>>>>a photo album without pictures<<<<

The Mechane.

In art and culture throughout the ages the body or structure that is in some sense floating, autonomous of its immediate environment and the physical forces active within it, makes reoccurring appearances, representing and performing different roles and concepts.

In ancient Greece, Euripedes pursued a way to exploit Archimedes' declaration of *Give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world,* on stage with the use of the *mechane.*

A player in costume befitting of a god is suspended from this simple cantilevered crane and lowered into a theatrical scene giving birth to *Deus ex Machina*. As the other characters stand on the boards and look up at this floating deity, order is delivered to the world of the play whilst simultaneously taking care of any loose ends or dead ends within the narrative.

Far into the future, after the discovery of moving pictures, modernists and entertainers employ their own *mechane* with a quite different objective.

Early avant garde film and most all early animation explored the mediums revolutionary potential to break from the drudge of the everyday with the depiction of objects that defy the parameters of gravity, logic, their own physical tolerances. The hats, cats, machines and buildings that fall in, lift, dance, spin across and out of frame are not, as with the Greeks, imposing order but testing and breaking from it.

These objects are in a constant state of flux, a spout of water from a hose becomes a walkable platform, the windows and doors of a cottage transform into a laughing face, a businessman’s tie refuses to stay still and snakes off to create abstract shapes like brush strokes on canvas.

Whether in an early Disney *Silly Symphony* or Hans Richter's *Vormittagsspuk* (1928) these free agents are tricksters, mischief makers. Through their free play the ever more mechanised and timed controls of modern life is blown a loud raspberry.

A stack of empty boxes may sit idly on the floor but are just as likely to rise up, shape shift and float to one corner of the ceiling like helium filled balloons. The downwards drag of gravity is bypassed and becomes a target for ridicule.

As cinema progressed the avant-garde was brushed aside by the rapid development of commercial technique and convention while the irreverent chaos of early animation gave way to attempts at realism and the use of conventional narrative structure. The infatuation with defying gravity and the parameters of the cliff edge, however, persisted. Exploration and exploitation of what occurs at the point of stepping over the cliff becomes a de rigueur trope in Loony Toons and similar animations that replace the free mayhem of their predecessors. In live action film the threat of the sheer edge, the peril of falling away into nothingness is so prevalent that another cinematic trope, the *cliffhanger* is developed to keep ticket buying viewers coming back for more and more.

But by now the free energy and rebellion has long given way to narratives driven by anxiety and controlled fear. The only defiance of gravity in the *cliffhanger* comes at the strong rescuing hands of a patriarchal hero; any dallying with the edge provides the basis for moralistic, cautionary tales. *Wile E Coyote* may wander off an edge as if the air beneath him were the boards of a stage but as he looks down he realizes his mistake. Then, crossing the fourth wall, he looks to the viewer for a grave second before reality sets in, leaving only a puff of dust is left as he exits downwards.

The colonization of imaginary places.

There's this myth that a young Jules Gabriel Verne (1828-1905) ran away to sea, only to return prematurely with a vow that any future exploration of distant places would occur only in his imagination. If it is true, he may have later been surprised or even frustrated to find that the trading the real world for a place wrought from sheer fantasy was a harder journey than hoped.

Verne's reoccurring theme of fantastical vessels, airships, rockets, submarines, etc. that cast-off from terra-firma to explore and occupy strange and distant lands is, at least when translated into English, never quite achieved. If Verne imagined new places and technologies, then built them from words on a page, it is as if the very words became corrupted by old colonial grudges and grievances.

Perhaps because of his satirical jibes at both the British and Americans, Verne's work has been subjected to notoriously poor translations into English. The utopian ideal of a place or vessel entirely separated from the existing or old world is thus found to be an impossibility. The baggage always travels with us. The very fabric of the ascending craft, the escape module, the synthetic islands, creations that overcome gravity and ingeniously circumvent technological limitations is corrupted with inescapable preconceptions and impediments even when they are purely imaginary. Earthbound insecurities and prejudices are stamped into every brick, panel and member like the hallmark of a manufacturers brand.

