

Architectural deviations and subjective dislocation in the work of Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan

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A secret wound, often unknown to himself, drives the foreigner to wandering.

Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*

The collaborative work of Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan can initially be associated with a practice of site specificity that in recent years has been structurally dependent on the dynamics of globalization and dislocation.¹ Born in Rosario, Argentina, trained there and in New York, and currently living in Berlin and traveling throughout Europe, the pair's work mode of production and circulation corresponds to that of many other artists who, when asked to produce a project for a specific space in a specific city, invariably travel there and respond, in one way or another, to the conditions of the site and/or place. While tracing a genealogy for the aesthetic operations of these artists still seems to demand discerning the "original" context of their formation, a characteristic art historical strategy that even the acknowledgment of the complex dynamics of cultural formations cannot deflate, I prefer to focus instead on how Zinny and Maidagan's work springs from a modernist legacy, which in Argentina and elsewhere in South America, was skeptical of any attempt at stabilizing the relationship between local signifiers and the artistic signified. This same premise characterizes the work of the artists who,

far from deploying strategies of signification keen on revealing the meaningful value of a site, have insisted on various marginal archaeological investigations that negotiate between the subjectivity of viewers and the ideological architectural spaces (urban and institutional) in which the work is located.

Because it is clear that Zinny and Maidagan's work, in foregrounding the architectural/institutional and/or urban framework in which their work operates is related to the legacies of institutional critique and site specificity, it is important to emphasize that their operative mode is never analytical and in no way predicated on the collecting of information that, once processed by the artists, is returned to the viewer in the form of a statement that implies legibility (Hans Haacke, Fred Wilson, Mark Dion come to mind). In their architectural manipulations of space, they are certainly closer to the situational aesthetics of Michael Asher or the early work of David Lamelas. Unlike Asher though, Zinny and Maidagan are not just concerned with the infrastructure of the space of exhibition, its material constitution and objects and how their spatial configuration carries very specific ideological meanings. Like Lamelas' early work, they have productively engaged the architectural passageway to disperse the stability of their sculptural/architectural interventions and involve the viewer in a process of resignification that, again, does not deliver a transparent signified. Instead, the artistic signifier stands opaque, unstable, dysfunctional in relation to a final signified. In other words, their work depends heavily on an environmental poetics that some have associated with the pair's fascination with the literature of Jorge Luis Borges and Bioy Casares, among others.²

But again, Zinny and Maidagan's work resists referentiality, and any literary allusion remains elusive. Instead, it is in the work's materiality and its physical demands on the viewer that one might be able to detect a series of operations that facilitate a mode of site specificity that is also an exile into the imaginary, surely a paradoxical project but one that remains, at least for these artists, the only possibility of engaging contemporary topographies.

The Stairwell

A work made for the New Museum of Contemporary Art in 1999 is a good starting point to understand the formal and conceptual tectonics that structure the site specific approach of Zinny and Maidagan. *Offside*, a rectilinear armature measuring 7 x 5 x 1 m, attached itself to an internal wall of the museum while occupying the space between the wall and the stairwell leading from the mezzanine to the second floor gallery. Made of wooden planks, the skeletal core was covered with a semi-translucent sheeting whose surface faintly changed as the viewer climbed or descended the stairwell. At times opaque, at times reflective, the screen was a subtle indicator of the passage of time and the new trajectories imposed on the audience by the 1999 renovation and expansion of the Museum. But the work featured two important characteristics that recur often in the work of Zinny and Maidagan. First, the work was situated, literally, in an architectural margin of the institution. In between the wall and the stairwell, it occupied an unused space, a residual space, wasted from the point of view of art institutions desperately attempting, since the nineties and until today, to maximize their

exhibition space. Following this residual logic, despite its large scale and precise construction, the work signaled a passageway, a physical and discursive institutional path, and so it behaved more like a marker than an object. Second, the work itself, despite its clear architectural composition, was obviously dysfunctional, an ambiguous prop that alluded, echoed, inserted itself between wall and stairwell, but had no definite purpose. Once over its display, its temporary and ephemeral status would be fully evident. This is the case with many architectural interventions, renovations, expansions and buildings, as the closing of the old New Museum and the opening of a major “New, New Museum” scheduled for 2007 suggests. This is an old tale, surely exacerbated by the pressures of a globalized economy, its expansive art market and the demands it makes on the urban geography of the cosmopolitan city. But despite this story’s mature pedigree, the “New New Museum” designed by Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa/ SANAA Ltd. can make architectural critic Nicolai Ouroussoff write “rarely, in today’s New York, does a building project inspire so much confidence in the future”³—an assertion that surely ignores the cycles of “renewal” and urban discard, dislodging and fragmentation which are the order of the day.

