

J O H A N N E S B I R R I N G E R

THEATRE, THEORY,  
POSTMODERNISM

*Indiana University Press • Bloomington and Indianapolis*

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藏书章

THEATRE, THEORY,  
POSTMODERNISM

*Indiana University Press • Bloomington and Indianapolis*

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*For Dee Anna*

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Today, the virtues of exhaustion are caused by  
the exhaustion of the land.  
Bertolt Brecht, *Galileo*

The concept of progress is to be grounded in  
the idea of the catastrophe.  
That things 'just go on' is the catastrophe.  
It is not that which is approaching but  
that which is.  
Walter Benjamin, *Central Park*

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## Preface

The following essays are a series of attempts: *Versuche* in the sense in which Brecht understood such writings as political/aesthetic experiments reflecting on the institutions and social conditions that provoke new artistic practices.

On the one hand, they attempt to come to terms with recent and current trends in the theatre and the performing arts. As I am unable to formulate a coherent and comprehensive overview of the many ways in which my understanding of theatre and performance has changed over these last ten years I have spent moving back and forth between Europe and the United States, I propose at least to share some of the ambivalent fascination I experience in thinking of theatre, and writing for the theatre. I dare to do this at a time when many among us would argue that theatre no longer has any cultural significance and is too marginal or exhausted to intervene in contemporary cultural-political debates.

But to describe it as marginal may not be so accurate. Consider for example, the highly subsidized and ponderously visible state theatre system in West Germany or the confusing proliferation of spectacles and images produced on the stages of the much larger and more pluralistic American performance industry. That practitioners and audiences perceive theatre exhausted may instead point to their refusal to acknowledge the increasingly complex relationship which has evolved between theatre/art practice (a theatre that can no longer be considered separate or autonomous from the other arts), a wide spectrum of contemporary speculative thought and theory, and the general cultural formation that has come to be named "postmodern", more and more unavoidably.

On the other hand, then, these essays seek to hold on to writing for and thinking through theatre precisely by recognizing the accelerating effect of recent theories of postmodernity and its modes of cultural reproduction, an effect through which the historical reality of a performance event, always already precariously ephemeral and subject to the vicissitudes of production and reception, is further diminished and rendered anachronistic within the postmodern consciousness of a technological society.

One could argue that the theatre itself, regardless of whether we now think of play-writing, theatre training or scholarship, dramatic performance or experimental forms of theatre scenography and performance art,

has diminished its historical consciousness because it seems not to live within the image-ridden and hysterical world of postmodern consumer capitalism, at least not to the extent that it would have hastened to theorize its institutional status or the aesthetic and political ideas/strategies with which it wants to participate in the cultural struggle over images, values, or material conditions that shape our perceptions of a constantly mediated reality.

There is something charming about the theatre's resistance to being on the cutting edge of the discourses that have affected the other arts and cultural practices such as film, photography, television, advertising, architecture, popular music, literary theory, or the human sciences. But theatre's inertia is actually rather incapacitating since it prevents it from expanding, revising, and revisioning the theatrical knowledge derived from those earlier interventions into the order of representation (by, say, Brecht, Meyerhold, Artaud, Grotowski) that may have prepared both the radical energies of the 1960s and 1970s (an era marked as much by the nomadic Living Theatre or the "social sculptures" of Joseph Beuys as by the focused, formalist innovations of Robert Wilson) as well as the exhaustion of the "order" and of the avant-garde in the 1980s.

Today we are not sure whether Brecht or Beuys or Wilson could be considered a model or an art practice that offers a way of rethinking and analyzing the social and cultural conditions under which a dominant aesthetics of representation can be challenged in an act of performance that reinscribes the margins between theory and practice. Among actors, directors, and writers there is very little discussion about what a "postmodern theatre" might be, and we notice the same reluctance among drama critics and scholars who continue to write about a world of texts and performances that seems largely untouched by the debates on the politics of postmodernism or on the technological transformation of the late modern culture.

What is at stake in this transformation is neither a political nor an aesthetic problem that I would want to see reduced to a definition or a new model of postmodern performance. And certainly not to one that extends the male European-American lineage of models that seems safely embedded in dominant historical conceptions of the twentieth-century Western avant-garde (from futurism and Dada to current multimedia performance). Rather, in facing the future of theatre we are already facing conditions in which the very notion of a dominant or unified culture, a traditional notion traceable back to historical idealizations of the theatre of the Athenian *polis*, will become obsolete by the changing realities of our fundamentally multicultural, multilingual, and socially polarized societies.

