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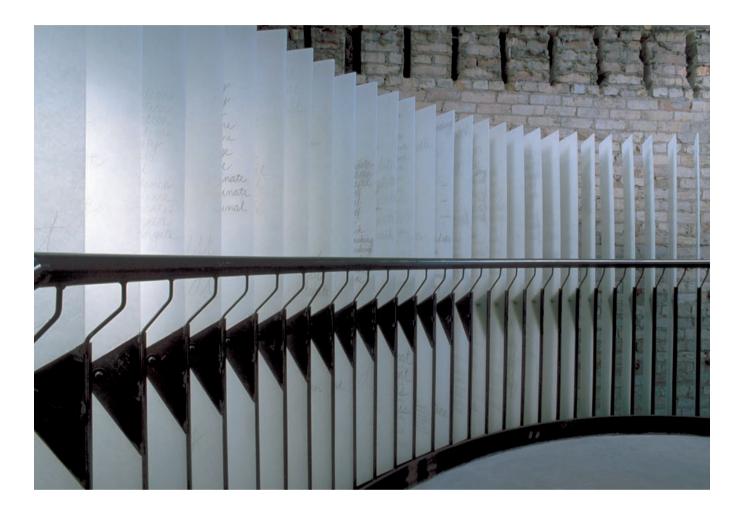0731-0455

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Displace/Discover

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The artist and writer Robert Smithson once made a distinction between a site, a place in the world, and a nonsite, a representation of that place in a gallery. While his descriptors for site included "open limits, scattered information, and some place (physical)," nonsite incorporated "closed limits, contained information, a no place (abstraction)."[1]
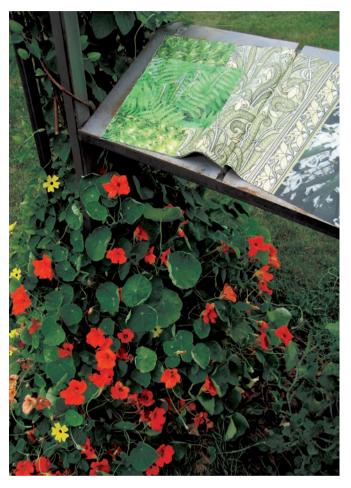
A simple dichotomy like this implies that the architect deals with the site and the artist with the nonsite, but it really is the slippage between the thing and its representation that characterizes both. The form of a work is developed as a response to a series of questions: what is its content, where does this come from, who is the audience, what is the context, what does it mean? Thus, meaning is not automatically derived from program; the facts are in service to meaning at the same time that they help determine it.

As an artist I work with architecture as a theme, public art as part of a larger sculpture practice, and the book as subject and metaphor. Associative thinking—or re-placing—is at the core of my approach to the questions above. My work explores place as both site and nonsite through word play, sequential patterns, and grids—each providing a basic structure that allows for layers of fluctuating meaning.

content, *context*, *subtext*, *text*, *textural*, *architectural*

So begins the word game that continues, handwritten on eighty 6-foot-high Lumasite pages supported by a two-story steel spine in my work *Gail See Staircase*, at Open Book, a center for reading, writing, and book arts in Minneapolis. Co-designed with the architect Garth Rockcastle of MS&R Architects (the guest editor of this section), the staircase also includes welded steel railings inspired by bookbinding structures. The viewer of this work becomes both user and reader, enclosed in a space, traveling through the text. Through the manipulation of roots,

prefixes, and suffixes, the word lists shift from books to architecture, from reading to living (*vivir, vivre, livre, libre, libro*). Like the stair steps themselves, the forward linkage of the words carries the user through the space.

The shift of meaning from book to architecture in both words and object provides a physical embodiment of Ferdinand de Saussure's definitions of paradigm (associative relationships) and syntagm (sequential relationships). Associative word games have interested me since childhood, long before I learned them formally through semiotics. Words link and slide, compare and contrast, continuously creating meaning that is further modified by each reader's unique set of experiences. The result is a migration of meaning. One thing replaces another, yet they coexist.

These layers of dual meaning are also evident in another of my works, *If not (T)HIS, If not (T)HERE*, commissioned for the Art Lab at the Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis,

in conjunction with the exhibition "Ed Ruscha: Editions." Inspired by the asymmetrical compositions of Ruscha's word/image prints and his droll exploration of the Los Angeles landscape, *If Not (T)HIS* is a room-sized sculptural book that compares "There," Los Angeles, with "Here," Minneapolis. It includes photos and a three-screen video, "Every Building on Lake Street," that provide a Minneapolis take on Ruscha's book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*.[2] Here, the book form allows for a series of codings and recodings—a page is a place, a book cover is a door. *If not (T)HIS* invites the reader/viewer to enter the space of a book, a room, and a landscape.

