

Strategies of Indeterminacy in Recent Landscape Practice

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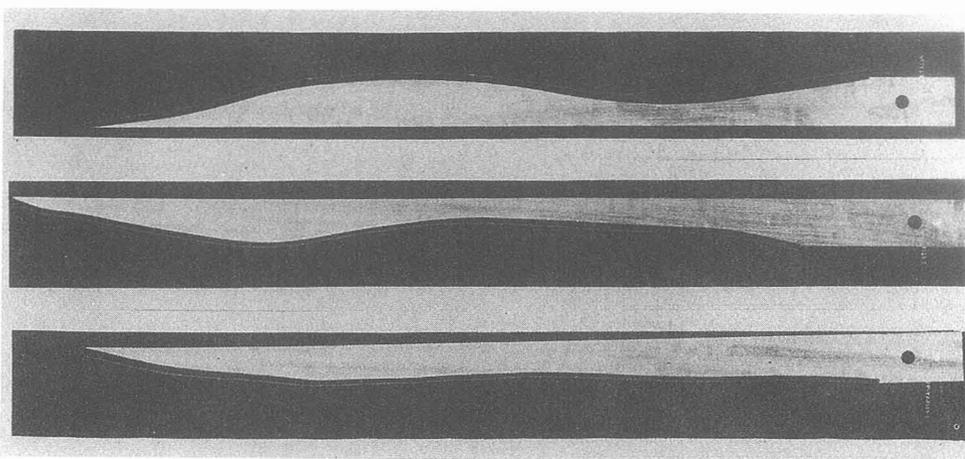
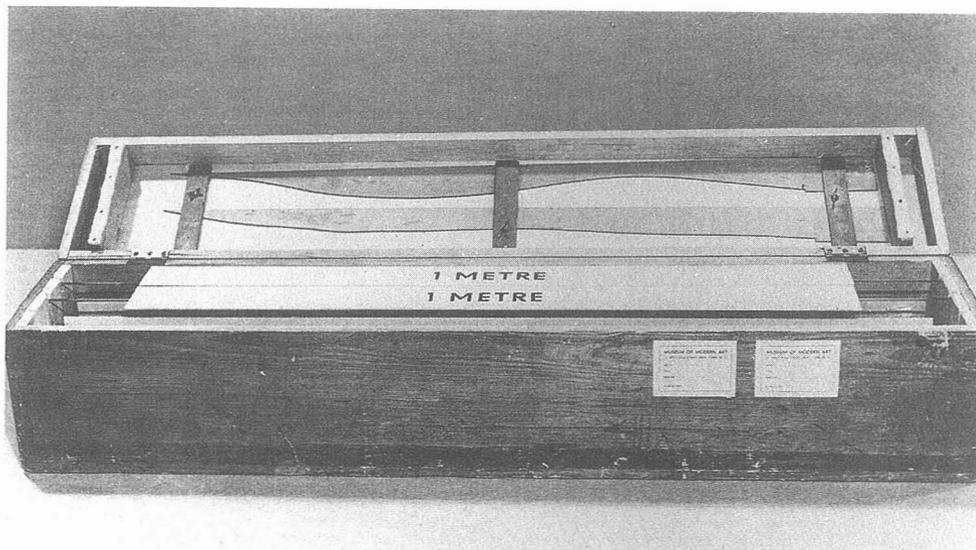


FIGURE 1
Marcel Duchamp, *3 Stoppages Étalon* or *3 Standard Stoppages*, c. 1913-14. Reprinted from
Gloria Moure, *Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Robert Marrast (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1988).

Reports of the author's death, once greatly exaggerated, are now extremely rare in contemporary discussions of architecture. While recent architectural discourse has been rather more focused on questions concerning the ongoing relevance of criticality and the possibilities of the "post-critical," many contemporary practices concerned with the urban landscape, having internalized that interest in displaced authorship articulated in architectural publications like *Oppositions* in the 1970s, now advocate on behalf of strategies of indeterminacy, self-regulation, and autonomous emergence. In response to these developments, this essay examines the connection between neo-avant-gardist discourses of problematized authorship and the just named tendencies in landscape urbanism. Before taking up those connections, however, it is important to convey something of the substance of these strategies of weak or displaced authorship as they first emerged in the theory and practice of the early twentieth century avant-gardes. Here the practices of Raymond Roussel and Marcel Duchamp can be thought to be exemplary of the range and spirit of these strategies.