The Corner and the Window

The following year, Zinny and Maidagan were invited to produce a work for the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. In *Movement in Art*, as the project was titled, the spatial paradigms deployed for the occasion involved a parcours of artistic gestures that encouraged the viewer to follow the dispersed clues set up by the

artists. To Zinny and Maidagan, the unimpressive architecture of the Rafael Moneo building in which the Museum had been recently housed, triggered a series of questions around issues of social viewing, national property and spatial properness. The first irregularity proposed by the pair was to request access to the galleries where the collection is housed and bypass, for now, the contemporary art gallery where their work was to take place. In three of these main galleries the artists built curved wall extensions inserted into the corners of the altered space. These insertions were hollowed and could be accessed through a sliding door that made the whole structure resemble a sort of closet or small chamber. Following a well-established avant-garde formal strategy which consists in acting upon the corner of the architecture (the gallery, the institution, the studio) to displace the centrality of the object and focus on the dispersion of the sculptural object, the architectural frame, altered viewing conditions, as well as in undermining the most defining architectural marker of three-dimensional space (Tatlin, Robert Morris, Fred Sandback, and environmental De Stijl experiments are paramount examples), Zinny and Maidagan chose again to situate their practice along the periphery of the architecture.

When closed, these props were barely noticeable, a subtle insertion that could easily be ignored by the viewer despite Zinny and Maidagan's fundamental attack on the architectural spatiality of the institution. But, if opened, the dark interior (painted black) suggested an unfamiliar place, one that made strange the viewing premises upon which the museum is predicated as well as the formal configuration of work and building, here intimately, although disturbingly,

enmeshed. “Invited” to step in, the viewer confronted the fact that the promise of withdrawal from the social space of viewing was cancelled by the narrow space within (only a child or a small adult could fit in this claustrophobic space). But the effort could be made, and the presence of this black hole was enough to elide vision from the museological experience, proposing thus a different regime of interaction. Indeed, if the space of social intersubjectivity that constitutes the central matrix of the public institution is here eroded by the black hole of the corner, the latter is not replaced by an introspective ground of intimacy. Instead, both loci, the private and the public, are dislocated through non-traditional bodily and locational references.

Another minimal intervention consisted in manipulating a system of metal grids that the architect had devised to cover over the windows to protect the building and its contents after-hours. At the request of the artists, the metal grid remained in place for the duration of their project, obstructing therefore the outside view and further complicating the mediation between inside and outside, which the windows—with their terrace extension articulating an ideal viewing position—posited as transparent. Landscape (country) and museum (national collection) seemed to interpenetrate one another through these generous windows. But in incarcerating the view, in suspending this channel of connectivity, in canceling access to these viewing terraces, which situated the civil subject at the center of city and museum, Zinny and Maidagan redrew the line of interest and power that radically separates the art collection from everyday life. Curiously, a photograph of one of the incarcerated windows features a work by Mondrian on the adjacent wall.

This work recalls Mondrian's struggle with the referent and its increased efforts to abstract the landscape, experiments which soon led to a complete dismissal of the motivated sign in favor of the dynamics between grid and pictorial support. To Mondrian and others, these formal resolutions were to be blueprints for a better society, and so next to Zinny and Maidagan's intervention, the latter cannot but be read as a failure of that idealized connection between art and life. Finally, as the intervention called attention to the operative maneuvers of the institution, the grid reminded initiated audiences of a long representational tradition that first sought a perfect translation of the real into pictorial space and later a definite flight from that reality. Over the picturesque landscape of the city, the grid acted thus as a reminder of the various boundaries established by art and its institutions as well as art's various attempts to negotiate the relationship between the real and the aesthetic.

