



Unmapping the City

















Unmapping the City: Perspective of Flatness

Edited by Alfredo Cramerotti

Outline

Unmapping the City, the first title in the new Intellect series 'Critical Photography', features photographs shot between 2004 and 2008 in fourteen different cities around the world. The images are linked by their shared attempts to define a two-dimensional approach to a three-dimensional built reality, and to address spatial representation and urbanity through art. In representing the cityscape through a flat texture of lines and minimal colour tones, they draw the reader into a conversation about the interplay between reality and its representation.

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Excerpts

In this book, the assemblage of photography and critical analysis is designed to produce a dialogue between knowing and seeing, a differential space where two systems of representations work not to determine each other but to expand a common horizon of possibility for photographic practice.

In a photographic study developed over four years, *Unmapping the City* traverses the history of modern aesthetics, connecting retrospective forms of abstraction to new perspectives in contemporary urban photography, a process shaped by the 'implicit recognition of a historical transition from the representational priority of "surface" to that of "interface"' (Victor Burgin).

The photographic effect is to deconstruct the three-dimensional built environment in 'perspectives of flatness', which in turn re-construct a sensibility toward the concrete, rationalized spaces of urban cartography.

In the process, it re-instates a relationship between individual perception and the vast complexities of urban life.

The photographer adopts the method of the psychoanalyst to retrieve a critical image of the city, as the photograph restores to perception the information that remains absent, like a blind spot in the individual's urban conscious.

Emerging from the social and historical complexities of the urban environment are a thousand cities of the imagination, as the shadow architectures of perception. These other places are the yet to be experienced vicinities of the city, the interstitial places that materialize in the gaps between 'perspective seeing' and 'perspective knowing'.

In the 'perspective of flatness' the infra-structure of the modern city merges with the info-structure of urban photography; a retrospective insight into the discourse of Modernism, and a prospective lens through which to encounter the aesthetics of the contemporary city.

The 'perspective of flatness' becomes an urban interface between past and present, abstraction and actuality, a place for the architectural unconscious to emerge in the photographic imagination.

In the un-mapping of the city, in the oppositions of inside/outside, past/present, night/day, surface/depth, reality stutters at the edge of abstraction as the gaze becomes unstable, we don't quite know where to fix our attention or what it is that we are supposed to be looking at; a window becomes an image, the image a screen, the screen a portal, which transports us to memories of a city long forgotten or places yet to be encountered.

Unmapping the City requires the photographer to replace the cognitive frame of representation with the perceptual register of affect. The result is an emergent form of critical cartography, an encounter with the complexities of place, where visual sensation

displaces meaning in the counter-intuitive lens of the urban photographer who ‘thinks in pictures’.

Unmapping the City abstracts a ‘journey-form’ from the psycho-geographic drift of the derive. The presentation of different images side by side, juxtaposing two images to form a unique view of the same subject matter, amplifies the aesthetic of mobility as the perspective in process counteracts the stillness of the photograph.

As the unwieldy city ‘runs its course’, the photographer ‘transcodes’ the free associations of a filmic experience into the urban acrobatics of the free runner or *traceur*, who navigates the ‘open source’ city by improvising a route that goes ‘off the map’, through unexplored and often unseen places in the urban landscape. In the photographic sequences we take a perspective detour, following the perspective of the free runner through enclaves, backstreets, stairwells and blind alleys.

Urban experience is modified with such frequency that our shared sense of perspective disperses into a pathological state of abstraction, where life in the contemporary city and its environs is separated from human understanding. The ‘perspective of flatness’ becomes a means of negotiating the conditions of contemporary urban life.