In part due to the rejection of his work by the French literary establishment and his humiliation in front of a series of Parisian audiences, the avant-gardist playwright and author Raymond Roussel took his own life in 1933. His last manuscript, intended for publication after his death was a non-fiction account of his primary working methodology titled *Comment J'ai Ecrit Certains de Mes Livres (How I Wrote Certain of My Books)*.¹ This "secret and posthumous" work describes in detail his use of compositional protocols that, while resembling the aleatory strategies of Surrealism and Dadaism, were distinguished by both the arduousness and the arbitrariness of the restrictions they placed upon the process of creation.

Another difference between Roussel and his Surrealist and Dadaist counterparts becomes apparent if we compare him with the better-known work of Marcel Duchamp. A case in point is Duchamp's 1913 construct "3 Standard Stoppages" [*3 Stoppages Étalon*]. In this work Duchamp reportedly dropped a meter of string from a meter above a table top and then claimed the twisting shapes resulting from this operation as new units of measure. In spite of the fact that both the construct itself and repeated attempts to reproduce Duchamp's practice have illustrated that the work was a consciously constructed hoax, the project has come to enjoy canonical status as a model of delayed authorship in favor of automated method in cultural production.²

After the posthumous publication of Roussel's explanation, his working methods became the object of intense scrutiny and interest for a range of cultural agents, including the authors and critics of the *Nouveau Roman* of the 1950s and the so-called structuralist critics of the 1960s and 70s. It was from these literary sources that the "death of the author" first entered architectural discourse in the 1960s and 70s. Among the various texts responsible for introducing such post-humanist concepts of cultural production into architectural discussion at this time, one especially stands out, Peter Eisenman's 1976 essay, "Post-Functionalism."

Eisenman's text, and the collection of essays in which it was included, proposed the subversion of the author function as one symptom of a larger cultural trajectory.³ The absorption of architectural theory and practice into this trajectory would, on Eisenman's account, allow the discipline to abandon its obsession with motivating form functionally, so that it could then follow the other culture disciplines (music, painting, literature) in their pursuit of more willfully mediated strategies of composition.

Roussel intended his plays and novels to be read without knowledge of their working method, with the result that contemporary audiences were not inclined to read the works as manifestations of a theory. This fact distinguishes his practice from Duchamp's. For Duchamp, work depended precisely upon very public claims for its method of production, so that collapsing the space of production and reception proves to be part of the work's effect. Absent this reading of the artifact as an allegory of compositional process, Roussel's works were found unremarkable and often unintelligible. By expecting his plays and novels to be read on their own, Roussel arguably anticipates Barthes' emphasis on a reception liberated from any presumed authorial intent. The result of this liberation is the "open work," a work that would also figure in contemporary architectural discourse, and that continues to inform contemporary understandings of "field" as a model of both the urban surface and those operations we apply to it.

This relationship between the reception of a cultural product and the claims of authorial intent is of particular relevance to contemporary debates about the status of criticality within architectural discourse. As architectural culture declares the ascendancy of the post-critical, interest in displacing authorial intent has been in a predictable state of decline. However, even as fewer claims are being made for problematized or distanced authorship in architectural production, contemporary landscape and urbanism have provided these topics with fertile ground and newfound relevance. A variety of contemporary landscape practices evidently employ techniques of problematized authorship and contemporary discourse around landscape and urbanism is awash with claims of indeterminacy, open-endedness, self-regulation, and post-modern ecological models of autonomous emergence. These practices, while multiform and various, might be summarized into three general lines of thought, each with their own specific aspirations, origins, and claims. The first of these, and the one most directly extending from the critical architectural discourse, comprises urban landscape projects designed through various automatic methods yielding highly sculpted horizontal surfaces. These projects and the architects responsible for them represent a clear extension of the neo-avant-gardist architectural project. A second distinct line of work includes a range of urban projects described as open works or infrastructural systems that are meant to distance questions of authorship in favor of an explicit open-endedness and indeterminacy in the face of future cultural contingencies or larger urban forces. These projects typically invoke absent architectural authorship in favour of a mod-

est, socially responsible, and economically efficient urbanism as a kind of operating system or matrix. A third distinct body of work invokes the indeterminacy and self-regulation ascribed to natural systems and attempts to transfer these qualities to the instruments of urban collectivity. Typically, this involves the employment of ecological models and natural metaphors to describe an urban landscape capable of adapting itself over time to rapidly changing conditions. Taken together, these three lines of work offer evidence that, within the discourses of landscape and urbanism at any rate, neo-avant-gardist strategies of composition, production, and reception continue to be influential, however much faith in the criticality that originally sponsored them may have eroded.

