



José Manuel Ballester,
An Te Liu, Lynne Marsh

Hyper Spaces

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Oakville Galleries
at Centennial Square

Curated by Shannon Anderson

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One can't even know what it means to be lost in reality. For instance, it is easy to know whether you are lost or not in the Sahara desert, but to be lost in reality! This is much more complex! Since there are two realities, how can we say where we are? We are far away from simulation, we have reached substitution! I believe this is, all in the same time, a fantastic, a very scary and an extraordinary world.

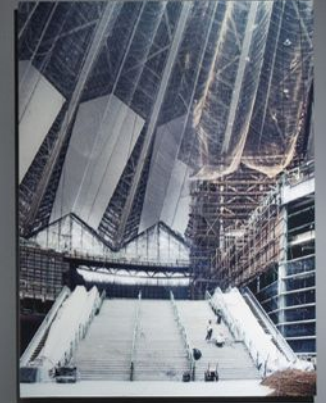
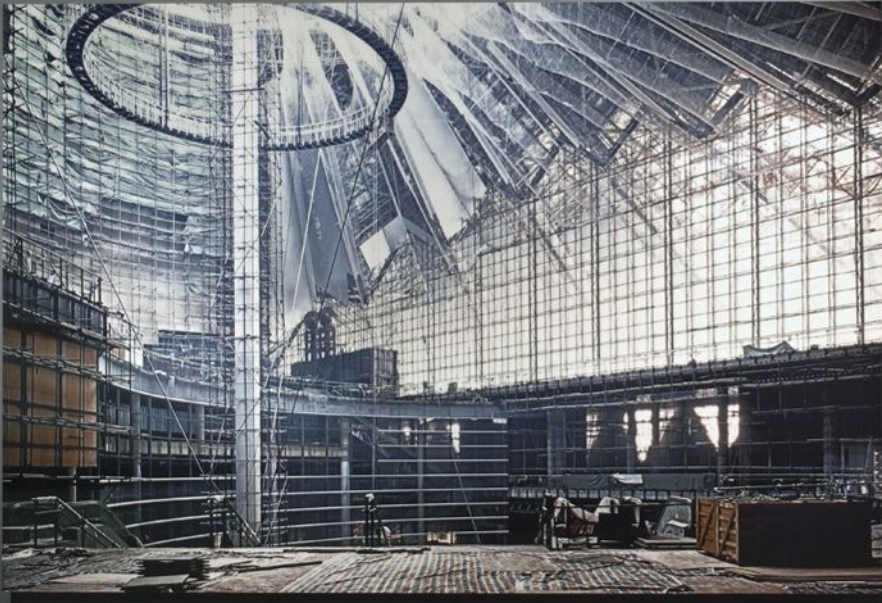
— Paul Virilio¹

If we are to believe the theories of philosophers such as Paul Virilio, we have already entered the future. A fundamental shift in how we understand the “real world” has occurred in that the idea of the virtual is all encompassing. According to Virilio, we now live in two realities, one actual and one virtual. On the one hand, we have always held the “real” at a certain distance through the mediation of our thoughts and dreams, a distance acknowledged as early as the seventeenth century by René Descartes.² On the other hand, we can point to the prevalence of the screen in our daily lives, beginning with film and television, then to the computer screen's increasing presence in our space of communication, especially as it becomes more mobile in the form of GPS readers, BlackBerry devices, and iPads. It should come as no surprise that our persistent need to shift between these two worlds—the virtual and the real—might provoke a third space, a space which lies in both of these worlds, and neither of them. We might call it hyperreality or hyperspace, an alternative realm normally attributed to science fiction, but that seems ever closer to the present moment. The sensation of being not-quite-in-this-world takes many forms: driving to a destination on autopilot, somehow navigating through the real world without really

seeing it; being confronted by endless rows of products in a big-box store; or walking along a too-quiet street in the dense fog. *Hyper Spaces* focuses on this sense that we are standing at the threshold between the everyday and the extraordinary, the bizarre, the impossible. It is this moment when we hover between the real and virtual, or the dream and the waking state that the works in this exhibition evoke. José Manuel Ballester, An Te Liu and Lynne Marsh conjure unsettled spaces, micro-worlds on the cusp of transition. In all instances, they are triggered by public architecture. Here, the body and building brush against one another, and the encounter is both strange and familiar, uncomfortable and exhilarating, and filled with tension and fascination.

