The Politics of Spatial Transgressions in the Arts

Edited by
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Losing Site: Folded Morphologies of Photography and Brutalist Architecture

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An image does, indeed, kill.[1] Once I look past an image's lustered surface, peel back its layers of emulsion, I am left with a piece of paper and a cruel illusion. Henri Lefebvre's poetic multivalent use of *killing* applies both to an image's ability to outlive its subject and inability "to account for richness of lived experience."[2] And this killing is then multiplied upon realization that a photograph, the ultimate indexical depiction of truth, is flat. So, I often wonder how to render a photograph in three dimensions. How to extrude its surface—to see past the photograph as a pictorial object and to reach deeply into the image, extend a hand, and touch the spaces inside the frame. Contending with Roland Barthes's conception of photography as a "wound"[3] or a "puncture" amplifies this idea of photography's perpetual failure to depict objects, people and places as they truly are. Barthes' disillusionment crystalized when he asked how "to accede to *what is behind*?" the photograph, only to be met with the swift disappointment of empty white paper. This cognitive dissonance subsequently reinforces the photograph's inability to realize and depict

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truth and reality. Perhaps it is photography's flatness, rigidity and lack of haptic sensibility that epitomizes its failings and prohibits me from seeing, touching, and possessing what I desire. As a photographer, I am frustrated with the medium's ephemeral nature, tied to the brittle emulsion on paper that will decay and fall apart over time. So I began to seek refuge in architecture, a medium focused on massive solid objects that outlast not only paper but also our lifetimes. The allure of architecture was tempting. It's solidity and monumentality was a salve to heal the heartbreak of torn and grainy photographs that disintegrated between my fingers.[4]

Ironically, architectural practitioners possess an immense tendency towards privileging the image. Even Walter Benjamin notes "everyone will have noticed how much easier it is to get hold of a painting, more particularly a sculpture, and especially architecture, in a photograph than in reality."[5] The photograph often acts as a stand-in for a building since it necessitates experiencing the building, moving through space to truly understand it. So in this way, architecture is a field of image translation. These visual translations are all facsimiles for the ultimate building as either perspectival drawings, blueprints, cross-sections, elevations, isometric perspectives or axiomatic views, etc.… Architect John Hejduk explores the tricky relationship between architectural and pictorial space in his essay on "The Flatness of Depth," lavishing the still image's power to see a building in its entirety immediately and its subsequent ability to "heighten to an extreme, exorcising out from a single fixed photographic image all of [a building's] possible sensations and meanings."[6]

So how am I to reconcile this ultimate incongruity between architecture's dependency on the image and the artifice and ephemeral nature that imbues the photographic object? How to transform a fragile paper photograph that is "[a]ttacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes: there is nothing left to do but throw it away?"[7] Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in in the middle. Subsequently, my photo-based practice as a whole attempts to reconcile these material and conceptual shortcomings of photography and architecture by destabilizing conventional methods of representation; thereby radically transforming the ways in which we experience or perceive architecture and ideas of place.

The Henry F. Hall Building

This radical change in my practice began with confronting the haunted past of a single building: the Henry F. Hall Building at Concordia University in Montreal. This massive grey concrete and glass block sits unassumingly in the middle of campus. Originally designed by the architectural firm Ross, Fish, Duschenes and Barrett, the Hall Building was opened on October 14, 1966. Designed with a sensitivity to democratic values and honest, inexpensive materials such as concrete, the building was also touted as the only single structure to contain an entire university, including: "10 auditoria, one seating 700 people, 42 classrooms, 15 seminar rooms, 47 undergraduate laboratories, and 37 other smaller laboratories for research and graduate work, three language laboratories, four student lounges, a student government centre, and a Computer Centre."[8] Its aesthetic tended towards a high modernist, even Brutalist, approach with the façade's modular, pre-stressed concrete exterior. Fabricated by Dutch company Schokbeton, each window module has a slightly curvilinear aperture for the glass, giving the skin of the building an almost ethereal feeling in contrast to the rectilinear or hard-edged facades with large swatches of *béton brut*. Nonetheless, there were several traumatic events involving protest, shootings, and violence that occurred within the Hall Building that could not have been predicted by the architects; and subsequently, irrevocably transformed the way this building is seen, used and experienced. It is this inherent dichotomy between the utopian sensibilities of brutalist architecture and the grimy traumatic histories that have spurred my artistic practice.