The first line of work is best exemplified in the recent projects of two Spanish architects, Enric Miralles and Carme Pinos, particularly in the Igualada Cemetery (1986-89) and Archery Range (1989-92) projects outside of Barcelona. Both projects derive from the rubbing of drawings over the topographic lines of the Igualada site, the cemetery constructed on that same site as a representation of the site's surface and the Archery Range constructed on a remote site on the periphery of Barcelona. Both operations invoke the Surrealist project and the work of Max Ernst specifically as the origin of various frottage and collage techniques. The resulting constructed surfaces are highly sculpted, complex forms in contrapose to their landscape sites. Each implies a thin volume of space between a highly delineated horizontal surface and architectural volumes just below (Archery Range) or behind (Igualada Cemetery) that surface. Both read as highly constructed architectonic landscapes that happen to contain some building enclosures and both exhibit a palpable tension between the figurative gestures of their organization and the prosaic demands of their respective programs, be it the storage of cremated remains and gardening supplies (Igualada Cemetery) or the accommodation of locker rooms and zen-like preparation spaces (Archery Range). Both projects are experienced primarily as horizontal landscapes created by complex sectional relations between the building enclosure and the found topographic conditions of their sites. The Igualada Cemetery project predates the Archery Range project and latter commission simply re-appropriates the already available set of complex rubbings originally produced for the Cemetery. Set upon an arid plain in the peripheral territories of the Olympic site, the Archery Range deploys Igualada's automatic topography across a nearly flat site, folding it into an architectural section and vast rooftop landscape. Both projects exhibit a clear continuity with previous techniques of problematized post-humanist authorship within architectural culture including Eisenman's own obsessions with mathematics and abstract formal operations.

Another Spanish architect laundered in Ivy League architectural theory, Alejandro Zaera-Polo and his partner Farshid Moussavi have authored a range of urban landscape projects over the past decade extending the neo-avant-gardist interest in subverting or displacing authorship. Zaera-Polo and Moussavi/Foreign

Office Architects' Yokohama Pier Terminal (1995) and Barcelona's Auditorium Park at the Forum of International Cultures (2004) construct highly complex three-dimensional surfaces that perform in the first instance as urban landscapes, effectively masking larger building programs below or behind them. In place of Miralles and Pinos's distinctly analog techniques of frottage, Zaera-Polo and Farshid Moussavi fashion their horizontal surfaces from complex computer algorithms of multi-variate, indeterminate inputs. Emerging from these digital parameters, their horizontal surfaces respond to a complex array of instrumental expectations, while distancing authorial control or instrumental intent from the resulting surface. While the Miralles and Pinos projects depend upon an emptying of programmatic demands in favour of an initial figuring of form and a subsequent accommodation of program, the Zaera-Polo and Moussavi projects are shaped in response to a dizzying array of programmatic demands. From this response vertiginous landscapes emerge, landscapes that afford a renewed engagement with the topography of a site as a surface for appropriation. While both projects invoke traditional park programs of theater, spectacle, and promenade, each sufficiently distances humanist expectations of authorship to maintain continuity with the aspirations of neo-avant-gardist architectural practice.

The second body of contemporary work invoking a distanced authorship includes a range of urban landscape and infrastructural projects over the past quarter century. Among them, the projects by Bernard Tschumi and Rem Koolhaas/OMA for the Park de la Villette Competition (1982) explicitly invoke the notion of an open work (Tschumi) or unplanned juxtaposition (Koolhaas) as necessarily post-humanist conditions of any urban intervention. These projects variously exhibit attenuated authorship through the deferral of decisions over program, the focus of those modernist strategies they were seeking to displace. The projects equally signal the coming centrality of landscape as the medium through which an appropriately open-ended, responsive, and indeterminate urbanism might be conceived. Equally evident in this line of thought are the more recent urban projects of Stan Allen. Allen's interest in infrastructural arrangement and the notion of constructing the site for future architectural embodiment offer evidence of an ongoing engagement with questions of indeterminacy and delay. Allen's proposal for the Barcelona Port or Logistical Activities Zone (1996) proposes a "thick 2-D" surface of urbanism as the locus of design attention, forming a horizontal surface or landscape of infrastructural affordance, one capable of responding dynamically to unforeseeable future conditions. This surface is conceived as an infrastructure in its own right, one staged to accommodate any configuration of capital or logistical requirement attendant to contemporary flows. In this formulation, post-critical interest in the fluidity and flux of global capital flows intersect with the necessity those flows produce for an urbanism that is responsive, efficient, and potentially abandon-able. Each of these imply their own form of distanced authorship, one in which the recuperation of selective aspirations