In view of these realities, we must reinvent our cultural topographies and engage in collaborative intercultural art, media, and research projects. And in view of a "postmodern theatre," we need to accommodate the significant impact of women's performances, both on the stage and on feminist critical practices seeking to analyze cultural productions in regard

to their constructions of identity, gender, race, and sexual preference. My own preferences as an interpreter are shifting. I have not succeeded, I hope, in determining a coherent model for experimental performance that could safely distinguish between male-identified realist or high-technological theatre and woman-identified ritual body art or performance art. Such lines of demarcation will be crossed in a more heterogeneous, repeated movement between positions identified, say, with Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson, or Karen Finley. The challenge I see in this movement—a movement always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable and without beginning or end (as in the old drama)—will perhaps be formulated most clearly in the middle of this book, when I return to the German Tanztheater of Pina Bausch.

Toward the end, in "The Postmodern Body in Performance," I arrive at the very problematic question of how the contemporary body appears, not as a figure of dramatic theatre or performance theory (Artaud, Grotowski) but in new forms of performance art and multimedia performance that either foreground or displace the body in ways similar to its construction in the visual media, in music television, in aerobics and body building, and the promotional industries of fashion and advertising. In discussing the work of Laurie Anderson, Robert Wilson, John Jesurun and Karen Finley, I am therefore equally drawn to other models of posing the body (Calvin Klein ads, Madonna videos) because such models connect imaging technologies and artistic practices. In fact, in this open-ended essay I come closest to recognizing video as the paradigmatic postmodern medium indicating changes in cultural production that are not merely changes in technology but in aesthetic models and ideologies of the subject as well. The body is the site of these changes, and the dematerializing and dehumanizing effects of postmodern technologies provide perhaps the strongest argument for the reinvention of theatrical consciousness based on the experience of the dispossessed body. Linking this dispossession to a politics of resistance and revolution, the book explores the current interaction of cultures (in theatre anthropology and intercultural performance) through its own dialectical frame of reference, which brings the postmodern theatre of surfaces (Robert Wilson and the various avant-garde opera and dance concerts I discuss in chapters 8, 9, and 10) into collision with those practices in dance and performance art that refuse to neutralize and technologize the human body or to edit out its history. The erasure of specific histories, traditions, and cultural differences promoted by the globalizing spectacles of postmodern capitalism is one of my main concerns in chapter 10, which is about Wilson's *the CIVIL warS* and the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival, and in chapter 7, "Theatre Anthropology after Brecht," in which I examine how Brecht's Marxist "learning play" model might have influenced the politics of European theatre research (Eugenio Barba) or at least helped me to approach the current dialogue between Western performance traditions and the Asian and Latin American traditions. In resorting to Brecht's understanding of the role of theatre as a

social learning process, I try to account for the deeply ambivalent and provocative pessimism in the recent work of East German playwright Heiner Müller. Chapter 2, "Medea: Landscapes Beyond History," explores Müller's postrevolutionary plays (or "synthetic fragments," as he calls them) not only against the background of the catastrophic history of the two Germanys but also in reference to the seductive ease with which they have become assimilated into Robert Wilson's architectural theatre scenography. The couple Müller/Wilson is one of the stumbling blocks in this book, since it exemplifies both the confluences between German and American experimental performance theatre in the 1970s and 1980s and the divorce between German dance-theatre and American postmodern dance that I discuss in chapter 6, "Pina Bausch: Dancing across Borders."

The same dialectic is at work in the museum exhibitions that are the subject of chapter 5, "Overexposure: Sites of Postmodern Media." The exiled Hungarian theatre company Squat plays an intermediary role in this chapter, which seeks to read Lyotard's staging of "Les Immatériaux" (Centre Pompidou) against the Whitney Museum's spectacular display of "Image World: Art and Media Culture." In a sense, this reading also reflects the transatlantic direction in which postmodern theories have traveled from France to the United States. In the course of tracing this movement of theory, I repeatedly arrive at the "America" projected in the ironically nihilistic sociological writings of Baudrillard. Without sharing Baudrillard's nihilism, I find my experience divided between my European commitment to a political and philosophical understanding of theatre, and my American interpretation of the expanding power of postmodern consumer capitalism and the spectacle of a culture dominated by the new electronic media. In my search for a theatre practice that has not been subsumed or marginalized by this culture, I encounter the "archaeological" work of Herbert Blau. The theoretical writings and experimental stagings of his KRAKEN company present a powerful model of *thinking through the theatre*. Though the impact of Blau's deconstruction of *Hamlet* on the American theatre may be minimal, the substance and depth of his thoughts create an important counterpoint to the on-going spectacle of postmodern art and commercial entertainment. In one sense, Blau's intellectual emphasis on *Hamlet* is a deliberate anachronism, and I discuss it in chapter 3, "Tracing the Ghosts in the Theatre," by interpolating the radical self-critique of Müller's *Hamlet-machine* and by adding a commentary on the most significant postmodern *Hamlet* production in an institutional theatre—chapter 4: "Self-Consuming Artifact: *Hamlet* in West Berlin". In order to recover the thought of theatre and its critical connection to postmodern culture, the long, introductory essay in chapter 1 sets the scene for the various leitmotifs of postmodernist philosophy and ideology that I discover in the contemporary space of culture. Before I even mention a particular theatre work or performance art event, I therefore concentrate, first of all, on architecture, urban space, and the visual mediation of late capitalist culture in order to explore the pervasive social and economic displacements that underlie this mediation. My