Finally, in an attempt to address boundaries once again, the artists asked that in the contemporary art gallery where their work was to originally be shown, Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte en valise* (1935-1941) be exhibited. Recalling Asher's relocation of a George Washington statue (a cast of a famous 1785-1791 marble by Jean-Antoine Houdon), from the outside of the Art Institute of Chicago to one of the inside galleries featuring eighteenth-century objects and paintings, the artists, like Asher in 1979, posed questions, through Duchamp, about original and copy, exhibition space and context, curatorial and artistic roles. The dislocation of the object and the stubborn instability of the site were in place, within Zinny and Maidagan's artistic repertoire, as privileged strategies of aesthetic production.⁴

The Façade

In 2002 another architectural dislocation would preoccupy these artists. Asked to produce a project to be housed at the Bibliothèque Royale in Brussels located in Mont des Arts, the artists used their unearthed knowledge of the institution and its surroundings, once again, to redraw the boundaries between inside and outside, past and present, function and use. *A Façade that Considers no Interior Contains an Illusory Garden* consisted of 78 hand-painted glasses set in wooden frames that acquired the form of screens reclined along the wall of the old browsing room of the library. Departing from three tones of green, the artists generated 85 different permutations of color that clearly referred to an outside garden, supposedly public, but which could not be accessed from the street. Inside the browsing room, the garden, framed by the large doors of glass that compartmentalized the view seemed inaccessible and so the work posited this space of visibility as a green abyss that separated the institution from its surroundings, the building from its public. This seemed to attest to the stubbornness of certain architecture to distance itself from its context by relying on clear-cut boundaries and the resistance to change of national institutions linked to an idealized heritage. At the Bibliothèque, this was exacerbated by the fact that a temporary façade had been built ten years before the building, a gesture as bizarre as is complicated the history itself of Mont des Arts where the library is located. Indeed, as Bruno de Meulder explains, originally located on the site of the Montagne de la Cour, a hill that historically mediated between the Upper and

Lower towns of Brussels, the intermediate zone of the Mont des Arts has become, following incoherent “infrastructural interventions,” and dramatic urban shifts, an “island.”⁵

But this “island” effect, which impacts on how the cultural institutions of the area negotiate public space, is reinforced, Koen Van Synghel suggests, by the post-fascist architecture of the Bibliothèque Royale designed by Maurice Hoyoux and Jules Ghobert in 1937 but not realized until after the war between 1949 and 1964. Under the aegis of classical modernism, the monumental façade rose first as boundary and clear demarcation of the introverted quality of the area. To Van Synghel,

...Whether one considers Guimard’s strictly neo-classical architecture on the Place Royale, or the rather more elegant classicism of the Place du Musée, or the severity of the Bibliothèque Royale and the Palais des Congrès, the Mont des Arts manifests itself as a kind of no man’s land between the more vital Lower and Upper towns. The main problem is the radical boundaries between inside and outside, radical in the sense for example of the high wall that the Bibliothèque Royale has put up along the Jardin de l’Albertine, but radical also in the way that entrances are closed off, and the surreptitious way in which rooms are opened up as museum space.⁶

Zinny and Maidagan’s project attempted thus to pose questions about the boundaries between the building and its surrounding gardens and public spaces.

By materializing the immediate garden outside the space of the browsing room, at the center of which a sinuous low structure that operated as marker and bench at the same time, delineated the central area of the room, the artists suggested a space for the city dweller inside the library. Suspicious of the severe symbolism of the façade and the physical and mental barriers that it establishes with its surroundings, a symbolism that David Vanderburgh calls a “bureaucratic stripped classicism [which] is the architectural language of twentieth-century power,”⁷ a façade that considers no interior and contains an illusory garden opened up the possibility for an interior without façade and a garden without illusions.