of modernist urban planning become desirable. While the modernist aspirations to totalizing instrumental control are distanced through an explicit interest in self-regulation and autonomy, the parallel modernist interests in an organic relation between economic, ecological, and infrastructural arrangement are seen as highly desirable. From this position, the mid-century urban proposals of Ludwig Hilberseimer, the diagrams of the Walter Christaller, and the aesthetic or cultural aspirations of Norman Belle Geddes hold newfound urgency. Recent interest in the diagram as a locus of architectural and urban content are equally relevant here, with the critical aspects of deferred authorship continuing in a subconscious operating system, while the desire for post-criticality articulates itself in an increasing desire for proximity to decision-making, capital, and social relevance. While this line of thought is increasingly interested in models and organizations taken from natural systems and often invokes neo-organicist aspirations, more often than not it invokes natural systems as models or metaphors for infrastructural organization rather than as operating ecological regimes.

The third body of work implicated in this discussion explicitly deploys and develops ecological claims for their distanced authorship, often articulating a natural process, landscape strategy, or ecological regime as the first phase of a subsequent urbanism. These projects tend to make broader claims for the relative autonomy of ecological systems and their ability to shape future urbanization. Central here is a recent proposal by James Corner/Field Operations for Lardner Point on the Delaware River Waterfront in Philadelphia (2003) where the indeterminate spatial location of contaminated soil on site persists in the form of randomized urban voids in the context of future urbanization. In this project an initial phase of phyto-remediation, using plant material to absorb toxins in the soil, not only cleans the ground but indexes the form of future development with the most toxic areas of the site being capped with clean soil in preparation for their life as urban parks. The architectural and urban fabric of the surrounding development, while deferring to the ovoid residual green spaces, takes its formal and architectonic cues from the market. Likewise, West 8/Adriaan Geuze's Buckthorn City (1995) proposes the urbanization of an off-shore site in the North Sea building traditional polder land with dredged sand and Buckthorn planting. Over a period of years the invasive European Buckthorn plant, generally regarded as a nuisance plant, consolidates the subsurface conditions through its extensive root system and produces topsoil in advance of future urbanization. The ultimate market-driven urbanization takes a more or less conventional (or at least market compliant) form, while the rhizomatic shape of the Buckthorn colony indexes the form of future infrastructure and urban form. Each of these projects proposes a dynamic and open-ended relationship between urbanization and ecological process, one in which traditional hierarchies between urban figure and landscape void are inverted in favor of a more environmentally informed, if not more sustainable, regime of urban development. Equally in each of these examples the

privileging of landscape strategy and ecological process distances authorial control over urban form, while allowing for specificity and responsiveness to market conditions as well as the moral high-ground and rhetorical clarity of environmental determinism.

Contemporary interest in landscape and urbanism owes much to the critical architectural project's engagement with strategies for distanced authorship during the 70s and 80s. One explanation for this may be that those disciplines are still belatedly absorbing the impacts of post-modernism long in other cultural arenas. Another argument suggests that the strain of criticality embodied in problematized authorship has proved enduringly relevant to the social, economic, and ecological imperatives that determine construction at the scale of the urban landscape. In either account, it is clear that the critical or negational dimensions of distanced authorship associated with the neo-avant-gardist architectural discourse of the 70s and 80s have largely given way in favour of a putatively post-critical assumption of laissez-faire urbanization and autonomous ecological emergence as the pretexts for this new indeterminacy.

NOTES

- 1 Raymond Roussel, *Comment J'ai Ecrit Certains de Mes Livres* (Paris: Gallimand, 1935, reprinted 1995).
- 2 Gloria Moure, *Marcel Duchamp*, trans. Robert Marrast (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1988).
- 3 Peter Eisenman, "Post-Functionalism," *Oppositions*, no. 6 (Fall 1976): i-iii.