José Manuel Ballester's photographs document the built environment, consistently drawing us to the edge of spaces that seem to pour out toward infinity. *Hyper Spaces* includes images from Spain, Ballester's home country, and also China and Brazil. In both *Interior Bienal 2* (2007), which documents Oscar Niemeyer's winding concrete ribbons in the São Paulo Bienal building, and *Pasillo Blanco 2* (2004), which captures the hypnotic repetition of arches in the Madrid Airport's newest terminal, Ballester's use of symmetrical, tunnel-like spaces pulls viewers in while highlighting their solitary observation of these otherwise empty spaces. In each scene, we explore grand spaces designed to accommodate large crowds. The emptiness is rendered more extreme by the large volume of these rooms, leaving us without a sense of scale to ground our perspective or a sense of narrative to ground our imagination. Instead, anything is possible in these unoccupied buildings, and they are quickly filled with our growing unease.

Cover: An Te Liu, *Fantasia in 24 Gauge (Op. 1)*, 2011 (detail), sheet metal, brass, mirrored acrylic, glass.
Image courtesy of the artist.



The largest image of Ballester's presented in *Hyper Spaces* documents Zhengzhou's Convention Centre in mid-construction. We witness the structure's outer skeleton as a lattice-like gridwork, illuminated by rays of natural light. In both *Gran Columna 2* (2005) and the smaller image of the central staircase, *Gran Escalera CBD* (2006), the images situate us at a viewing angle that is neither indoors nor outdoors, but somewhere in between, a consistent feature of Ballester's photographs.³ The structure has a near-unearthly quality, with a size that almost demands awe. A single, towering column follows the rise of the soaring ceiling, culminating in a dramatic wash of light, a scene of high theatrics that recalls both the towering arches of a gothic cathedral and a science fiction film set. Development in Zhengzhou, as in many areas of

China, is occurring at a dizzying pace. The city intrigues Ballester as a "big urban laboratory" that makes grand attempts to create what he calls, architecturally speaking, "a new empire."⁴ Ballester's words cannot help but bring to mind the megalopolis settings of futurist and post-apocalyptic film and fiction.

While in China, Ballester also photographed Zhejiang's Hangzhou Bay Bridge, another recent construction of extreme scale. At just over 35 km in length, it is currently the world's longest trans-oceanic bridge. In *Gran Puente* (2006), the road seems to hover in mid-space. Viewers have no ability to situate the scene; to the left, right, and above the highway, all we see is a blanket of cloud. The thick air could be sky or fog, but more likely this atmospheric haziness can be attributed to the pollution smog

Above: José Manuel Ballester, *Gran Columna 2*, 2005 and *Gran Escalera CBD*, 2006 (installation view), dibond mounted photographs. Image courtesy Oakville Galleries © Toni Hafkenscheid.

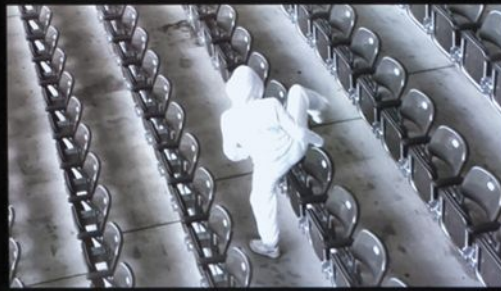


that drapes much of China. In *Gran Puente*, the air lends the scene a bizarre uncertainty, and the unknown function of the two large buses—the only traffic on this long stretch of road—takes on sinister possibilities. Curiously enough, Ballester's worlds are very real, in the sense that the photographs are subject to minimal digital manipulation, but they represent those moments when we hesitate to trust the reality in front of us.⁵ Virilio likens the moment when the real and the virtual seem to veer together to a state of intoxication, as we try to shift from “telecommunications and the electronic highway” back to the physical realm.⁶

Lynne Marsh focuses our attention on the charged atmosphere of a German sports stadium in her video installation *Stadium* (2008). Using the same kind of crane

employed for sporting events, television and film production, Marsh explores the vast building at a vertigo-inducing pace, sweeping up and across the mass grids of seats to lend us the perspective of a swooping bird. Later in the video, a single protagonist dressed completely in white works her way through the space, climbing over the seats row by row, breaking their clean rhythm. Writer Jeremy Todd notes that “her white tracksuit-like outfit and hood-covered head accentuate a gracefully athletic, youthful body that continually transgresses the ordered and objectifying architectural frame containing it. Like the science fiction suspense soundtrack that accompanies her actions, she sustains a constant tension in her on-going disruptive movements. She does not conform.”⁷

Above: José Manuel Ballester, *Pasillo Blanco 2*, 2004 and *Interior Bienal 2*, 2007 (installation view), dibond mounted photographs. Image courtesy Oakville Galleries © Toni Hafkenscheid.



