

A.D.I.E.U. (ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENTS IN ESCAPE UNITS), 1999, DIGITAL PRINT  
ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER; PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTISTS.

# The Transcendence of Transarchitecture

CURRENT PROJECTS BY KIT

• DOMINIC PETTMAN •

Over the last few years, KIT has taken something of an interventionist approach to a constellation of concerns, including architecture, urban space, technology and eschatology. They not only reflect on the ways in which these discursive sites are produced and policed, but actively trace the political vectors through which these phenomena are both validated and contested. Based in Canada, England and Australia, this revolving collective have built up a solid reputation based on conceptual installations which challenge, unsettle and inspire. Guardedly influenced by such maverick figures as Tesla, Fuller, Archigram and TeamX, KIT take critical theory firmly under their wing, without being seduced by its more common mantras.



## 1.1 NEW TOXIC HOMES

What the map cuts up, the story cuts across.

– Michel de Certeau<sup>1</sup>

There is a scene in John Woo's film, *Face Off* (1997), in which the villain Castor Troy (played at this point by John Travolta) comments on his new-found suburban situation, forced upon him in the interests of laying low *incognito*. Staring out at the generic picket-fenced lawns from his car, he makes the personal prophecy: "I'll never get a boner again." Such an observation captures a significant millennial shift in perception – where the suburbs were once seen as an idealistic

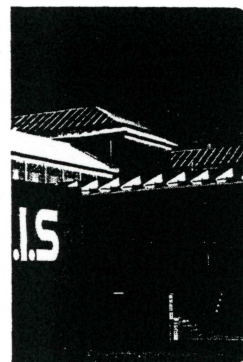
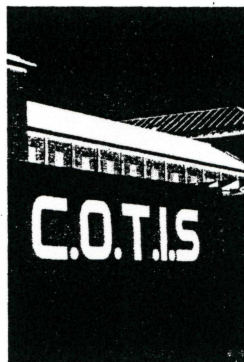
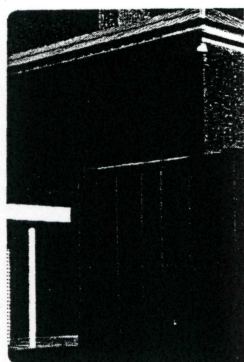
The "lots" referred to here are in fact a *faux* housing development in Ottawa's LeBreton Flats, an area so polluted by the legacy of local industry that it is now unfit for human habitation. KIT's project links a website with the real life site of LeBreton Flats, tracing a virtual connection between these two coordinates in order to emphasize the highly mediated subtext of globalizing technologies; that being, to continually colonize and delineate new frontiers.

This project asks the audience to inhabit the abstract spaces of both these sites. Rendering the required social interaction as a concrete example of the "non-place urban field," the website as property develop-

Borderline Developments – KIT's corporate persona for this project, in association with Artengine – navigate a theoryscape as disorienting, overwhelming and flexible as the metropolis itself. Taking a cue from Michel de Certeau, KIT seeks to create a tactical response to the urban environment by indulging in the "art of manipulating and enjoying it." The premise for such an endeavor questions de Certeau's suggestion that "futurology provides no theory of space,"<sup>6</sup> indeed that space itself is largely forgotten in the capitalist reification of time. By tracing the parallel exponential growth of human populations and industrial waste, *New Toxic*

*Homes* counters the entrenched logic of Taylorism with the stark fact that large sections of the planet are becoming uninhabitable. (A point which is becoming particularly pertinent in Australia due to the Pangea Corporation's proposal to use the outback as one of the world's major plutonium dumps.)