own experience of the dispersion of local identity in the postmodern city leads me to see the city itself as the ultimate site of postmodernist theoretical debates, and I explain why this site became the focus of my own current theatre project, *Invisible Cities*.

Before I locate the emergence of postmodern performance from this space, I draw attention to Joseph Beuys's concept of "social sculpture" as a process of social transformation, to the intersection of cultural politics and theatre (in the case of Fassbinder's *Garbage, the City and Death*, a play halted by the city for/against which it was written), and to the situationist interventions of Krzysztof Wodiczko, whose "counter-projections" directly expose the architectural façades of late capitalist culture. These intersections help me to set the historical stage for the conjunction of theatre and postmodern culture that I will return to throughout the other ten chapters.

The essays that follow do not present a thesis but rather explore different ways of looking at contemporary modes of performance. At the same time they will bring some of the postmodernism debates into the focus of the theatre in an effort to reappropriate and reposition the theatrical metaphors that have been so widely used by other cultural discourses and practices. Perhaps inevitably, such an effort to theorize the historical conditions of contemporary theatre can only be tentative. If there is a limit to the theory and the future of theatre, however, it is most certainly related to the radical impoverishment of postmodern culture and to the "exhaustion of the land."

Having said this, I admit to the limitations of a book written by a male European displaced into the borderland of Texas. His struggle against the exhaustion of European-American culture may be self-contradictory insofar as it is waged with the languages and concepts it has internalized. A different language will become necessary, as Gloria Anzaldúa has suggested in her book on "borderlands," if we want to reverse the progress of history that has brought us to the current crisis. More realistically, perhaps we can acknowledge the crisis at the juncture of cultures as our common ground. *La frontera es lo único que compartimos.*

Houston, Texas  
January 1990

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Much of my thinking in these essays developed in response to performances and exhibitions I saw while traveling in search for a practice. While my critical debts will become obvious, I owe special thanks to those colleagues and practitioners who have encouraged my search either directly or indirectly. I would like to mention Robert Corrigan, Julian Olf, Herbert Blau, Michael Oppitz, Bonnie Marranca, Gautam Dasgupta, Rustom Bharucha, Heiner Weidmann, Frank Leimbach, Renato and Iris Miceli, Dawn Kramer, and Attilio Caffarena. Attilio's criticism was vital at a point when I lost faith in the theatre as well as in role of the director, and I also wish to thank Randal Davis, Cristina DeGennaro, Mya K. Myint, Laura Steckler, and Eoghan Ryan for their help in this transitional period. When I began to focus on the praxis of performance, I realized how much I had been moved, on a deeply personal level, by the experience of my frequent encounters with Pina Bausch and the dancers of her company. Working through this experience, I need to thank all the actors, dancers, and visual/performance artists who have collaborated with me over the past few years. Their generous encouragement has helped me to accept the painful loss that binds me to Houston.

The photographs used in the book are reprinted with the permission of the artists whose work I have reviewed. I am grateful to them. Several photographers and art galleries/museums have been very generous in allowing me to use their photographs. I regret that in a few instances the photographers are anonymous and I was unable to give proper credit to their work.

I also wish to thank the readers and editors of Indiana University Press for their expert advice and their trust in the frequently nomadic style and logic of my writing.



**THEATRE, THEORY,  
POSTMODERNISM**

## 1 THE POSTMODERN SCENE

### *Exhausted Land/Exhausted Theory*

. . . the mental desert form, which is the purified form of social desertion, expands visibly. Disaffection finds its purified form in the barrenness of speed. The inhumanity of our late, asocial, superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic and ecstatic form here. For the desert is no more than that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance.

Baudrillard, *America*

Postmodernism has not yet taken place, although it is talked about as if it were a central theme of contemporary theory and cultural practice. We cannot dispute the term's use for a variety of cultural forms, from art to advertising or from technology to everyday lifestyles. The inflationary use of the term renders it sufficiently abstract and powerful, even though the fascination for it, along with all the polemical debates, seems largely due to the uncertainty we experience in our abstract relations to the changes in our time, that is, our *imaginary* relation to time, to what is contemporary.