The Wall

A 2002 year-long residency in Berlin culminated in an exhibition at the daadgalerie in the Fall of 2003. Entitled *Such a Good Cover*, the project consisted in covering the walls of the exhibition space with stripes of sewn canvas. The predominant color was a warm cream punctuated by stripes of yellow, pink and black folded in between larger expanses of the more neutral tone. In photographs of the installation, the work seems to restore to the space the warm domesticity that it had lost due to the ravages of history. As Lynne Cooke observes,

The daadgalerie in Berlin occupies a small apartment, of some 130 square meters, on the upper storey of a former bourgeois villa whose ground floor is now given over to a restaurant, the Café Einstein. Built in 1912 for the silent movie actress Henny Porten who, in 1933 was forced to leave Germany

because her husband was Jewish, the residence was declared public property during the Nazi era. In 1978 it was converted to its present use.⁸

Curiously, this is the least structural intervention in space deployed by these artists. It recalls a work of 1997 entitled *1/1 Fiction* in which, through a carefully crafted intervention on the wall, the artists created the illusion that the corners were peeling away. This desire to act on the wall as a support of the work springs from Zinny and Maidagan's foundational interest in the space of exhibition, and architecture in general, as a discursive ground.

At the daadgalerie, domesticity was intimated by both the mundane quality of the material and the labor-intense process of fabrication that for weeks transformed the exhibition space into a fabric workshop.⁹ So that by collapsing studio and exhibition space, craft and conceptual work, architecture and *décor* (*Such a Good Cover* also resembled a long curtain), the artists aimed to call attention to the desecrated space of private-turned-public. If at first sight the harmonious warmth between the stripped-wall, the zigzagging parquet of the floor, and the irregular bands of light bathing the space make us think of a restorative gesture, then the extreme abstraction of the operation tends to disorient rather than center us. By pushing the work, once again, toward the periphery of the room, by morphologically and alternatively mutating from wall to curtain, to connective tissue between the various rooms, the artists posited both, exhibition and domestic space as vulnerable loci graspable only as temporally based historic specificities. It is this

seismic terrain that *Such a Good Cover*, with its arbitrary folds and trembling surfaces, irregular and unstable by all architectural standards, emulated.

This “vague geometry” that sheltered the walls and the viewer at once and injected the architecture with a somatic topography shared with the audience, was also explored in a series of collages which bespoke the vulnerabilities of that zone of encounter between subjects and architecture. Made of thin stripes of hand-cut paper glued to the surface of the support, they recall Schwitters’ idiosyncratic manipulations with space and paper and seem to concoct some constructivist fantasy or impossible place, as in Lissitzky’s work as well. But the collages and architectural interventions of Zinny and Maidagan are not crucial links in a *Gesamtkunstwerk* project that attempts a utopian synthesis of art and architecture. It is obvious that the struggle between the pictorial and the architectural at the heart of pre-war constructivism, has been replaced here by an abandonment and excess that verges on craft and decoration, underbellies of the avant-garde. Some of these collages, such as those entitled *Studio for Studiolo*, 2003, suggest pavilions, chambers and precincts that protrude from the wall (some wall in the abstract sense) and allow the viewer to enter the architectural support, allow her that is, to become part of the architecture, if only temporarily, in some undefined way. Of course they also suggest a space of withdrawal, but this withdrawal is defined by the boundaries created by the walls of these uncertain chambers. It is always, it seems, the constructed space of architecture which marks the trajectories of the subject inside the house or out in the city.

The Floor

Last year, on the occasion of the second Seville Biennial Zinny and Maidagan produced a floor piece entitled *Deviation*. The work echoed a floor painting done in 2003 at The Showroom in London. The latter, entitled *Kein Banner in der Sonne* (*No Flag in the Sun*), measured 4 x 3 m and displayed a compelling Russian Constructivist look-alike design that recalled the bold patterns of Gustav Klutss and Unovis. Over a creamy rectangle, the artists inscribed a bright red semi-circle intersected by a black pole. The graphic starkness of the image, monumental in its simplicity and scale, recalled the ideological zone of transition between revolutionary design and propagandistic support trotted by the avant-garde in the twenties and thirties. As its title suggests, morphologically and formally, the image, its scale, and colors, indexed the pervasive nationalism of the period and the intricate, historical relationship between aesthetics and politics.

