reflective menageries are pleasurable (it is wrong to ignore the beauty of Kalpakjian's imagery, which sometimes approaches the resplendent clarity of Ad Reinhardt monochromes), their spatial conundrums upset any sense of a real passage. The "other side" never comes into view. Instead, the passageways' infinite reflections recall an earlier rendering that Kalpakjian actually animated: a curved hallway at LaGuardia Airport, designed by an associate of Robert Moses, that moves toward the viewer in an uninterrupted loop. Window after window, fluorescent light after fluorescent light, pass through the frame without any real change in complexion, presenting a uniform hallway of endlessly repeating forms. As in a labyrinth, there is a sense of movement without movement, of departing one point only to arrive at another of the same kind. It is a spatial representation of time not passing: entropy might exist, but history never dies.

In a real sense, Kalpakjian does with digital imagery what Jane and Louise Wilson do with actual architecture. His systems of ducts and hallways shadow the claims of millennial technology in much the same way that the Wilsons' roving views of tunnels deep within the Hoover Dam reveal the industrial core of the sensual, simulacral glitz of casinos in *Las Vegas, Graveyard Time* (1999). (And
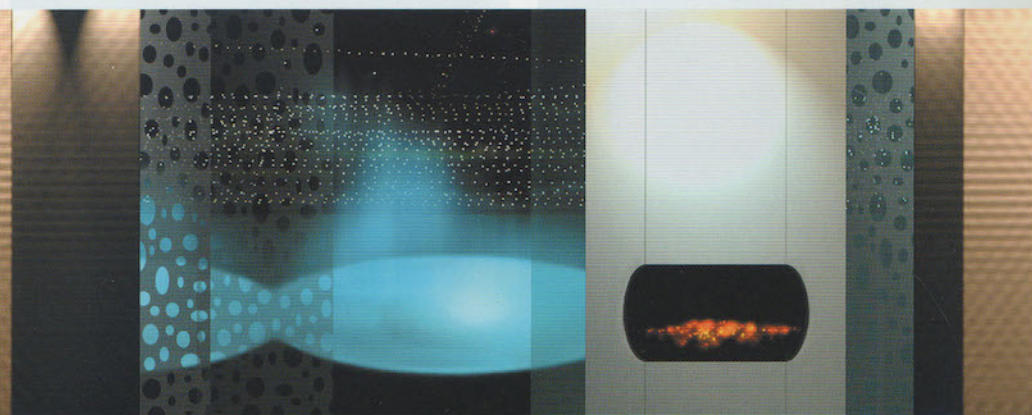
the way that their portrayals of an abandoned American military base and East German secret police headquarters in *Gamma* [1999] and *Stasi City* [1997], respectively, bring apparently outmoded political models into public view.) In fact, their endless loops create the same sense of going somewhere and nowhere at once, and of repeatedly discovering the past inside the present—a dynamic that is amplified by their use of doubles, which appear everywhere in their work.

The duo's installations often consist of large projection screens, one pair placed at either end of a gallery; on occasion, single projections break into split-screen presentations. This system continually generates kaleidoscopic effects, as mirror images converge without providing any single vanishing point by which to judge perspective. (Their dizzying composition evokes Andreas Gursky's photographic composites, in which different points of view and axes occupy the same seamless, flat plane, thereby implying unending continuity beyond the borders of the frame.) All the time, elements of single buildings appear from inverse angles, rushing away from the eyes in one place while rushing toward them elsewhere; elevators move up and down simultaneously, corridors scan left and right at once, and doorways open and close at the same time. The frequent appearance of actual mirrors in the frames intensifies these spatial conundrums. In *Gamma*, a series of mirrors (with slight gaps between them) runs before the camera in a warehouse setting, so that audiences alternate between views looking ahead and behind. The camera itself never appears and, because of the featureless environment, it takes a moment to be sure where the building ends and its reflection begins--or whether, for that matter, it is the mirrors that are moving and not the camera.

(PREVIOUS)
CRAIG KALPAKJIAN,
HVAC IV, 2000,
Cibachrome print on aluminum, 40 x 30 in.
Courtesy the artist.