I will begin with the proverbial 'elephant in the room' and the intimate connection I have with this building as it spawned many years of artistic investigation to document the site. On August 24, 1992 Valery Fabrikant, an Associate Professor of Mechanical Engineering, walked onto the ninth floor of the Hall Building carrying a briefcase that contained three handguns and many rounds of ammunition. Spurred by a long history of erratic behavior, harassment of staff, students and colleagues, and being denied tenure, Fabrikant killed four of his fellow professors, including my uncle Phoivos Ziogas, the Chair of the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department.[9] He was shot twice in the stomach and died a month later in the hospital. To work through the emotional implications of his death and its reverberations throughout the family, I returned to the site of trauma and photographed its interiors, hallways, staircases, façades

and architectural details. Thinking of the long circuitous almost claustro-phobic architecture of the hallways in the building, I made a two-channel short film entitled *The Ninth Floor* examining the disorienting feeling of following an ambivalent figure down a long hallway. Shot as a single unbroken take to add a dense layer of tension, the viewer is forced to stay within the enclosed space as a potential threat of violence looms. The work makes reference to a rich history of filmmakers exploring similar subject matter including Alan Clarke's *Elephant* (1989), Gust Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) and Denis Villineuve's *Polytechnique* (2009). In *The Ninth Floor*, the camera swoops and spins across the Brutalist concrete spaces of Concordia and York University; creating moments where the difference between floor, ceiling and walls are ultimately indecipherable (Fig. 7.1).

Subsequently, I began researching the Hall Building's past, searching for archival images of the building during construction and its opening. Unexpectedly, I discovered a series of riots and violent events that occurred before and after the 1992 shooting that dramatically changed the way I viewed and experienced the space. In 1969, the largest student protest known as the Computer Riot saw unprecedented violence on the ninth floor.[10] Fueled by accusations of racism and unfair grading, students occupied the lounge, computer labs, and "barricaded the stair-wells on the seventh floor and shut off the elevators and telephones."[11] Somehow, a fire broke out and the university's computer labs were conse-quently destroyed. One of the most striking photographs in the archive was an image of millions of IBM computer punch cards and various papers flying out the windows from the ninth floor. The computer cards littered Maisonneuve Boulevard and surrounding streets below, blanketing the
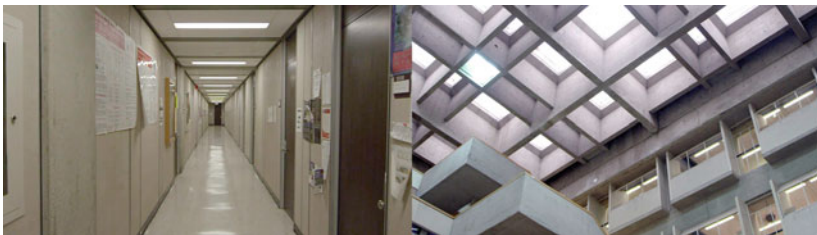
Fig. 7.1 *The Ninth Floor*, 2-channel HD video installation by Jessica Thalmann, 8 minutes, sound, 2015 (Image courtesy of the artist)

streets in a snow-like paper puddles. It remains a striking image of mayhem and destruction with complicated layers of institutional critique and violence.

Another instance of unrest occurred on September 9, 2002, when riot police were deployed to the Hall Building to contain protestors opposing a scheduled visit from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Glass windows on the ground floor were broken, metal barricades and chairs were thrown, until finally, the riots ended in tear gas and pepper spray. Ingrid Peritz from *The Globe and Mail* reports,

> "Protestors occupied the front vestibule, only a few metres from the auditorium where 500 mostly Jewish spectators had gathered to hear the speech. Demonstrators outside smashed a large plate-glass window in the vestibule and began hurling objects at police inside, prompting officers to fire back with pepper spray. The acrid gas began to fill the vestibule. As chaos began to take hold, police pushed back the protesters inside. In response, several hurled wooden furniture and metal chairs at the officers from an upper mezzanine. By lunchtime, the vestibule of Concordia's main downtown building was littered with paper, upturned chairs, broken furniture and the choking aftereffects of pepper spray."[12]

How can a single building have such a troubled history of violence? Was there a connection between its Brutalist design and violence? Are there geometric shapes and textured concrete at fault of fostering a cold authoritarian environment? How can the lived experience of a building sharply veer away from an architect's intent or original design? Can these experiences and traumas of the past seep into the pores of concrete walls, and sublimate into our own experience of the place? Having my own connection to this place, it is even more disconcerting to find these other troubling associations and stories that had taken place over fifty years prior. How to reconcile these intertwined histories?