At Seville, the fractured floor piece done specifically for the show measured 7 x 17 meters. Of painted wood, the white “floor” opened up to reveal irregular bands of red and black rubber that shined between the cracks of the main body of the piece. The work took up a tradition that goes back to Lissitzky’s *Proun Room* (1923) and traverses the minimalist work of Carl Andre, by allowing the viewer to interact with it by stepping on it or by simply circulating around it. Here though, the artists relinquished the perfection of geometric forms (the rectangular and circular shapes of Lissitzky, the square plates of Andre, even the graphic simplicity of *Kein Banner...*) to give materiality to the seismic terrain of transnationalisms invoked by the Biennial. Indeed, if *Kein Banner...* with its abstract but definite iconicity

collapsed on the floor invited viewers to step on that old paradigm of collective organization represented by the flag, *Deviation* offered an untamed terrain of choices, disruptions, and adaptations forced by the different global social and economic arrangements with which we are still coming to terms.

Fragmented more than pliant, Zinny and Maidagan's floor suggested a zone of conflict. More topographic model than sculpture, it alluded to a terrain that has lost its coherent and homogeneous communities and cannot offer either comfort or stable ground. It invited viewers to occupy temporarily this space which aptly relinquished the tamed participatory aesthetics of Andre and his muted reflections on place, for a logic of dislocation that disturbingly informs a) the life of the migrant, b) the global appeal of the commodity, and c) the organizational principle of the biennial. Accordingly, the artists did not attempt any architectural intervention; instead, they claimed a territory of their own, albeit fragile and uneven. In this sense, *Deviation* seemed to suggest the inevitability of a lost place or at least the diffusion of those solid national frames of reference that inform the monument and the museum. Clearly, Zinny and Maidagan have, for the last sixteen years, trespassed various national borders and negotiated various cultural codes in the unrooted place of exile. Émigrés from Rosario in New York first, they later left for Berlin where they decided to stay thanks to the privileges that as European artists of a sort –Zinny carries an Italian passport– they could enjoy in Germany. But carrying a passport does not erase one's foreignness, especially in a country known for its historical appeal to national community, an organic more than a political one.¹⁰

It is to that condition, the incessant foreignness of the contemporary artist to his/her spaces of production and of art to its audiences, that the site specific work of Zinny and Maidagan speaks. It might be both fair and useful to recall that the title of the Second Seville Biennial, curated by Okwui Enwezor, was *Unhomely. Phantom Scenes in Global Society*. No less significant is the fact that while the Biennial seemed to extrapolate from the psychoanalytical to the political uncanny, as Freud's *unheimlich* is usually translated, it still suggests a model to understand the complex dialectic between self and other that Julia Kristeva sees as foundational to the contemporary multinational society. To Kristeva, Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (1919) posits a familiar strangeness, a familiar repressed: "that which is strangely uncanny would be that which was (the past tense is important) familiar, and under certain conditions (which ones?), emerges." What surfaces is a concern with certain psychoanalytic concepts familiar to any reader of the *Unheimlich*: "anxiety, double, repetition, and unconscious."¹¹ The immediate consequence of this familiarity is, to Kristeva, to situate the uncanny as an other (repressed) inside us (that returns). As she precisely summarizes: "the other is my (own and proper) unconscious."¹² And a few pages ahead: "the foreigner is within us. And when we flee from our struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious—the 'improper' facet of our impossible 'own and proper.'"¹³ Why impossible? Impossible because an encounter with the uncanny strangeness insists on the challenging task of situating myself with regards to others, it defies the solid structure of the self, it demands to cope with the "incongruous" and the new. So against the reification of the other, the gestures of colonization, the emphasis on assimilation

and the erasure of difference, Kristeva suggests: “To discover our disturbing otherness, for that indeed is what bursts in to confront that ‘demon,’ that threat, that apprehension generated by the projective apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as a proper, solid ‘us.’”

