

OVERGADEN.

Asbjørn Skou
A Staggering Territory
24.01 – 15.03 2015



Asbjørn Skou, *Test Site*, 2014

Notes to Accompany *A Staggering Territory*

By Carl Martin Faurby

1

Architecture is a figure of something rational. It assures us that there is a plan, a promise of a tomorrow and a better future. In a way, architecture is in this sense utopian. Yet architecture is also always colonisation: a spatial power that enforces boundaries, order and form. At its core, architecture is an instrument of organisation, rationalisation and efficiency.

A key theme in the art of Asbjørn Skou is the staggering territory between the rational and the unknown, the utopian and the dystopian. It is a territory haunted by something lurking under the surface. When I asked him what this 'something' was, he offered me a quote from Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839):

"I looked upon the scene before me – upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain (...) with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after dream of the reveler upon opium – the bitter lapse into everyday life – the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it – I paused to think – what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple

natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth."¹

2

I have had to write this text prior to the installation of Skou's exhibition at Overgaden. I am, however, familiar with the visual universe of the artist, and he has described the location of the different elements as far as he could predict it. Nonetheless, I write on the basis of my ideas about the exhibition. I imagine how collages of urban spaces and everyday places, buildings and satellite photographs cover the walls and pillars of Overgaden. How objects reminiscent of geological core samples lie on the floor, and how casts of Skou's primary tool – his HP printer – are positioned like pieces of fossilised technology in the exhibition. In my mind I see a stringent exhibition topography staggering under the weight of a bombardment of black and white imagery.

Whilst the physical space and solid sculptures conjure up a concrete place, he models the surface with images including abandoned open-plan offices and destroyed and run-down urban sites. The subjects are the results of his countless field trips in the city – his psychogeographical investigations. These investigations expose repressed aspects of the city's architecture. Archetypal spaces that are taken out of their context and transformed into symbols that seem identifiable yet anonymous. Now they exist at the level of images, as man-made yet misanthropic forms of architecture – a spatial rendition of a ruinous era.

3

Skou's meticulous, collage-like representation of commonplace architecture as almost post-apocalyptic has no documentary agenda. It is, rather, a gaze posited and invoked. A gaze that insists in order to point at a catastrophe we are such an integral part of that we are incapable of seeing it.

A key figure in Skou's practice as an artist is the cultural theorist Walter Benjamin, who writes about catastrophe as a historical phenom-

enon in the essay 'On the Concept of History' (1940). The essay includes a description of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, in which an angel with outstretched wings looks to one side, facing us with its back to the future. Benjamin saw the angel as 'the Angel of History'. History is a pile of rubble at its feet, but what we see as a chain of events, the angel sees as a single catastrophe. According to Benjamin, the Angel of History wants to stop, piece together history and show it in its entirety, but is constantly pushed forward by 'progress'.

Benjamin understood the complex relationship between the ideas of the past, present and future that constitute History. This was not true of the Nazis, who forced him into exile at the beginning of World War II.

Hitler's head architect, Albert Speer, tried to persuade Hitler to build the Third Reich's most important buildings in stone, modelled on ancient Rome. According to Speer, only stone ruins could communicate the true nature of the Thousand-Year Reich to coming civilisations. This was especially true of the Nazi party's rally grounds in Nuremberg in the 1930s. Today large sections of the grounds have been demolished due to the risk of collapse. The swastikas have been removed, and where the Führer's former audience of hundreds of thousands stood, there are now parking spaces for tourists' cars. Control of the meaning of the ruins fell to the victors, and instead of symbolising the grandeur of civilisation, they now stand as a monument to political failure and catastrophe.

Albert Speer's theory of the value of ruins as an aesthetic and ideological vessel, as well as the fate of the rally grounds, are concrete examples of how the ideals of the past, the self-perception of the present, and ideas about the future all provide a foundation for architecture. Together they create a staggering territory in constant flux. This is rarely more obvious than in the architectural rationales of an arrogant age.

4

Another key figure in Skou's art practice is the science fiction author J.G. Ballard. Whilst Bal-

lard's fictions are often set in the future, they are rooted in the present and its hopes and fears of what is to come. In other words, Ballard's science fiction reflects the collapse between what exists and the ideas surrounding it that constitute the present. One of the forms of architecture where this collapse is most obvious is the nuclear power plant. If we follow the logic behind such plants and their genesis, they almost write their own science fiction.

On February 14th 2014 an employee at Los Alamos National Laboratory insulated barrels of radioactive waste with the wrong kind of cat litter. Once the barrels had been transferred to the Waste Isolation Power Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico – the primary nuclear waste plant in the US – the cat litter reacted to the irradiated salt nitrates in the barrels. This caused a chemical reaction, causing one of the barrels to explode. The area of the explosion is now closed pending a clean-up. In 1992 WIPP and Sandia National Laboratories appointed an advisory committee consisting of science fiction authors, architects, interior designers and linguists. Their task was to develop a communication strategy warning potential intruders of the future of the dangers at the WIPP plant. In theory, the plant should be resistant to human and natural influences for a period of 10,000 years. Similar plants elsewhere in the world have set a limit of between 100,000 to 1 million years.