The 1961 Fitzroy English translation of Verne's *Propeller Island* (1895) the story of a fantastical man made island's voyage into the Pacific Ocean which opens with the observation "*when a journey begins badly it rarely ends well*" is riddled with such barbs and omissions. Verne's suggestion, whether based on fact, myth or pure imagination that the British had deliberately infested the island of Martinique with venomous snakes before handing it over to the French is entirely removed from the text. An obnoxious British character who is apparently considered more necessary to the plot retained but transformed into a German. In the introduction the fact that Verne had lived as a child on the island of *Île Feydeau* situated on the Loire, is presented not so much as a source of inspiration but rather the cause of the authors "childish illusion that it might be torn bodily away and swept downstream".

And so on and so on.

This doesn't stop with Verne. Throughout history, fictional floating cities have populated the clouds, the oceans and heavens. From the high fantasy of Swift's *Laputa* or Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* to Fortean accounts of sightings complete with blurry photographs and dubious claims to hard edged objective reportage.

But these spectral manifestations, like the superior mirage -- *fata morgana*, remain fantastical or equipped with potential for the miraculous, only when observed at a distance. The closer we draw towards them the more we are prone to discover the source of the illusion. Rather than new territories they are merely reflections and distortions of what existed before.

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Within the broad range science fiction appreciation it is no secret that every post-war space opera is an angst ridden polemic on the *Red Scare.* From heavy handed metaphor to vaguely disguised propaganda every fictional visit to places beyond sees the reinstating of earthly habits.

Perhaps the only way to circumvent this trap is through the use of editing, experimentation and disregard for structure and convention. Verne may have failed to craft a truly new and alien land but are we sure we can say that of Burroughs or of Borges? The use of experimental editing released the cinematic medium from the restraints of time and motion, liberated literature from syntactical cliché, narrative's trite platitudes.

Painting new realities, revolutionary alternatives, imagined utopias that continue in this may require simply brushstrokes of another order, the walking of a less trodden track.

exempli gratia: The popular fantasy movie adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) sees it's lonely young protagonist escape the mundane Kansas dustbowl for a vivid alternative locatio filled with music, sunshine and magic only to find it populated with all too familiar anxieties, pressures, the same old faces. The message delivered by the final reveal and climax is a reactionary one; the possibility of a better, more wondrous life is an illusion, a folly. Better to stick with what you know, because you will never escape it. Wherever you go it will travel with you.

There is however a short sequence where the small wooden frame home of the protagonist is drawn up into the air by a tornado. Although artefacts of the world left behind are viewed like spectres through an open window as they too fly through the air, this could be seen as the only point in this supposedly escapist fantasy where the protagonist is truly freed from the oppressive limitations of her previous life. There is nothing about her but air, potential for new beginnings and free manoeuvre.

An alternative and more enlightened edit of *The Wizard of Oz* might be to take this one and a half minute sequence and simply loop it, for the entire duration of the original film.

Why not consider your own suggestions for a revolutionary re-editing of popular fantasy movie and send it to scratch.utopia@gmail.com. Terms and conditions apply.

The art of fixing the shadow

Do the designers of ships secretly apply techniques to increase their vessels resistance to corrosion - should they sink and come to lay on the ocean bed?

For a nautical engineer concerned with posterity, the sinking of their ship on its maiden voyage could ironically be the best chance of their work remaining visible over extended periods of time. As long as it remains in one piece.

The unpredictable, notoriously pitiless oceans make conscientious archivists of maritime history curating vast museums of ghost ships scattered across the their floors. How many of these wrecks would have been long since cannibalised for their timbers, sliced up and smelted to create stock for superseding designs and technologies if they hadn't slipped beneath the surface? If they hadn't fulfilled Virilio's promise of the *integral accident*?