The symbolic leverage afforded by Borderline Developments creates a conceptual



C.O.T.I.S. (CULT OF THE INSERTER SEAT), 1998, INSTALLATION VIEW; PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTISTS.

compromise between rural and urban life, they now represent the topography of a creeping malaise: a kind of scrap-heap for the spirit (along with the libidinal economy through which it usually circulates). Indeed, novelist J.G. Ballard has gone so far as to locate the apocalypse itself within the double-lockup-garages and sparkling kitchens of the suburban neighborhood:

I would sum up my fear about the future in one word: *boring*. And that's my one fear: that everything has happened; nothing exciting or new or interesting is ever going to happen again. . . the future is just going to be a vast, conforming *suburb of the soul*. . . [The suburbs are] dangerous places – you're not going to get mugged walking down the street, but somebody might steal your soul. I mean that literally – your will to live.<sup>2</sup>

KIT, however, sees an end to this horror, stating that their new project – *New Toxic Homes* – "predicts the eventual doom of this century's suburban project, killed by the very cult of hurtling consumption that created it."<sup>3</sup> KIT attempts to counter the "crushing isolation of the suburban dweller" through a two-pronged interrogation of the sociopolitical foundations of rational space. "Unlike Gerald Ford's two-car utopia," they assure us, "this project proposes no fulfillment from particleboard, rather the lots are plotted as a post-Y2K landscape of desire, a panopticon of shifted powers."

ment site will ask the audience to draw out a building onto the drawing applet which would not only exist in a toxic landscape, but which would also fully utilize the toxins, feeding off a previous generation's by-products. As it is drawn onto the web it is also drawn onto the actual toxic landscape in Ottawa via a GPS system which is linked up to a fully automated robot.

Thus, with the click-and-drag of a mouse, the web-surfer can design a virtual dwelling for themselves inside a meta-virtual space (at least in the sense that actual habitation would mean certain death). In doing so, KIT carves out a zone which is equal parts Thomas Pynchon and Hakim Bey: a liminal and temporarily autonomous space open to various ironic inscriptions. In this sense KIT endeavor to fold colonial logic back onto itself through the "little tactics of the habitar" (Foucault). In an uncanny echo of Cerne Abbas and the Nazca Desert, *New Toxic Homes* traces the outline of displaced desire in a world now defined by the transarchitecture of technology and the "dislocating localizations"<sup>4</sup> of its attendant para-spaces. Such are the lines of flight, rooted firmly to the toxic earth.

## 1.2 CROSSING THE LINE

A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is *from which something begins its essential unfolding*. – Martin Heidegger<sup>5</sup>

switch-board between Benjamin's "empty homogenous time" and the real-estate agent's "empty homogenous space" (and the timely deconstruction – or should that be demolition? – of both). The digi-mechanical manipulation of an environment now classed as off-limits enables a sense of vicarious empowerment and access. The blueprints of our imaginary domiciles are simultaneously etched onto the polluted ground, and the "mattering maps" (Grossberg) of the everyday.

This project stems directly from *KIT Homes*, a 1997 installation which empowered council-estate kids who found their school threatened by real-estate tycoons. After inviting the kids to design their own ideal living spaces, these fantasy blueprints were etched onto the demolition site itself. By taking aerial photographs and displaying them in mock housing-sales offices, KIT exposed not only the ruthlessness of urban "development," but also the utopian possibilities which sprout in the interstices of voracious capital.

Such a metaphoric cartography skirts alongside the fringes of *terrain vague* – the French term used to describe the disregarded edge between locations. In an age where liminality is the norm, the hyper-hybridity of *KIT Homes* and *New Toxic Homes* blurs any



residual distinction between virtual and actual. As a consequence, architecture is left to reinvent itself in the ruins of its own rap-turous rupture:

As unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their own signifying practices something that might be considered similar to the "wandering lines" . . . drawn by the autistic children studied by F. Deligny.<sup>7</sup>

While appreciating the counter-hegemonic logic of de Certeau's capillaries, KIT sidesteps the romantic resonance of his conclusions. To play in the polluted spaces of the landscape via the Internet is to already be (at least partially) complicit with the power-grids which only cut deeper into the next millennium. Borderline Developments thereby insist that:

These leftover spaces, abandoned by the concrete realm because of inherent pollutants, uninhabitable climate or corporate speculative indecision, may be safely accessed by vision through the medium of the screen. The entire process of territorial colonization may occur in the space between the monitor and the eye; discovery, exploration, purchase, design, construction and (visual) inhabitation of the "built" product, involving only minimal physical exertion of the finger tendons at the insirgation of a downloaded consciousness.