Unlike Ballester, whose architectural subjects tend toward new buildings and those in construction, Marsh engages with the historic Olympiastadion (Olympic stadium) in Berlin. Built in 1936 under the reign of Hitler, the space is pregnant with history. The filming method, the curious solitary figure, and the eerie, echoing soundtrack all draw our attention to the ways in which many futuristic imaginings in science fiction cinema have taken up the architectural styles of the Third Reich. When the camera scans down the empty rows of grey seats, for instance, the shiny, curved backs recall a faceless, helmeted army much like the stormtroopers of *Star Wars* (1977). The heavy concrete base and monochromatic design of the stadium are suggestive of so many “futuristic cities,” from *Equilibrium* (2002) to *Dark City* (1998).

It is all too easy to draw æsthetic parallels between science fiction cityscapes built on dictatorial governments and the architectural legacy left by Hitler’s disastrous leadership.

Marsh employs green screen techniques and 3D modelling to further craft these scenes, beginning with an overhead view of the structure that curator Lesley Johnstone describes as “a free-floating vessel lost in space.”⁸ Through Marsh’s handling, the stadium becomes an entity pulled out of the ether, and we have no sense of life outside of its high, all-encompassing walls. She amplifies the structure’s epic scale through this sense of isolation, and we are placed somewhere between the real space of the Olympiastadion and the virtual space of a video game, where the white-clothed woman

Above: Lynne Marsh, *Stadium*, 2008 (installation view), high-definition video, 10 min. 54 sec.
Image courtesy Oakville Galleries © Toni Hafkenscheid.



Above: Lynne Marsh, *Stadium*, 2008 (video stills), high-definition video, 10 min. 54 sec.
Images courtesy the artist.



is our avatar, exploring her surroundings in search of the opening to the next level. *Stadium* creates a sense of limbo between two worlds, where the protagonist has no means of escape.

The woman's movements grow stronger toward the video's climax, when they reach a whirlwind that seems almost at war with the stadium. For a moment, everything appears to fall off-kilter, the camera swinging precariously until it rights itself and the video fades to black. The tension is left unresolved, and we learn nothing more about the world that extends beyond this intensely expansive yet suffocating environment.

At times, the futuristic worlds of science fiction films can feel a little overwrought, sharing a similar architectural language of grey, moribund, dense, windowless,

concrete structures, where the damp, cold night is omnipresent. An Te Liu picks up on the intensity and excess behind the genre in *Fantasia in 24 Gauge (Op.1)* (2011). In the same fashion as the science fiction spoof *Brazil* (1985), Liu draws attention to the inner workings of the gallery in a spirit both playful and disorienting. Air ducts are the most prominent architectural element in *Brazil*, depicted as bulky, monstrous entities that in many ways operate as a central character in the film. They are visible in nearly every scene, weaving in and out of every building, ubiquitous but ignored.

Liu draws the same absurdist attention to the pipe and air duct system running through Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, a system that is intended to operate fairly invisibly and, in the case of this gallery, is covered

Above and following page: An Te Liu, *Fantasia in 24 Gauge (Op.1)*, 2011 (detail and installation view), sheet metal, brass, mirrored acrylic, glass, 2.13 x 2.13 x 2.13 m, Images courtesy Oakville Galleries © Toni Hafkenscheid.





by a baffle system that encircles the upper ceiling. Liu has built a hanging structure that, while suggestive of a monolithic sculpture from the outside, contains a complex parallel universe of sorts when viewed from underneath. Inside, a fully-mirrored chamber creates a kaleidoscopic environment where “one experiences the air conditioning infrastructure of the gallery as an infinite and dazzling network of ducts and pipes.”⁹ The intense optical illusion is an Alice-in-Wonderland-like world where we are neither here nor there as the reflections above are infinitely fractured and multiplied. In his discussion of heterotopias, Michel Foucault uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe a state that is simultaneously real and virtual:

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there.

*Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.*¹⁰

Liu's psychedelic installation intensifies our relationship to the surrounding space, opening up an inner world that operates on an infinite scale. This is not a reflection of reality, but a new reality even more disjointed from the mirror that Foucault describes.

Above: An Te Liu, *Matter*, 2008 (installation view), closed-circuit surveillance camera, light, airborne particulates, two projection installation over 100 days. Image courtesy Oakville Galleries © Toni Hafkenscheid.