(ABOVE)
JEREMY BLAKE,
Black Swan, 1998,
digital C-print, 22 x 60 in.
Courtesy Feigen Contemporary, New York.
(BELOW)
JANE AND LOUISE WILSON,
Stasi City (Double doors Hohenschoenhausen), 1997,
C-print on aluminum, 71 x 71 in.
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.
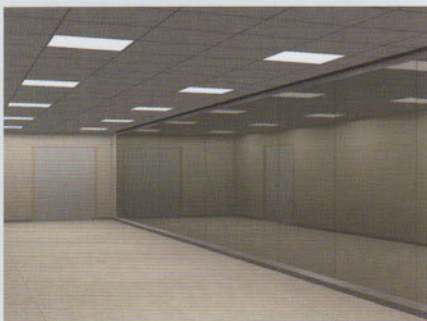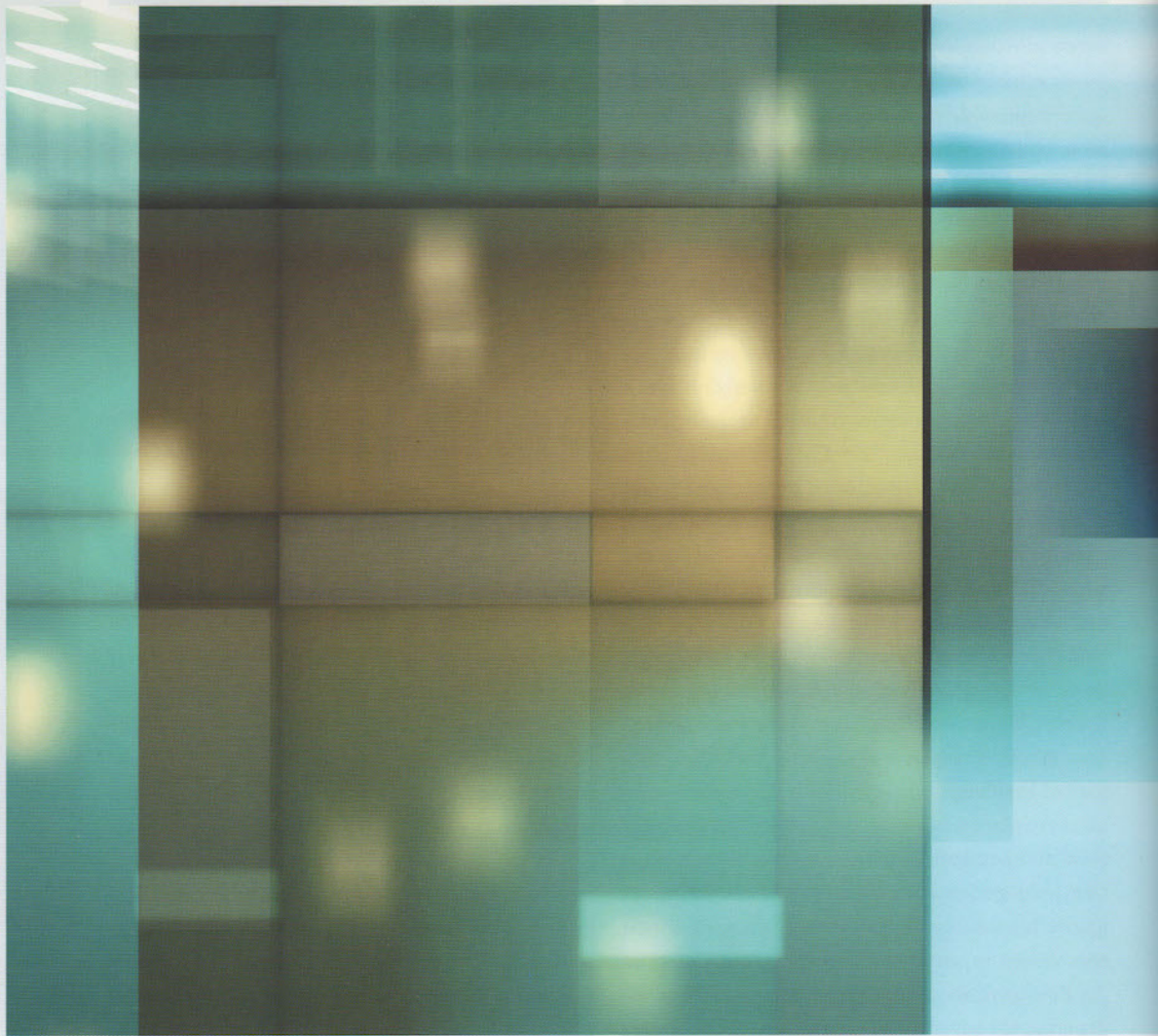
(ABOVE)
JEREMY BLAKE,
International Headquarters, 2000, digital C-print, 41 x 102.33 in.
Courtesy Feigen Contemporary, New York.
(BELOW)
CRAIG KALPAKJIAN,
Lobby, 1996, Cibachrome print on aluminum, 40 x 30 in.
Courtesy the artist.