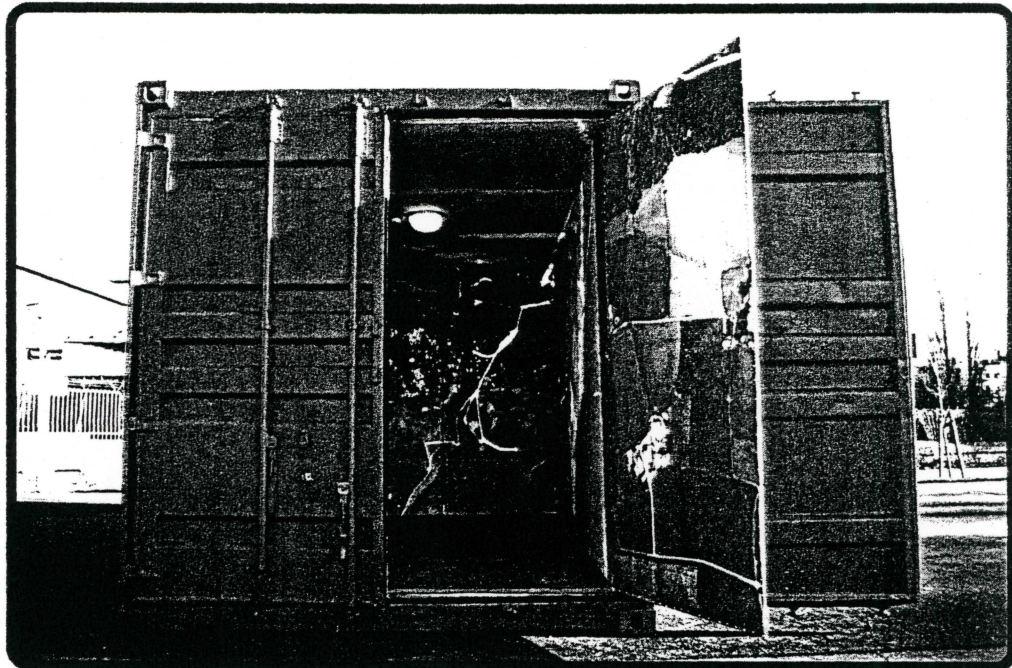
By thus extending Benjamin's *flâneur* into a zone prohibited to fragile mortals, *New Toxic Homes* initiates an intriguing dialogue with modernist modes of appropriation and resistance. Dwelling within "the blind spot in a scientific and political technology," Borderline Developments' idiosyncratic *détournement* uses the tools of alienation – the Internet, robots, indeed the logic of architecture itself – in order to clear a space for rethinking our *habitus* without becoming hostages to our own nostalgia. (Hence their insistence that their project provides a chance to escape "Martha Stewart's myth of a global preindustrial cranberry-wreathed Connecticut.")

Indeed, KIT's next project traces the movement from this *habitus*, to a more general hubris.