By drawing attention to the gallery's infrastructure, Liu also challenges our notion of Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square as a "modernist white cube." Such a description is a bit of a misnomer as it implies a neutral ground or *tabula rasa* for the display of art. This might be said for all "white cube" galleries, but we can focus on the particular space of Centennial Square, which has its own distinct set of curious features. The gallery's 30' ceilings makes entering the space feel as though one is walking into a cavern-like room of unexpected expanse. The darkened, black ceiling makes the space above feel drastically open but oppressively present. The room's psychological impact is easy enough to ignore, until someone like Liu draws our attention back to where we stand, giving us the opportunity to scratch our

heads at the strange grids of sound-baffles that line the upper half of the walls, or the heavy ducts that transfer air in and out of the room. These features operate on pure function, intended to be invisible parts of our built environment. But Liu reminds us of their strange presence. "This piece plays with the everyday infrastructure," he says, "multiplying, reordering and aestheticizing it in an unnatural way."¹¹

Liu's *Matter* (2008) continues this hyper examination of our surroundings, but this time, by focusing on the very air we breathe. Two projections display small white objects skating across the screens in a curious dance, darting in and out of view. At this scale, the images look equally like a microscopic or macroscopic view of our world; they suggest the appearance of galaxies viewed

Above: An Te Liu, *Matter*, 2008 (installation view), closed-circuit surveillance camera, light, airborne particulates, two projection installation over 100 days. Image courtesy Oakville Galleries © Toni Hafkenscheid.

from a Hubble telescope just as readily as organisms viewed through an electron microscope. In reality, they are enlargements of the particulate matter circulating in the air inside the gallery, projected at a large scale. This is the unseen matter that we breathe in and out of our lungs as we wander through this room and experience these artworks. Liu focuses on “our evolving relationship to hygiene and comfort via environmental technologies and controls.”¹² Being able to witness the bits of matter that permeate the air around us challenges our assumptions about these “pure” and healthy environments.

Scale becomes a strange and relative measuring device in this situation, and from the point at which we stand, we can move forward or backward in any direction. We are equally small specs when viewed on a massive scale and monstrous beings from a microscopic perspective. *Matter* produces a sense of vertigo as we find ourselves floating within these two extremes, without any absolute sense of where we can situate ourselves when infinity stretches out from either direction. We are floating in a world where there is nothing to anchor us: a hyperspace, so to speak.

Each of the three artists in *Hyper Spaces* fabricates a view of reality where nothing is certain, reminding us of the psychological impact of all public architecture, however muted the desired effect. They conjure the space where the ground is no longer quite stable at our feet, and our surroundings no longer feel quite right. As Virilio claims, and as we all no doubt regularly feel, we are living with stereoscopy: two realities between which we

are constantly switching back and forth. The barriers cannot remain distinct, and the two often overlap, creating moments where we start to view the “real” world through virtual-tinted glasses. At those moments, it feels as though “up” could just as easily be “down” and who are we to say if an alternate reality lies just to the side of where we stand? “I don’t think we can even imagine what it may provoke in people’s minds and in society to live constantly with this ‘stereo-reality,’” Virilio says. “It is absolutely without precedent.”¹³

¹ Paul Virilio, interview by Louise Wilson, “Cyberwar, God and Television: Interview with Paul Virilio,” *CTheory*, October 21, 1994, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=62>. ² René Descartes, *Mediations and other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (London: Penguin, 2000). ³ Barbara Rose has made this same observation. See Barbara Rose, “In the Mind’s Eye,” *José Manuel Ballester* (Toronto and New York: Nicholas Metivier Gallery and Charles Cowles Gallery, 2007), n.p. ⁴ José Manuel Ballester, email to the author, January 11, 2011. ⁵ José Manuel Ballester, email to the author, January 11, 2011. ⁶ Paul Virilio, interview by Jérôme Sans, “Game of Love and Chance: A Discussion with Paul Virilio,” *Watson Institute*, n.d., <http://www.watsoninstitute.org/infopeace/vy2k/sans.cfm>. ⁷ Jeremy Todd, “What are we now? On *Stadium* and *Vox Pop*,” *Blackflash*, Fall 2009, 53. ⁸ Lesley Johnstone, “Figure, Architecture, Camera: The Strategic Modes of Lynne Marsh,” *Lynne Marsh* (Montréal and Rimouski: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal and Musée régional de Rimouski, 2008), 55. ⁹ An Te Liu, Toronto Arts Council grant application, 2010 Visual Arts Program. ¹⁰ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 24. ¹¹ An Te Liu, telephone discussion with the author, January 4, 2011. ¹² Liu, Toronto Arts Council grant application. ¹³ Virilio, interview with Jérôme Sans.