The latter ambiguity reaches toward the heart of the Wilsons' work: in these places that are supposed to be "dead," there is the unmistakable sense that buildings are alive. In *Star City* (2000), a G-force machine swings powerfully through space without anyone at the controls; the chair in a motion-sickness module turns around and around, even while unoccupied. In *Graveyard Time*, vast arrays of slot machines ring while majestic, curved staircases go completely unpopulated, somehow intimating the presence of invisible throngs of people. When figures do appear, they often seem like phantom presences. The distant reflection of one motionless Wilson is caught as she stands in an ascending casino escalator; and in *Gamma* the two walk the rooms together silently, wearing identical military uniforms. It comes as no surprise that the Wilsons cite *The Shining* as a favorite film. Stanley Kubrick's ice-cold camera similarly runs through the labyrinthine hallways of a hotel in the off-season, so that ordinary rooms seem totally saturated with deep historical and psychological currents.

(It's enough to make you wonder if British Parliament was built on its own ancient Indian burial ground.

Their earlier works provide a foundation for such a bond between psychology and architecture. The sisters are hypnotized together in *Hypnotic Suggestion* (1993); and the hypnotist's words are significant, referring to a walk "down a long corridor ... with every step you take [you go] deeper, deeper into trance, relaxing...." At the point of their "deepest sleep," the camera slowly and silently zooms in, then pulls up above the pair to settle upon a blue curtain—creating a gorgeously monochromatic frame, the mute contours of the room becoming a visual corollary of fathoming the subconscious. *Crawl Space* (1995) goes further (with a blend of spoof and homage). Quoting scenes from *Carrie*, the Wilsons make doors slam violently with just a stare, and run the camera time after time through the same dark hallway into a red room--where the walls finally expand and contract with an ominous sensuality, beginning to breathe.
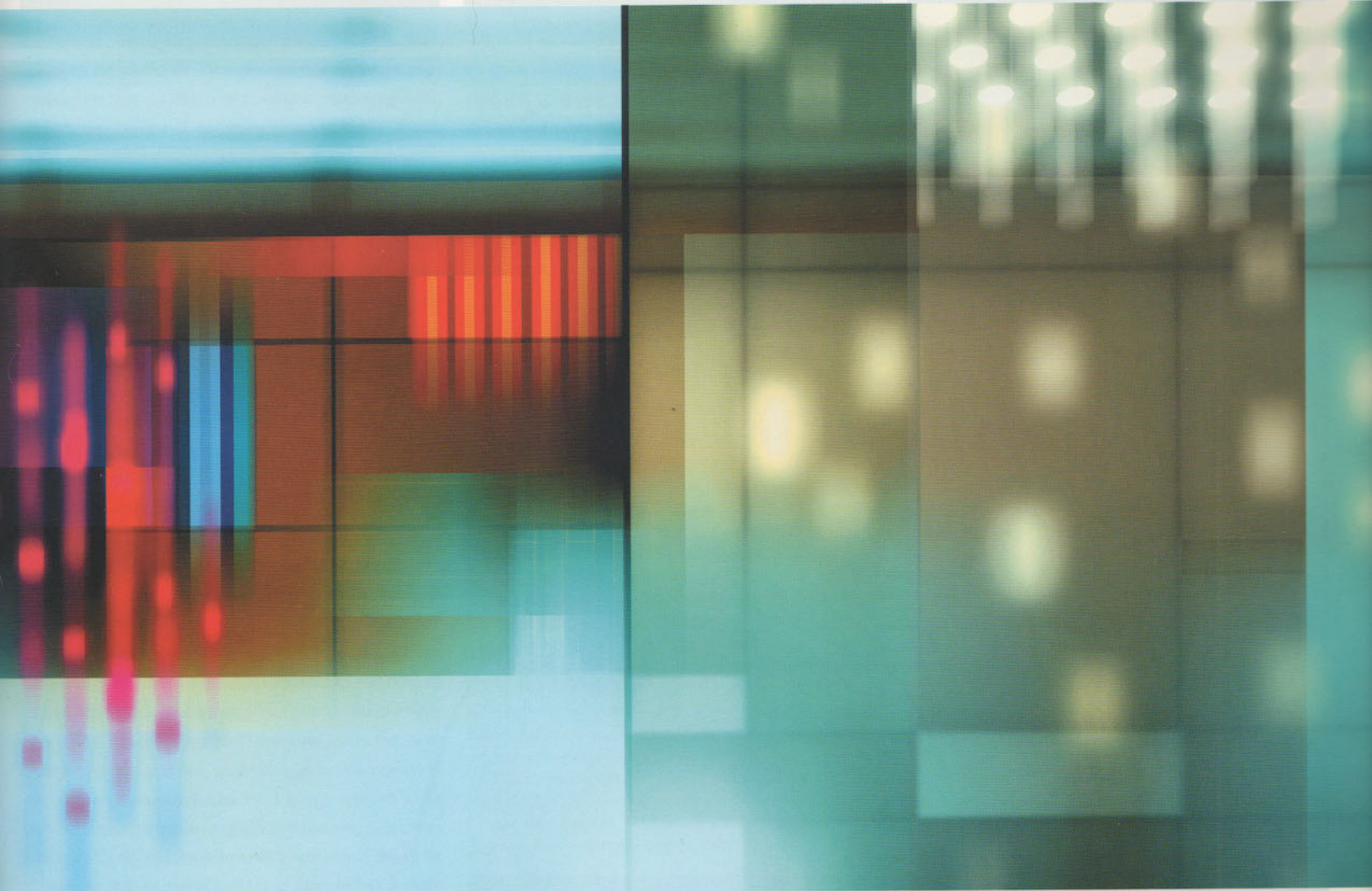
Abstraction in modernism is hardly considered in such terms. Yet it's a single cinematic dissolve to move from those breathing walls to Jeremy Blake's *Angel Dust* (2000)—another infinitely repeating loop—in which the multi-hued sections of a flat, all-over grid brighten and dim with a warm, respiratory pulse. The rectilinear composition evokes classic, cool, prewar abstraction; but colors turn slowly from reds to blues and back as if passing through a bloodstream, periodically replenished with oxygen. And with their symbolic functions so unmoored, it seems that the intoxication of universal modernist principles could wear off (as the title suggests) like any drug, however pure.