## 2.1 ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENTS IN ESCAPE UNITS

Ironically, the very scientific worldview and runaway technological acceleration some say have produced the spiritual vacuum and societal fragmentation that are fertile ground for millenarian beliefs are spawning a technoeschatology of their own – a theology of the ejector seat. – Mark Dery<sup>8</sup>

When standing on a rooftop in Manhattan it becomes very difficult not to be struck by an epiphany of verticality so powerful as to confound Baudrillard's basically sound observation that we live in an era of "horizontal immortality." Suddenly a form of transcendence seems possible, through the tradi-



C.O.T.I.S. (CULT OF THE INSERTER SEAT), 1998, INSTALLATION VIEW; PHOTO: COURTESY THE ARTISTS.

tional route of skyward rapture. De Certeau similarly plugs into this impulse when he writes:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to anonymous law. . . . It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.<sup>9</sup>

KIT funnels the millennial urge for rapture (a.k.a. "escape") through another pseudo-corporate venture known as ADIEU (Architectural Developments in Escape Units). Starting with Ballard's premise that "we are all looking for some kind of vertical route out of this particular concrete jungle," ADIEU harnesses the cathexis that transforms Manhattan's ubiquitous water-towers into a fleet of dormant escape pods waiting for the signal. By setting up post-ironic salesrooms in order to "sell" spaces in the Escape Units, KIT greases the psychic hinge which links suburban entropy to metropolitan panic. A planned set of infomercials pitching the benefits of these escape pods – combined with the ambiguity of their trajectory (*i.e.*, no information as to their destination after the moment of

ejection) – plays on the *Titanic* mentality which has seeped into architectural discourse through the twentieth century mandate of engineered salvation.

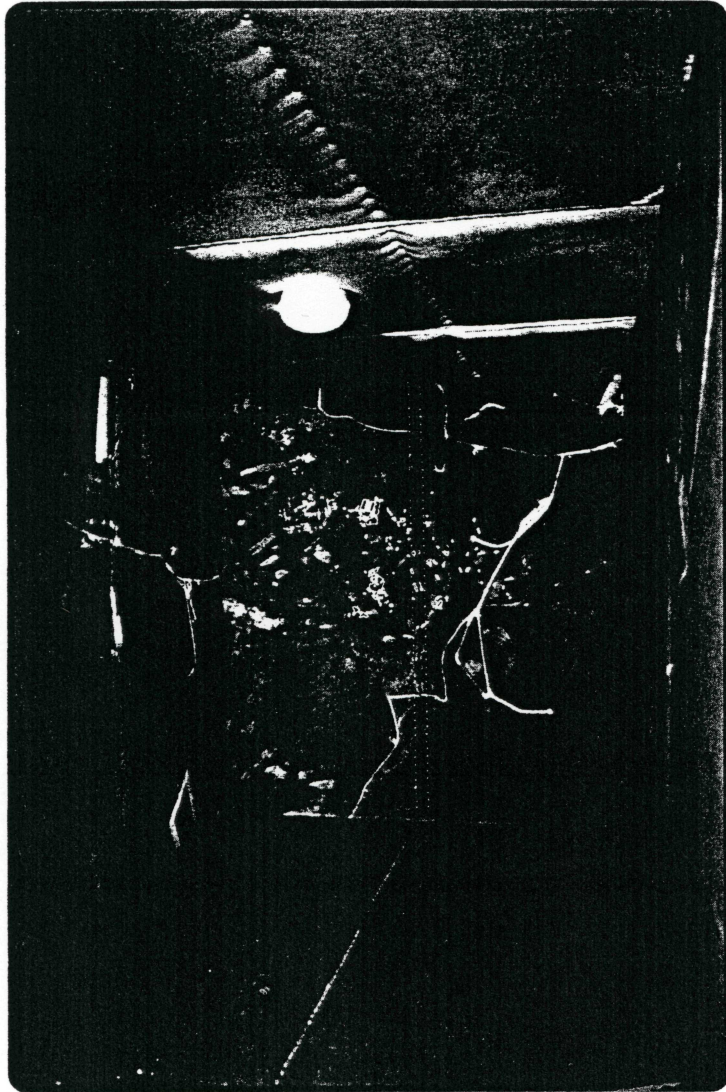
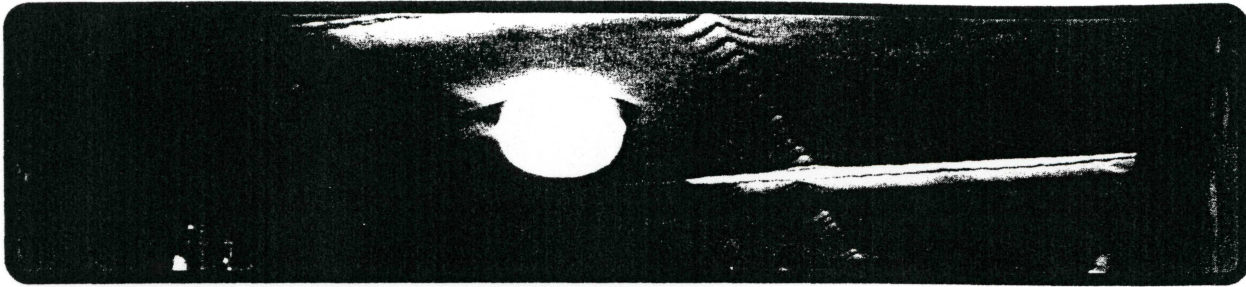
## 2.2 BLUEPRINTS FOR THE FUTURE