But for the designers and engineers this isn't a simple question of *ruin value.* To register a craft in these annals comes at a price.

Oceanographic surveys reveal submerged vessels on a regular basis. A recent search for a missing jet airliner in the Indian Ocean produced a sonar image of a 19th century iron hulled ship. The vessel appeared to be slightly distorted yet recognisable enough to accurately discern it's identity.

But is it really a ship?

Given its current depth of 3,5km beneath the surface and the fact that it is not recorded as having carried any great treasure or items of historic significance it is likely to only ever be seen in this form, a two dimensional photographic image. It will never be retrieved or investigated or experienced in any more detail.

It is not a ship, rather the image of a ship and nothing more. A latent image held in the darkness for hundred years.

Captured from such distance the sonar image, although impressive, is quite flat; as it would be if photographed through a long telescopic lens.

The deeper the vessel sinks, the longer and better preserved will it remain in the archive. But every hundred metres down is another step away from a physical existence toward that of mere image.

The Tower Trick

When a tower of playing cards is completed, say, two or three stories of carefully positioned pairs leant against each other at angles to produce a tall triangular structure, there follows a moment of delight as hands are swiftly removed; the balancing act complete.

"There!" declares the builder "Look!"

Attention is drawn to the tower for two reasons.

Firstly, the resulting structure could be said to be of interest as a variety of *card trick*. More specifically, the type where cards flip, rise from the pack or jump from one hand to another on cue. Feats that reinforce the conjurers assertion that the deck of cards is a magical device, active, perhaps even sentient and under varying degrees of control though his or her mastery and legerdemain.

The flat, paper cards are not behaving as they should. They are revealing their capability to expand, assume three dimensional form. The tower is a demonstration of dormant potential.

But as card tricks go this a simple one and easily repeatable.

The second reason that the constructor calls attention to his efforts is temporal.

The call of "Look!" is communicated with a degree of urgency, for we know upon completion of the tower, it is certain to promptly collapse.

The novelty of the tower has less to do with balance or steady handedness as it is has with the idea of a stolen moment. A sort of brief freezing of time.

The image of the tower is highly photographic. It is static moment flanked on either side by movement and change. It is a moment that will be seen and then lost. This photographic quality may seem to be the very glue that holds the cards together for that brief moment. The onlooker becomes still, taking in this image in much the same way a camera takes a photograph; the urgent call to look like the shutter's click.

Do building materials effect time?

There are stories of a man in Mexico who built himself an island from hundreds of thousands of discarded plastic bottles found floating in the sea. He gathered them into nets which he then tied together, covered with soil and planted up with rhizomatic plants. The strong lattices of root bound the soil together and created a structure stable enough for him to build a small two story house on.

In such *seasteading* projects involving the creation of private islands; mini states and principalities in offshore locations the owner/occupier would traditionally pronounce themselves *King* and go through the formal procedures of monarchy; having coinage minted, forming and declaring a constitution, etc .

According to research statistics a plastic bottle takes 500 years to decompose but in sea water this period may be greatly reduced. This means that the King would have to create a lineage prepared to constantly replace the bottles as they disintegrate.

Should future generations of soft drink manufacturers drastically reduce the volume of disposable plastic bottles produced and the seas ceased to be soup of plastic pollution (free harvestable island substrate) the King's heirs may find themselves in considerable trouble. They may discover themselves to be the first heads of state to worry about a deficiency in marine pollution.

Statistically, however, the average nation or state lasts only 158 years so it is arguably a pointless matter for the monarch to fret over.

Does the fabric from which any structure is built effect the perception of time for those living on or inside it?

Unless constantly maintained and renewed most conventional buildings and structures will, if exposed to the elements, depreciate at a rate of 15%-20% every 10 years.

An architectural model built to scale from stout card and stuck together with PVA glue should decay at a faster rate than the finished structure. Rain rolls off poured concrete impregnated with waterproofing agents far easier than it does cardboard, which deteriorates at a rate of 15%-20% every 10 days.