Deleuze, Paper and the Fold

It became increasingly clear that traditional means of photographic practice could not properly capture and articulate the mass of the Hall Building and the weight of its experiences. The simple black and white photographs that lay suspended in film emulsion or as a silver gelatin print became a kind of *flat death*[13] on my studio wall. Staring at those images on the wall, a feeling of paralysis slowly creeped in as these cold

authoritarian grey buildings loomed larger while I shrank smaller. How could a photograph of these flat grey buildings hold so much power?

But, what is a photograph really? What are its compositional elements? It was just a piece of paper. It was just a piece of paper that has a front and a back. The image is made up of light, chemicals, and paper. Once that realization was made, they were no longer holy *decisive moment*s. But rather, were converted from photographs to images; and, ready to be transformed. They could be torn, folded, ripped, cut, glued, collaged, sewn, and layered on to one another. Moreover, this idea of layering and inversion resonates strongly with Gilles Deleuze's understanding of the fold. "Always a folding with a fold, like a cavern within a cavern. […] The unfold is thus not the opposite of the fold, but follows one fold until the next."[14] This Deleuzian understanding of folding creates a kind of conceptual and emotional freedom. There is liberty in realizing that a photograph needn't be rectangular or square, that historical choices that had shaped the medium's aesthetic and conceptual conventions could be undone.

Folding was one of the first strategies that altered the photograph almost immediately. Akin to the moment in the darkroom where an image magically appears in the developer bath; the process of folding is much the same. The fold defies the laws of physics; somehow, at once hiding and revealing the front and back of a photograph. Gilles Deleuze's understanding of the fold as "a sheet of paper or of a tunic into folds, in such a way that there can be an infinite number of folds, one smaller than the next, without the body ever dissolving into points or minima."[15] And this idea of fold within a fold extended not only to the material in which I was moulding and shaping in my hands but also the photograph and all of its mimetic implications. The first artwork in this series was *Utopos (Henry Hall Building)* where a black and white image of the façade of the Henry Hall Building is repeated, reflected, then folded into a triangle tessellation grid (Fig. 7.2).

The process for these works involves cutting, folding, gluing and pinning prints directly onto the wall, creating distorted almost organic shapes out of the bleakest and sharpest geometric concrete objects. Folding as a strategy became a transformative tool to recover my power over these buildings. I could physically shape these spaces, misalign windows, invent optical illusions and build distances of space where there was none. The destructive practice of folding and cutting was always
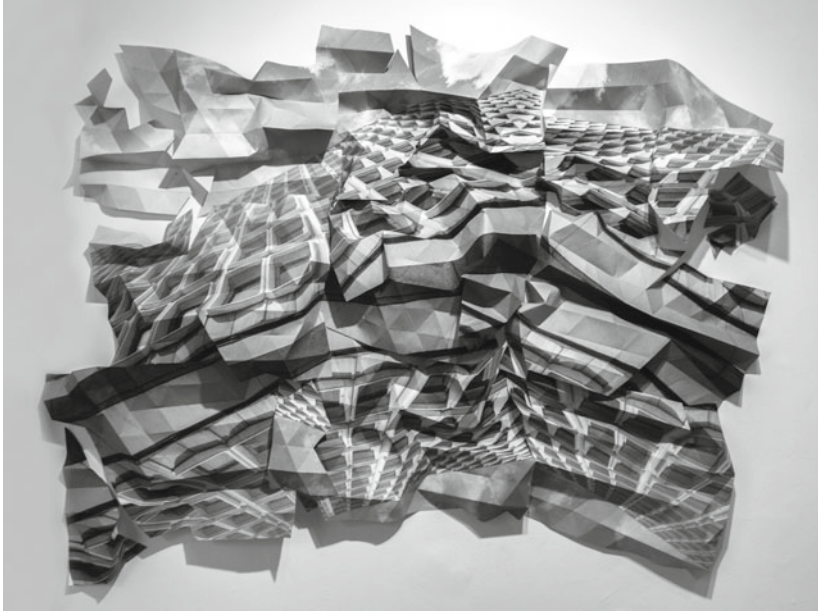
Fig. 7.2 *Utopos (Hall Building)*, folded archival pigment print by Jessica Thalmann, 48 × 62 inches, unique, 2015 (Image courtesy of the artist)