In fact, when Blake's solvent abstractions "wear off," they freeze into architectural figuration. But Blake plays America to the Wilsons' Europe. Whereas they often portray architecture after the fall of the Wall, he regularly shows architecture the day after the decadence—after modernist motifs have passed through the hands of corporations, and even have accumulated associations, as in

(LEFT)
JEREMY BLAKE,
Angel Dust, 2000, storyboard sequence for digital animation
with sound on DVD.
Courtesy Feigen Contemporary, New York.
(ABOVE)
JANE AND LOUISE WILSON,
Omnimax Cinema, Caesar's Palace: Las Vegas Graveyard Time, 1999,
C-print on aluminum, 71 x 71 in.
Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.
(OPPOSITE)
CRAIG KALPAKJIAN,
Closet, 2000, Cibachrome print on aluminum, 54 x 39 in.
Courtesy the artist.

Bungalow 8 (1998), with the pulp true fiction of notorious junk bond exploits. Rooms end up reading like crime scenes, the stuff of L.A. *noir*; they seem almost hung over or drugged, trying to remember what happened the night before. The architecture continuously moves and melts, becoming inseparable from cinematic devices (these are, after all, completely mediated environments), which only emphasizes its uncanny, psychological saturation. Panels and planes sometimes dissolve into a translucent haze—the kind of half-conscious fuzz-out that regularly appears in film, or in Raymond Chandler novels, in the moments before a protagonist comes to, or blacks out.