How can we identify these concerns with the dislocated self, made strange to itself, with the architectural deviations of Zinny and Maidagan and their explorations of place? The easiest path might be to associate the artists’ works with an architectural uncanny that Anthony Vidler has mapped in architecture’s fascination with margins and wastelands, oneirism, nomadism, transparency, the alienation of the city, domestic anxiety, aesthetic defamiliarization, homelessness.¹⁴ But more than tracing or identifying common aesthetic strategies with the eighteenth- and twentieth-century architecture that occupies Vidler, I want to suggest a conflation between Kristeva’s exploration of the estranged subject and the spatial unhomely that Vidler espouses in his book, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays on the Modern Unhomely*. There he, like Enwezor, favors the literal translation of *unheimlich*, unhomely, for connecting that text to Europe’s social destabilization on the eve of, throughout and after WWI.

Themes of anxiety and dread ... seemed particularly appropriate to a moment when, as Freud noted in 1915, the entire ‘homeland’ of Europe, cradle and apparently secure house of western civilization, was in the process of barbaric regression; when the territorial security that had fostered

the notion of a unified culture was broken, bringing a powerful disillusionment with the universal 'museum' of the European 'fatherland.'

Given the fact that neither diasporic displacement due to war or political persecution, nor homelessness due to economic reasons has been overcome; rather on the contrary this crisis has been exacerbated today, it might be fitting to confront, as Vidler suggests, a symbolic reflection on the unhomely with social and political practice. To Zinny and Maidagan that job begins at "home" with the reformulation of an aesthetic practice that, in its confrontation with place, bypasses its colonization through knowledge and proposes reflection through estrangement—not as a choice but as something inevitable. It is to this ever-changing and unstable paradigm of site specificity that, to conclude, I will now turn.

The Column

Entitled *The Coast, the attack, the same*, Zinny and Maidagan's most recent project for Sala Rekalde in Bilbao furthers a method of site specificity where urban memory, as a stabilizing signifier that generates a process of identification between the city and its inhabitants, is eroded. Here unities are substituted by traces, the traces of a peripatetic visitor who is more interested in the urban vulnerability of psychogeography than in the institutionalized memory of archives and history. Uninterested in taming the recalcitrant nature of the city, Zinny and Maidagan's work suggests unresolved zones of complexity that, as with their experience of the sites they encounter, are irresolutely archetypal and unique. The central piece for

the exhibition at Rekalde, made of fiberglass and flexible MDF, was based on a sinuous and jagged line marked by Zinny around the columns of the exhibition space on a floor plan. The three-dimensional piece measured 17,87 x 15,30 x 1,52 m and was an explosion of the various preparatory drawings that advanced the suggestion of a coast. But the solid piece was a cacophony of convoluted thin walls that embodied a dull transparency thanks to the bluish fiberglass. This capricious matrix intersected another continuous screen made of cardboard that served as the spinal cord of the piece. The articulation of both materials/screens was rather arbitrary except for the fact that at times one echoed the other. The result was the creation of recesses and folds, cavities and layers that invited the viewer to explore the piece and to estimate its impossible structure, the gestalt of which remained obscure due to the large scale of the work and the impossibility of taking it in. While the viewer could enter some of the recesses created by the screens, she could never access its inside. There really was no distinction between inside and outside which would aptly correspond to the coastal topography that the title of the installation suggests. A coast, more than a border demarcating boundaries, is an area of transition, an interstitial zone of entry and exit that can be welcoming or fatally hostile.

Zinny and Maidagan had been at work in Bilbao for more than a month before their exhibition opened last February. This brief residency, necessary for completing the piece, was preceded by a couple of trips made by Maidagan during the previous year to meet with Rekalde's curator and to study the space. At first, one is tempted to contrast the human-scale, model-like quality of the piece with

Frank Gehry's monumental Guggenheim museum in the very center of the city: the spiraling walls of both structures alluding to their constructive opacity and diffusing wholeness. Of course that is probably the extent of their commonality since in every other aspect they are complete opposites: the reflective Guggenheim with its glittering blades, its large scale and intruding constitution, its central and monumental place in the city, is nowhere to be suggested in *Alarga la lengua (Stick your Tongue Out)*—a burlesque title given to this central piece that also contrasts with the institutional and corporate appeal of *Guggenheim Bilbao*. But for anyone familiar with the inside of the museum and its collections, the central piece of this installation, in one of the few alternative art spaces of the city devoted to contemporary art, interpolated the massive statement that Richard Serra's seven-piece, site specific installation at the Guggenheim signified. Commissioned by the local government, the latter consists of works derived from Serra's *Torqued Ellipses* series, each made of

two or more bent plates of weatherproof steel, with heights ranging from 12 to 14 feet. The lightest work, made of two plates, weighs 44 tons; the heaviest, made of eight plates, weighs 276 tons. The total weight of the new works, which [were] manufactured in Germany, [is] 1,034 tons.¹⁵