Would living in or around structures built from materials that decayed at such an accelerated rate effect our perception of time?

Perhaps of the longest planned lifespans in modern structural design are for warning

markers positioned around radioactive waste landfill installations. Intended to last 10,000 years, these monuments imagine a distant future where all other record of the buried poison has been lost or forgotten, along with our civilization and all memory of it. In this scenario trash outlives civilization as we know it.

Maybe these installations and their warning signs situated in the remotest corners of the planet, may turn out to be our only legacy. Will they carry within them some evidence of ourselves, some trace of memory that we are yet unaware of? Encoded into the three metre thick concrete walls, there might be some latent data or image, a message in a bottle from the present to the people of the future that we are currently unable detect or even imagine? We may never know what it was we wanted to tell them, other than to - KEEP AWAY.

“How much does your building weigh?”,

Buckminster Fuller asked a famous architect.

He believed the most useful structural process was not the conventional, rigid system of connecting load bearing members but the holding together of free floating components within a net of continuous tension.

This concept he called *tensegrity* and it became the model for his geodesic domes that were to be used for everything from housing radar equipment to living spaces in hippy communes. Fuller also famously coined the term *spaceship earth.*

During the many hundreds of hours he spent travelling the globe on jet aircraft he would stuff his shirt with sheets of newspaper and partake of polyphasic sleep. Considered one of his many innovations this simple, cheap but effective insulating technique was previously used by the homeless before the mass consumption of items packed in cardboard boxes became so prevalent the construction of cardboard shelters or cardboard cities became a possibility for those living on city streets.

It may be that on a jet, during one of his *Dymaxion* naps, warm and snug under his copy of the Wall Street Journal; Fuller first dreamt of his master project: *Cloud Nine*.

Here a spherical mile-wide mega version of the geodesic dome is filled with a populated city and sealed. As the temperature within rises, the sheer size of the sphere causes it to float up into the sky, it's own mass will carrying it upwards.

Fuller had a well earned reputation as an innovator and inventor. But *Cloud Nine* is another kind of work. It is neither invention nor innovation, but rather pure dream. The means of heating the space within the sphere, the automated screens that would regulate the influx of solar energy, the proposals for the tensegrity of the structure are details that appear to make this a planned working project but in fact they are merely

the artefacts generated by reverse engineering the dream of the flying city.

The strength of Fuller's idea is it's understanding of an innate collective desire to enter the sphere and sail away into the air. This desire appears to override any regard for the practicalities of the concept. The fact that it would seem doomed to fail for any number of reasons was conveniently brushed to one side, backed up by a few vaguely scientific assertions of why it should work. Less a battle against gravity as a battle of will.

Cantilevered Overhang

Buildings and structures might, generally, be said to respect their foundations as the underlying factor most critical to their success. The simple law that weight exerts itself downwards is recognised when building upwards, with constant attention paid to the centre of gravity, weight distribution, balance.

But what emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century were architectural motifs that seemed to want to question these *a priori* principles and approaches.

We might notice this in Corbusier's floating facades that seem to refuse to support the structure they're attached to or his reversal of convention in the roof garden but it is most apparent in the *cantilevered overhang* an architectural gesture that appears to want to break previously established rules.

If we look at the work of Frank Lloyd Wright or Lissitzky, their imitators and successors one might wonder if there isn't a kind of pompous claim of mastery over materials at work here, a sort of house built of hubris.

A first glance, balance has been abandoned both structurally and aesthetically.

The cantilevered building breaks a longstanding agreement with its foundations and through leverage exerts additional force upwards. A new sense of balance must be negotiated therein. A type of *Taijitu* groundwork that must be handled with a degree of delicacy and consideration previously non-existent in the basic practises of foundation trench digging and concrete pouring.