Opposite: *Gail See Staircase*. Also see images on cover and p. 5. Photo by Rik Sferra.
Above left and top right: *Summerhouse Library*.
Above bottom right: *If not (T)HIS, If not (T)HERE*. Photo by Dennis Dennehy for Walker Art Center.

Instead of bringing a landscape into a room, another of my works, *Summerhouse Library*, is an outdoor installation for the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum that imports a reading room onto the landscape. Welded steel window wells, grown over with trailing vines, provide an open framework for four books that explore the relationship between art and the landscape. Printed on weatherproof vinyl, these *Field Guides to Art in Nature* explore color, pattern, texture, and perspective. The viewer examines the books while looking out to the natural surroundings. Caught between landscape and place, representation and real, all the usual cognitive sureties are called into question: scale fluctuates; purpose appears and then disappears; experience reveals its limits.[3]

Specifics of place were more explicitly rendered in my work on the Minneapolis Hiawatha Light Rail Stations, co-designed with MS&R Architects and ESG Architects.[4] Each station was meant to reflect its surrounding community as gleaned from public meetings and historical research. The collaborative process among artists, architects, and community provoked a lively dialogue that yielded rich details.

Approached as large-scale site-specific sculpture, each station has its own character. For example, the 38th Street station borrows details from neighborhood bungalows. And the 50th Street station, which faces Minnehaha Park, provides a transition between urban and natural environments; playing off the dual meaning of the word "canopy," I designed the image for the glass station canopy as the underside of a winter tree canopy.

Another of my works, *Vertical Circulation*, constructed over a year from August 2001 to August 2002, calls the concepts of place and nonplace more directly into ques-

Above: Minneapolis 38th Street light-rail station.

tion. In a strange inversion, post-9/11, the sky became the constant when the world was shifting. The photographic grids of clouds document specific times and places, even if clouds themselves are elusive and universal.

Each series of cloud photographs reflects a different idea of place. For one, taken during a sabbatical year abroad, I photographed the sky every day—morning (east), noon (above), evening (west). As an avid walker, I also wore a pedometer to document footsteps, going into the millions, and each photograph was noted for footstep number and place.

The images and data served as a frame for *Vertical Circulation*. The title refers to stairs, columns, the book delivery system for library stacks, and the concept of ascendancy. Incorporating books that were constructed from rubbings made at the same locations as the photographs, the grids of sky and land capture the variables of seasonal change, emotional mood, and constant flux.

In the spring of 2007 I was fortunate to spend a semester abroad with students from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design at the Burren College of Art in County Clare, Ireland. As a means of grappling with their sense of displacement and discovery, we addressed weekly sketchbook topics—among them, Art/Artifact, Boundaries, Inside Out, Story:Telling. I made a book each week, some made assemblages, others drawings.

By organizing a pedagogy that put my work in play with theirs, I found both place and replacement—I was teacher and student, guide and fellow traveler. Together, we affirmed difference and found similarity through shared investigations of place. In Ireland, with my students, place became the starting point for understanding, a site for making and remaking the world.

function, fiction, depiction, picture, pictogram, pictoglyph, hieroglyph, hierarchy, arch, archive, architecture, archetype, type, typograph, graph, ideograph, idea, ideology, logic, magic, imagination, image, afterimage, afterword, word, wordplay, play

Notes

1. From Smithson's more complete table in Nicolas de Oliveira et al., *Installation Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), p. 33. Included as a footnote to Smithson's essay on "The Spiral Jetty," reprinted in Nancy Holt, ed., *The Writings of Robert Smithson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

2. Ed Ruscha, *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (Los Angeles: Heavy Industries, 1966).

3. *Summerhouse Library* was designed and executed with Laura Fulk and Chad Rutter, senior undergraduate students from the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. A production edition of the book *Field Guides to Art in Nature* is available through Printed Matter (printedmatter.org), the world's largest distributor of publications by artists.

4. The conceptual design of the Warehouse station downtown was with ESG; the conceptual design of the 38th, 46th, and 50th Street stations was with MS&R. Concurrently, I managed the team of artists on the conceptual design phase. The glass canopy design for the 50th Street station emerged from a separate public art opportunity during the construction phase.

All photos are by the author except where noted.

Above left: Minneapolis 50th Street light-rail station.
Above right: Sketchbook pages. Top Row: Karen Wirth; Michael Mott; Wirth; Aaron Bickner. Middle Row: Isa Gagarin; Wirth; Jamie Sandruck; Wirth. Bottom Row: Wirth; Aaron Bickner; Wirth; Laura Lewis.