paired with gluing and re-assembly, as if one gesture was inevitably counterbalanced by the other. With this new methodology, I realized that history, time, and architectural space are as much a material to bend and fold as paper, steel, and concrete. Additionally, that the metaphor of folding could extend beyond the image itself and become a transformative tool to fold the past into the future; or by extension, to fold facades, interiors, stairwells, and hallways into one another. Thus, a single building is not one space and one place but many spaces folded into many places.[16] Architecture perceived as a single space is folded into many places.

This Deleuzian formation of space time became a liberating artistic tool throughout the series; especially in the *Utopos (Computer Engineer Working in Lab B10)*. In this work, a quasi-fictional imagining takes place beginning with an archival promotional image of a computer engineer working in a laboratory of the Hall Building during its opening in 1966. A temporal superimposition occurs as the anonymous man in

the white lab coat play-acts as my uncle. I imagine a time over twenty-five years before the Fabrikant shooting where Phoivos Ziogas sat in his office working away in this black and white pictorial space. The colourful sections of the image interrupt monochromatic space and act as a kind of rupture; moving gradually then suddenly throughout the picture plane. These abstracted colourful elements are actually archival images from the 1992 CBC News footage depicting the Fabrikant shooting and year-long subsequent trial. In essence, two temporal spaces exist in a single image, fragmenting and folding several pasts into one another. From archival document to immense monument, *Utopos (Computer Engineer Working in Lab B10)* was one of the first works to imbue personal and intergenerational memories into an indexical photograph. Though despite these attempts, the work inevitably enacts what Barthes describes as photography's dual challenge when addressing memory. He writes "not only is the Photograph never, in essence a memory, but it actually blocks memory quickly becoming a counter-memory"[17] (Fig. 7.3).

In these ways, folding as a physical and conceptual metaphor became a powerful tool to transform and render the photograph solid. The fold was a way to rid the photograph of its illusory and ephemeral qualities, add weight, give texture, and blur the boundaries between interior and exterior space. With the fold, I was now able to convey the confusing and destabilizing experience of assimilating traumatic experience within Brutalist architectural spaces.

Monuments and Traces

Like Janus, the Greek god with two faces, one looking towards the past and the other the future, my practice evolved looking forward and backward. I moved forward by experimenting with rigid materials but constantly looked to my initial interest in Brutalist architecture and trauma. My recent solo exhibition, *formless endless ruin* at Angell Gallery in May 2019, ruminates on the porous boundary between object and image; exploring the ways ruins, monuments and abandoned public spaces such as Freeway Park in Seattle or Keller Fountain in Portland embody failed utopian architectural sensibilities of Brutalism. There is a tragic incongruity seeing these once seemingly utopian public spaces becoming obsolete or slowly descending into modern ruin. Freeway Park, for example, remains one of the most compelling experiments in postwar landscape architecture by transforming the unused space above

Fig. 7.3 *Utopos (Computer Engineer Working in Lab B10)*, folded archival pigment print by Jessica Thalmann, 48 × 52 inches, unique, 2015 (Image courtesy of the artist)

and between two major highways. Designed by Lawrence Halprin's office under the supervision of Angela Danadjieva, Freeway Park was intended to "heal the scar"[18] of an Interstate bisecting the residential neighbourhood of First Hill. Its use of innovative design and integration of materials such as concrete, water, and flora were ground-breaking. Halpern brought together sharp cast-in-place concrete walls, geometric patches of grass, and an artificial waterfall that humanized this 5.2-acre space that would otherwise be dead-zone between two concrete highways. The park's most iconic feature is the cascading canyon of concrete fountains that originally emptied into a deep pool that park-goers used as a swimming hole.[19]

However, the park's status as a positive urban public space for the community changed drastically as air pollution from the highways combined with failed irrigation systems and shallow soil depth created difficult conditions for the trees, lawns, and planters to grow. Also, over the years, the park's furnishings have been heavily vandalised, public washrooms have been closed, and "concerts or other programming that the park had been designed to accommodate were either discontinued or moved to other venues within the city."[20] But one of the most important issues is the lack of coherent wayfinding creating confusing entrance and egress routes for the park. The Seattle Parks Department's report entitled *A New Vision for Freeway Park* goes on to describe,