At the extreme limit of pain, nothing remains but the conditions of time and space. – Holderlin<sup>10</sup>

The meltdown of modernism has resulted in a Chernobyl-like pollution of our perception, so that art and architecture are now practically indistinguishable. Such a crucial historical juncture should alert us to the importance of re-inscribing "space" within the necessary delusion of agency. When entire populations are being driven from their homes because of wars fought on the very concept of territorial ownership, we would do well to remember the apocalyptic logic of an increasingly atavistic form of capital. It is perhaps a distant hope – but one we would do well to encourage – that the makeshift utopia of Gibson's Golden Gate Bridge lies dormant within the horrific squalor of the refugee camp.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps architecture, like anthropology and various other anachronistic guilds, should take this opportunity to acknowledge its impending obsolescence, and then return to the drafting board. Indeed architecture has been





C.O.T.I.S. (CULT OF THE INSERTER SEAT), 1998. INSTALLATION VIEW;  
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more effective than a hydrogen bomb in eliminating people so that structures are unburdened by constant human adaptation. Only when the sculptors of our environment value habitus over hubris will KIT's robot be able to escape the pathos of Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running* (1971), in which a lone droid – watercan in hand – tends the Amazon rainforest inside a giant glass bubble floating in space, long after the Earth itself has died.

#### NOTES

1. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988: 129.
2. J.G. Ballard quoted in Andrea Juno and V. Vale, eds., *J.G. Ballard*, San Francisco: REsearch, 1984, pp. 8, 14.
3. Borderline Developments, *Mediated Intoxication: How to Navigate with Double-Vision*, Mexico City: Virtualia, 1999, n.p. Uncited quotes by KIT below are from this source.
4. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 175.
5. Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 356.
6. De Certeau, *op cit.*, p. xxiii.
7. *Ibid.*, p. xviii.
8. Mark Dery, *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*, New York: Grove Press, 1996, p. 8.
9. De Certeau, *op cit.*, p. 92.
10. Holderlin quoted in Agamben, *op cit.*, p. 185.
11. William Gibson, *Virtual Light*, London: Penguin, 1994.

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Les projets de KIT constituent une réflexion sur la production discursive et matérielle de l'environnement bâti postmoderne et une remise en question des interactions oppressantes entre architecture, espace public et technologie. L'auteur argumente que le travail de ce collectif « lubrifie le pivot psychique qui fait le lien entre l'entropie banlieusarde et la panique métropolitaine ». Leur concentration sur les déchets industriels, sur les terrains toxiques et sur la pensée apocalyptique met au jour ce qu'il y a d'impitoyable derrière le développement urbain, et indique aussi la voie vers « les possibilités utopiques qui germent dans les interstices du capital vorace ».