Blake's medium itself presents a kind of crime scene. His DVDs fall somewhere between categories, incorporating elements of painting, cinema, and narrative while still slipping outside the parameters of such terminology (in this vein, recall Riley's poetic description of the Cartier building). If Donald Judd asks artists to use new materials to create new kinds of space and color, these works provide one answer. Digital media allows the insertion of time into abstraction, and for the total absence of surface texture even as that imagery obtains layer upon layer of transparency--creating optical tensions of surface and depth, near and far, that are both more extreme and (with the recent arrival of plasma screens) more resolved. Blake places such material impact in the foreground, using it to "fingerprint" previous effects of technology and architecture on the perception of space, which are now taken for granted. (And which makes them hidden from view or, in a phenomenal sense, "transparent." When perception is the victim of a crime, a sleuth must find the purloined letter.)

Consider his most recent work, *Station to Station* (2001), which consists of five individual loops on plasma screens. Three screens offer views of subway stations and the surrounding landscapes, while two others are set between them, containing animations that appear to shuttle from one stop to another. The rides articulate the shifts in experience that accompanied the rise of modernism: for the first time, people looking out their windows were forced to assimilate a framed, flattened, constantly shifting landscape (and, like cinematographers, create some sense of narrative for the experience). But in the "windows" of these plasma screens, Blake features the spatial and visual dislo-

cations created by contemporary technology. Geometric forms of varying sizes retreat simultaneously across an abstract field at differing speeds, unraveling any fixed, uniform sense of space. (Seen from a vehicle in motion, objects should create a Doppler shift, with those in close proximity appearing to move more quickly than others in the far distance.) Elsewhere, at one subway stop, the image of a landscape suddenly ratchets to an unprecedented resolution; it's as if crystals were being formed from coal under the pressure of tons of bedrock. Then the image, which seems to contain deep space, turns out to merely be the façade of a locker system (the surprise resembles that of Gursky's photograph of a landscape which turns out to be a mural in a Chinese restaurant). Individual doors open, releasing gas into the air as in some millennial anthrax crisis underground.

As much as the mostly forgotten transformations of technology reemerge as a framework in these animations, so do those of New York. These dreamlike, millennial cityscapes are rooted in the totems of mid-century urban planning, and end up tracking the phantom hand of Robert Moses as it shaped the city today. In *Robert Moses Terminal*, an enormous Moses-style project appears shrouded in the acrid, polluted shades of dawn in Queens—an emblem of modernism's failed conceits of a technological utopia. Another subway loop, *Fordham Gneiss*, is titled after the slate deep under the city that Moses blasted in order to create the Cross-Bronx Expressway (an intentional misnomer, since Moses hated the idea of subway systems for the common citizen). While articulating the mutability of experience under the sway of technology, Blake directs attention to the kinds of architectural control that were exerted decades ago, and which are taken as matters of course today—making them alive for eyes again.

The idea is all the more compelling for the strange realism that is emerging in Blake's work. On plasma screens, the incredibly precise yet blurred borders of geometric forms resemble the translucent optical effects of acid-etched glass.[7] One of the loops in *Station to Station* takes its subtitle from the nighttime incandescence of Timex watches: *Indiglo Heights*. And his façade of lockers that dissolves into gas hardly seems fictional when you consider Diller + Scofidio's Blur Building—designed to be permanently enveloped in a mist generated by fog nozzles. The mediated, deeply psychological sphere of on-screen renderings (and all of its novel configurations of optics and space, exterior and interior), in other words, has an architectural analogue, a double. And it's in the phantasmic space between them—at their mirror's border, so to say, an opaque intermediary glass that allows the image to shuttle from one to the other—that one may discern the past as it remains embedded in the present, and even the near future. After all, sometimes things aren't disappearing—we're just not willing to see them.

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NOTES

1. Terence Riley, *"Relentlessly Transparent"* in Modern Contemporary: Aspects of Art at MoMA since 1980, *eds. Kirk Varnedoe, Paola Antonelli and Joshua Siegel (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2000), 528.*
2. *Hans Ibelings,* Supermodernism: Architecture in the Age of Globalization *(NAi Uitgevers, 1998), 69.*
3. *Ibid, 94.*
4. *Marc Augé,* Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, *trans. John Howe (London: Verso Books, 1995).*
5. *Jeff Wall,* Dan Graham's Kammerspiel *(Toronto: Art Metropole, 1991), 61.*
6. *Conversation with the artist, March 2001.*
7. *Such glass makes the screen images seem almost sculptural by comparison. Blake's C-print* International Headquarters *[2000] comes even closer, as red streaks of light seem disembodied, entirely free from any surface. It's a non-space that fits Augé's non-place, in a headquarters for a company that has no base or identity.*