> "As the vegetation matured and cut sightlines, the park became darker and more difficult to navigate. Seattle's growing drug-using and drug-selling population, as well as its homeless population, found a home in Freeway Park, in large part because of the Jensonia Hotel on its eastern edge. The murder of a blind and deaf homeless woman in broad daylight in 2002 spurred a city-wide effort to revitalize and reactivate Freeway Park."[21]

A lack of safety, combined with lack of maintenance, and care were all signals to the public to neglect and overlook this major urban park. It became an ironic monument to its own failure to connect neighbourhoods and bring people together. In so far as a monument, much like a photograph, is never itself; in that they are inextricably caught between their meaning and their being. Both photographs and monuments yearn to very much be the objects, places or people they depict but remain silent and inert. They often make visible what cannot be seen and erase or obscure what is solid. And in many ways their mnemonic possibilities

are troubled by their material limitations. Robert Smithson even notes that "instead of causing us to remember the past like the old monuments, the new monuments seem to cause us to forget the future."[22] These new monuments, then, fall into ruin. For architecture, something similar applies: ruins from times long past are widely appreciated and consumed as memories of worlds that no longer exist. It becomes distressing, however, when we encounter obsolete or decaying buildings or structures from our own times.[23]

With a new series of work titled *Such Places as Memories*, I began photographing natural elements like trees, vines, or plants that grew alongside these concrete monuments in Freeway Park (Fig. 7.4). Also, a more naturalistic colour palette crept into the work, which contrasted greatly with the *Utopos* series as it made evident an unconscious stylization of colour. More specifically, it became clear that colour could only be used in acidic or highly saturated tones in direct contrast to black and white. Unconsciously, my myopic vision was now opening up. Perhaps this may be a sign of opening not only pictorial space but also shedding a binary viewpoint that could restrict the image? The colours in the *Such Places as Memories* are no longer biting and acrid but are soft pinks, peaches, and blues that seem almost dusty or windswept, like the desert ruins of a future King Ozymandias. And as the palette grew more complex and refined, so did the folding technique. Instead of a repeating grid of equilateral triangles in previous works, the folding focused on the creative potential of V-pleating as a tool to create asymmetrical and visually dynamic patterns. The V-pleat itself is composed to two intersecting folds, creating an optical inversion that seems to defy material capabilities. And this *trompe l'oeil* effect is also achieved because of the change in scale and proportions of paper. Instead of cutting and gluing twelve prints to make these mural-like illusions, these smaller works are made from a single sheet of paper. This more directly corresponds to the intimate scale of my hands rather than the monumental scale of my body. The smaller scale also changes the relationship between the viewer's body and object; *Such Places as Memories* situates the viewer in a more manageable space, not engulfed in an almost confrontational fashion.

However, another strategy emerged from this material experimentation: that of a rip. In *Faults and Fractures (Freeway Park)*, a new kind of pictorial language is established almost in direct conflict with that of the fold (Fig. 7.5). The rip activates the pigmented surface of the photograph in a radically violent way, almost making visible Barthes' punctum. In this

Fig. 7.4 *Such Places as Memories*, folded archival pigment print by Jessica Thalmann, 17 × 22 inches, unique, 2019 (Image courtesy of the artist)

Fig. 7.5 *Faults and Fractures (Freeway Park)*, archival pigment print by Jessica Thalmann, 10 × 14 inches, edition of 3, 2019 (Image courtesy of the artist)

work, the torn middle section is rotated, flipped, and reinserted back into place, as if trying to blend back into the image. The horizontal lines of the cast-in-place concrete slabs act as a visual marker to connote spatial difference. Again, allowing the limited monochromatic cool palette to help differentiate between objects that are closer or further away from the camera. In this way, this slippage between image and object and being is radically interrogated; suggesting a kind of visual and emotional violence occurring within the photograph and this space. Perhaps even referencing the park's troubled history of violence, or perhaps simply referencing a kind of loss and displacement over time.