Passages of the report from Sandia National Laboratories read like dystopian, science fiction poetry:

“The design of the whole site itself is to be a major source of meaning, acting as a framework for other levels of communication, reinforcing and being reinforced by those other levels in a system of communication ... Put into words, it would communicate something like the following:

- This place is a message ... and part of a system of messages ... pay attention to it!
- Sending this message was important to us. We considered ourselves to be a powerful culture.
- This place is not a place of honor ... no highly esteemed deed is commemorated here ... nothing valued is here.

- What is here is dangerous and repulsive to us. This message is a warning about danger.
- The danger is in a particular location ... it increases toward a center ... the center of danger is here ... of a particular size and shape, and below us.
- The danger is still present, in your time, as it was in ours.
- The danger is to the body, and it can kill.
- The form of the danger is an emanation of energy.
- The danger is unleashed only if you substantially disturb this place physically.

This place is best shunned and left uninhabited.”²

The WIPP plant is an example of what I would classify as misanthropic architecture. It is in the same category as the architectural thinking behind playing loud, classical music at the back entrance of Copenhagen Central Station, and replacing benches in the city with ridged racks. Even though the rationales behind them are very different, to some extent they are all aimed at stopping people from using or being in the architecture (for reasons better or worse). But there is an additional invisible element present, which might only just be sensed in Skou's collages. Just as nuclear radiation cannot be seen and has to be labelled, one cannot help thinking about mould fungus, asbestos and the other poisons that have accumulated in the abandoned rooms that recur in the collages. With repetition after repetition, the exhibition creates the impression of something structural – a general, unconscious rationale in a self-destructive culture.

Carl Martin Faurby holds an MA in Modern Culture and Communication from Copenhagen University and is a curator and writer.

Translation: Jane Rowley

1. Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher', in: *The Oxford Book of Short Stories*, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 43.
2. Excerpt of the report *Expert Judgment [sic] on Markers to Deter Inadvertent Human Intrusion into the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant*, Sandia National Laboratories report SAND92-1382 / UC-721, p. F-49.

CV

Asbjørn Skou (b. 1984) graduated from Hochschule für Künste in Bremen in 2009. Recent solo projects include *Terminal Infrastructure* at Third Space in Copenhagen, *A Hole Through the Future* at Munch Gallery in New York, and *Impossible Society* at Vejle Art Museum. He has also participated in numerous group shows in Denmark and abroad, including at Westwerk in Hamburg; Gallery Steinsland Berliner in Stockholm; Athens Video Art Festival, and KØS Museum of Art in Public Spaces in Køge. In 2014 he published the artist book *UNSITE* with Konnotation publishers.

EVENTS

Thursday 5 Februar 6pm

Walk'n'Talk // *Unstable Space*

This evening, Asbjørn Skou will give an introduction to his exhibition in the company of the artist Søren Thilo Funder. They have for long had a close dialogue about their individual work as well as all sorts of strange phenomena that is related to and sometimes just touch on the visual and thematic universe of Skou. The event will be in Danish.

Thursday 26 February 6pm

Lecture // *Carsten Thau: The Residence, the Settlement and the Uncanny*

This evening, architect Carsten Thau will give a lecture taking Asbjørn Skou's exhibition as a starting point. The talk examines phenomena such as residence and re-railing, claustrophobia, the dwelling as timepiece, the metaphysics of absence, and the ruinous. These are selected headlines in a lecture that is primarily based on examples from architecture and art. The event will be in Danish.

Thursday 5 March 6pm

Performance // *Enemy of Mankind – Monologue for One Drone*

Asbjørn Skou's exhibition will temporarily be converted into a set design for a misanthropic robot theatre performed by a Parrot AR Drone 2.0. The play portrays a posthuman landscape above which a pilotless smart drone floats like a relentless, metallic bird of prey. It is looking for human faces among the architecture. The total absence of people

get the programming of the drone to form new and unforeseen circuits, and through its stammering, algorithmic train of thought bits of a story of a disastrous future is generated. The play is produced in collaboration between Asbjørn Skou (manuscript), Jacob Sikker Remin (drone pilot and technology) and Krister Moltzen & Tim Hinman (recordings and sound).

THANK YOU

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UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 27 March 2015 Overgaden presents the solo exhibitions *Timewave Zero* by Ferdinand Ahm Krag and *Mann beißt Hund* by Stine Marie Jacobsen. The exhibitions run through 17 May 2015.

This exhibition folder can be downloaded from: www.overgaden.org

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