If these numbers overwhelm the reader with the mere visualization of so much metal, the installation, which is to convey, according to the Guggenheim's press release, the potential for movement in the exploration of physical space, is

nothing short of overpowering. Specially designed for the long corridor called the Fish Gallery at the Guggenheim Bilbao, the usual intense experience of penetrating one of Serra's works is diluted here by the unproductive dizziness of perceptual saturation.

So how can we understand the imposing presence of a non-national New York museum in Basque territory, known of course for its pride and appeal to all things regional, and the fascinating realization that if you are a Serra fan, as many in the art world are, you must travel to Bilbao? How to account for the complex and layered urban identity that this phenomenon (part of which is the blossoming of Bilbao as a must see European destination) has triggered? As many have observed, Bilbao's attempt to reinvent itself in postindustrial times and terms (the city used to be a great center of steel production) led to the construction of the museum and the acceptance of the terms of a negotiation (the New York Guggenheim carries most curatorial and managerial decisions) that is as close to corporate franchising as culture can be. And if this regional transnationalism is one instance of the dislocated subjectivities authorized by globalization, a parallel can be drawn in terms of how bodies and matter travel in current times—be those of site specific artists or giant site specific sculptures. As Carol Becker observed back in 1999 in a text concerned with art nomadism:

This building [Gehry's Guggenheim] recognizes what postindustrialism means—that even brick and mortar, here titanium and rivets—can be transformed into light and movement. The mandate for the next century is

that even matter can be morphed by illusion, and even gravity will be defied.¹⁶

Confronting the paradoxes of these transformative processes affecting both places and subjects, Zinny and Maidagan's practice spills into the urban terrain which remains forever other: foreign space to which they are foreigners, mythic space that contains all worlds, geographical site whose rationalizing urban grids the walker undoes. Next to *Alarga la lengua (Stick your Tongue Out)* a smaller swirling piece, acting as an echo of the first, or as its severed tail, prolonged the meandering perceptual experience. On the walls, preparatory drawings, the photograph of a crest from an old, family-operated hard metal factory about to be relocated from its central location in the city, and a curtain piece complemented the three-dimensional installation. A tight narrative, like the one art critics and art historians are trained to create, could be constructed around these scattered objects and the various aesthetic gestures that generated them. But the exploratory strategies of Zinny and Maidagan, although tenuously allied with the archive, suggest rather a trail of possibilities signaled by the affective unfolding of the work and as such operate between the normative and the equivocal. If this urban logic touches on the *genius loci* of a place it does so only by chance. More interested in interstitial spaces, margins, and props as vehicles of negotiation between locale and viewer, Zinny and Maidagan's mode of site specificity uses the threads of knowledge that surface in their installations as the supplement of a constructed order within which we all operate, upon which we project and which we manipulate.

I am echoing here Michel de Certeau and his spatial practice of walking, a model that proves productive for understanding the lack of finality and authority in Zinny and Maidagan's site specific practice. Among De Certeau's various configurations of the relationship between walking and the city, he proposes an oneiric one, inseparable from the "dreamed place."

To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place but is only a name, the City. The identity furnished by this place is all the more symbolic (named) because, in spite of the inequality of its citizen's positions and profits, there is only a pullulation of passer-by, a network of residences temporarily appropriated by pedestrian traffic, a shuffling among pretenses of the proper, a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places."¹⁷

Dreamed-of places, haunted places, fictional places, remembered and forgotten places might be all we have after all. According to De Certeau, it was

local legend that facilitated the comings and goings to and from “habitable spaces.” In their absence, “travel, open[s] up space to something different.” And he adds:

What does travel ultimately produce if it is not, by a sort of reversal, ‘an exploration of the deserted places of my memory’ ... What this walking exile produces is precisely the body of legends that is currently lacking in one’s own vicinity; it is a fiction, which moreover has the double characteristic, like dreams or pedestrian rhetoric, of being the effect of displacements and condensations.¹⁸

It is such a displacement that a small book (a fiction? a memory?) produced by Zinny and Maidagan last year records. Triggered by an encounter between Maidagan and a book in a small library on the outskirts of Cordoba, the story of the book is, for the most part, “narrated” through pictures. Photographs of the surrounding landscape are followed by photographs of what appears to be a nineteenth-century bourgeois country house (a public library we learn later), followed by photographs of a book entitled *El Frac* authored by Ulises Nobody, followed by photographs of the preface to this book penned by Jorge Luis Borges, followed by a detailed list identifying the previous images, followed by images of an abandoned house (lost by fire we learn from the caption to the images), followed by a litany of photographs of the Railway Station Antartida in Fishertown: platform, rails, wooden door, fireplace, tiles, staircase, etc. are accounted for. In one image, a small metal “button” inserted on wood reads “Aleph.” The book is a bit of a

mystery, a riddle, maybe even the visual representation of a legend? Is there any relationship between Borges's *The Aleph* and this old-looking metal button? Was there something real in the 1949 story, one of Borges' most emblematic and famous tales? Of course not. It was, the artists told me, all a big coincidence, a visit to the old station and the neighborhood of Maidagan's past, of his memory, had led to wanderings around the building. On a windowsill Maidagan had discovered the metal insert which in a short time changed its status from revelation to industrial seal of approval. Indeed, upon more careful consideration, the small, mass-produced seal can be seen in many windows of the old station. Like a brand, a label, this Aleph spoke not of the world in a basement of which Borges wrote but of the quality of manufactured products.

A point where all points converge, is how Borges described the Aleph, that "iridescent sphere" where all space is, "actual and undiminished." Fiction or global village? Either way, Borges suggests, we will forget.

¹ For a classical assessment of site specificity in contemporary art see Miwon Kwon, "Once Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80, Spring 1997: 85-110. Specially pages 100-110.

² See for example Lynne Cooke, "Present Past, Past Present," in *Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan*, Berlin: Berliner Künstlerprogramm/DAAD, 2004, 50.

³ Nicolai Ouroussoff, "Art and Architecture, Together Again," *The New York Times*, January 19, 2006 (<http://global.factiva.com/ha/default.aspx>). As cited in the New Museum of Contemporary Art's website: <http://www.newmuseum.org>

⁴ Regarding other details surrounding this intervention in the collection see Maria Lind, *Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan. Moderna Museet Projekt*, Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 2000, p. 3.

⁵ "Now [Mont des Arts] is primarily an artificially raised thoroughfare dedicated to movement and the passage of everything that is 'other.' Trains, trams, buses, cars, the metro. The buildings are secondary and are a negative of the traffic infrastructure: a collection of hastily knocked-together fragments, often in the form of solitary buildings...torn loose from their urban context and with little

mutual connection apart from that single common datum: the illusion of expanse, the bath in a sea of asphalt." Bruno De Meulder et al, "The Metamorphoses of an Area Between Two Fires," in *Vacant City. Brussels' Mont des Arts Reconsidered*, Rotterdam: Nai Publishers, 2000, pp. 49-50.

⁶ Koen Van Synghel, "How Public Are the Temples of Culture on the Mont des Arts," in *Vacant City*, p. 235.

⁷ David Vanderburgh, "The Bibliothèque Royale," in *Vacant City*, p. 33.

⁸ Cooke, p. 54.

⁹ Friedrich Meschede, "Concetto Spaziale", in *Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan*, Berlin: Berliner Künstlerprogramm/DAAD, 2004, p. 5.

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon D. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 176.

¹¹ Kristeva, p. 183.

¹² Idem.

¹³ Kristeva, p. 191.

¹⁴ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1992.

¹⁵ http://www.guggenheim.org/press_releases/release_86.html

¹⁶ Carol Becker, "The Romance of Nomadism: A Series of Reflections," *Art Journal*, Summer 1999, p. 26.

¹⁷ Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984, p. 103.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 106-107.