The cantilevered overhang appears to possess a desire to separate from its foundations; these are building that dream of flight, that steal moments and inch towards the edge. They seek the point of no return, where they must simply *jump off the cliff and learn how to make wings on the way down.*

So then, maybe not so much hubris as a utopian desire to break from the rut of old tyrannies, from of the tired politics of bricks and mortar. The cantilevered building is a like a vessel that awaits the flood, longs for the sea, the sky; it has eyes for new territories. Some buildings just don't want to stay put at all.

the house that painted its own portrait

At the outset of the construction of any new building or structure, there appears to exist an often irresistible temptation for its designers, to arrange to film the process using time lapse photography.

Like the commemorative plaque or the laying of the first foundation brick these filmic documents have become part of the ritual and convention of construction. They exist as archived document, technical study, memento and novelty.

The simple technique of *under cranking*, of shooting at a very low frame rate and then playing back at a standard frame rate, dates back to the very earliest era of motion photography yet still produces distinctive results. Time appears to compress; an hour becomes a moment, a day a matter of seconds.

The duration of the construction work folds in on itself as with little apparent effort the feverish insect-like activity of diggers, cranes, trucks adjust local topography, introduce vast amounts of material into a concentrated area and transform it into structure. Around these machines and materials, ghost figures, little more than blurs on the film surface may occasionally be seen for milliseconds as they dash about and fix and carry and weld. In these documents the actual builders, the brick layers, the plumbers, etc. remain ephemeral and receive no more recognition than is typical in any other historical record of a buildings coming into being.

What these films capture best is a relationship between location, time and materials. Flickering images capture the production of flat surfaces, the connection of two or more units, frames and sub-frames, completion of levels; yet seem oblivious to the method through which they are fixed together. The agents that bind these elements to create a larger body are often invisible, it is as if the very speed of their union, the skewed temporality of the time lapse introduces its own attractive forces that fuse them together.

About the structure puddles appear, drain, evaporate. The malleable surface of the earth is repeatedly worked, scarred and smoothed over. The quality of the surrounding light undulates incessantly, repeatedly passing between day and night, rarely is the fluid variability of natural elements depicted so vividly in a visual document.

As the edifice materialises it gradually obscures sections of previously visible topography and sky. As much as it functions as an introduced object in the frame it also operates as a mask, obscuring what was previously in view. If the surface of the structure is glass impressions of sky and environment from behind the camera are reflected and seen for the first time.

Superficially, there is little variation between time lapse construction films, they seem to repeat the same trick and rarely surprise. But on closer inspection, and after repeat viewing distinctly different aspects begin to emerge. The timing of various elements, the relationship between the structure and it's environment, the use of various techniques and processes; prefab panels, frames and armatures, the movement of cranes etc. all contribute to making each film in some way unique.

Examined in this way these corporate, private or purely documentary films could be viewed within the tradition of avant garde or experimental film. They share certain tropes with the structuralist, durational films of James Benning, the early video work of Mary Lucier and could even be compared to the popular long take films of Andy Warhol.

The architect's design for a three dimensional structure as developed and represented in series of sketches, technical drawings, models and dioramas is generally seen to be embody their creative input. A vision that manifests first itself first in thought, concept and discussion, then on paper and card as template or prototype before becoming a technical drawing and awaiting to become the real and finished object. The completed structure is the work; the finished job.

But what if this were not the case? What if we imagine an undiscovered school of architecture, it's members operating secretly or independently and unaware of one another, perhaps even unaware of their own intention?

For these architects this time lapse film or video document is the finished piece.

What if structures are being designed and built where the primary creative concern of the designer is performance? The final existence of the object, the finished structure, is secondary and adjunct to the process of its manufacture and the visual demonstration of the process?

The finished buildings become surplus to requirement and sit empty like an abandoned wild west, movie set in the desert, merely stage props sat idle after the

performance has ended and everyone has gone home.

As the time lapse construction film draws to an end, the fevered activity ceases. The building stands straight and seems perfectly still, like a theatrical actor just before taking a bow.