Finally, the most recent material exploration is also the most hybridized, drawing on architectural technologies and fabrication methods (including architectural model making and digital 3D rendering software). These cross-disciplinary strategies can be seen in *Elevations (Travertine)*, freestanding photo-sculpture made of paper, foam, and Bristol. This new artwork is designed and rendered in a three-dimensional digital space of 3D rendering program Rhino where a single photograph is projected onto every facet and surface of the forms. Then the 3D model is flattened in sections, printed, cut and reassembled seam by seam to create a sculpture that supports itself without a wall. The photograph used to project across each surface is taken at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, looking specifically at the travertine stone used throughout the complex. *Elevations (Travertine)* speculates on the ruins of a possible future; a monument of beige-colored, cleft-cut, textured travertine stone baked in the warm honeyed glow of the California sun. Quarried with fossilized leaves, feathers, and branches sedimented into the natural grain, this travertine stone makes solid the weight of time. At once solid and permanent, the rocks are continually cracking and shaking; like gravestones straddling a fault line (Fig. 7.6).

This new series of works is a natural extension of my previous research and aesthetic tendencies as I am examining new ways in which photography and architecture overlap, conflict and co-exist. In this work, the architectural model and folded photograph co-exist as the material limitations of both disciplines draw on John Hedjuk's lamentations on the *flatness of depth.*[24] *Elevations* postulates on what lies beyond the surface of the photograph, depicting an architecture that is ultimately made up of "parts, fragments and fabrications."[25] These photo-sculptures endeavor

Fig. 7.6 *Elevations (Travertine)*, archival pigment print on Bristol and foam by Jessica Thalmann, 42 × 48 × 18 inches, unique, 2020 (Image courtesy of the artist)

to create a photographic experience where the viewer inhabits photographic space much "like an interior, surrounded and ingested by it; and where the boundaries between what is inside and outside fade away"[26] and become indecipherable.

To cross disciplines and boundaries can be seen as a transgression or violation. In many ways, I identify as photographer interloping as an architect; using another discipline's language, set of aesthetic and conceptual values, and materials and methods to re-invent my own. Or perhaps, this artistic practice of folding paper and architectural image-making is simply an attempt to make a kind of architecture that is less haunting or less rigid; to make space for loss, grief, and the complex ways that memory and place are intrinsically interlinked.

Notes

1. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, 1st edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), 97.
2. Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 132.
3. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1982), 26.
4. Ibid., 100.
5. Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 523.
6. John Hejduk, "The Flatness of Depth," in *Judith Turner Photographs: Five Architects*, by Judith Turner, 1st edition (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1980), 3.
7. Barthes, 93.
8. Wes Colclough, "The Henry Foss Hall Building, Montreal: From Riots to Gardens in Forty Years," in *Palimpsest III: The Dialectics of Montreal's Public Spaces*, ed. Cynthia I. Hammond (Department of Art History, Concordia University, 2010), 3.
9. Morris Wolfe, "Dr. Fabrikant's Solution," in *Essays, New & Selected*, accessed February 6, 2020, http://www.grubstreetbooks.ca/essays/fabrikant.html, 10.
10. Tracey Lindeman, "A Look Back at Montreal's Race-Related 1969 Computer Riot|CBC News," *Canadian Broadcasting Company*, February 15, 2014, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/a-look-back-at-montreal-s-race-related-1969-computer-riot-1.2538765.
11. Ibid.
12. Ingrid Peritz, "Israel's Netanyahu Greeted with Violence in Montreal," *The Globe and Mail*, September 10, 2002, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/israels-netanyahu-greeted-with-violence-in-montreal/article4139011/.
13. Barthes, 92.
14. Gilles Deleuze, "The Fold," trans. Jonathan Strauss, *Yale French Studies* 80, no. Baroque Topographies: Literature/History/Philosophy (1991): 227–47.
15. Deleuze, 231.
16. Ibid., 234.
17. Barthes, 91.
18. Projects for Public Spaces, Inc., "A New Vision for Freeway Park" (Seattle Parks and Recreation Department and Freeway Park Neighborhood Association, September 2005), 7.

19. Antonio Pacheco, "Freeway Park in Seattle to Undergo Wayfinding-Focused Renovation," *The Architect's Newspaper*, July 12, 2017, sec. City Terrain, https://archpaper.com/2017/07/freeway-park-seattle-wayfinding-remodel/.
20. Alison B. Hirsch. "The Fate of Lawrence Halprin's Public Spaces: Three Case Studies." Theses (Historic Preservation), University of Pennsylvania, 2005.
21. Projects for Public Spaces, Inc., 7.
22. Peter Smithson and Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (University of California Press, 1996), 11.
23. Brian Dillon, ed., *Ruins* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011).
24. Hejduk, 2.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 3.

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