I grew up in West Germany shortly after World War II, and at that

time I already found myself in a strange vacuum: the scenario of an unexplored and unspoken division between generations, one unwilling to confront its past and the other too young to understand why everything had to be new and different. The "new" social and economic organization, with its very palpable and visible progress of capitalist modernization, was to be called "reconstruction." The dead had been buried, the pile of debris cleared away, and the scars mostly covered over. I remember that when I was barely ten years old, my parents took me to the opera (Mozart's *Don Giovanni*). The building had been restored after the bombing; the huge crystal chandelier, a gift from Hitler, still hung from the ceiling. Later that year I saw my first American movie with Marilyn Monroe; it was the year in which John F. Kennedy proclaimed that he was a Berliner too.

By that time, other divisions had become more graphic and implacable. The ideological border between the capitalist world and the socialist world developed its Manichean architecture of entrenchment, and the cold war established its stone wall that cut time into two halves. It seemed a peculiarly fitting historical irony that the Wall, a belated symbol of an historical juncture and the separation of political and philosophical conceptions of history, cut its way straight through Germany and the middle of the Old World. On either side of this symbolic Wall (perhaps it could be called a monument) the revolution, and with it the entire tradition of modern rationality handed down from the Enlightenment, led its post-humous existence.

The Berlin Wall with its borderline, a fortified no-man's land that encloses and doubles the condition of the city, can be seen as a complex image of our postmodernity. The Wall constructs boundaries of difference but also contorts space in a way that postpones a clear territorial or categorical "break" as long as the city remains the east of the west and the west of the east. Thus it is also an image of the recent past and of the conjuncture of complementary fictions that refer back both to the bourgeois and the Marxist conceptions of the "project of modernity," as it has been called by the critical theorists of the dialectic of enlightenment. Postmodernism in this sense could be called a retrospective process in which a myth or imaginary construction as a mode of cultural (re)production is tied to the physiognomy of modern industrial society and to the historical trajectory of its political and aesthetic transformations. It is the trajectory of an historical tragedy. For somebody growing up in this divided postwar country, the new growth and prosperity of the one part of a defeated nation was always linked to the memory of its suppressed legacy: Prussian militarism, the failure of the Weimar Republic, Nazi fascism, and the Holocaust. The economic success of West Germany's capitalist modernization will determine the future of the other part now that East Germany's authoritarian party regime and its real existing socialism have collapsed. The disappearance of the Wall after the November revolution of 1989 will only intensify the problems of coming to terms with the double past. At this early point in 1990 one cannot foresee the results of a rapid

process of political and economic unification. But if one walks across the no-man's land of Berlin's border and watches the removal of the Wall, one already knows that it will remain a part of the collective psychopathology. Christa Wolf, in her newly published book *Was bleibt*, was the first East German writer to pose the question of the "remainder," of the residue of guilt and self-oppression, and she was immediately attacked for posing it. The question, however, will not go away.

As I continue with this introduction, which is not about theatre, I realize that I am only interested in writing about the theatre and its condition within the postmodern scene because I appreciate its absolute dependence on the past (the history of drama and the cultural history of interpretation mediated through techniques of acting) as well as its structural dependence on the current institutions and conventions of representation. This, I believe, has forced the theatre into a contradictory space and gives it a certain ghostliness within the cultural formations of modern societies predicated on technical and scientific progress.

More precisely, I am interested in the disappearance of theatre from the evolving debates on, and the theories of, postmodern art and culture, especially as these theories no longer debate the possibility of revolutionary change in the West. In considering contemporary theatre within the confluence of political neoconservatism and the phenomenon of postmodernism in the 1980s, as well as of the pessimistic, terminal pronouncements of the Left on the "obsolescence of the avant-garde,"<sup>1</sup> the "end of humanism,"<sup>2</sup> and the "end of art theory"<sup>3</sup> during the same years, I want to explore the specific boundaries (implicit in the idea of the *end of history*) that relate to the theatre.

Since my earliest encounters with theatre performance (mostly the classical repertoire of Greek plays, Shakespeare, Goethe, Schiller, Ibsen, and Chekhov, which in the later 1960s was presented in "revisionist" stagings), I had always thought of theatre artists as historians, archaeologists, and time travelers. Or, borrowing a comic figure from Shakespearean tragedy, they might perhaps be called "grave-diggers," working on the edge of the two extremes of destruction and preservation, throwing up the skulls of history and transforming them. Each rehearsal, each night of performance is a new beginning that preserves what comes back, each act an affirmation (which makes it institutional) whose consequences cannot be "saved" or guaranteed. When I spoke of the contradictory space of theatre, I meant to refer to the different realities—the simultaneity of the unsimultaneous—present in theatre productions that take place *in* time and *through* time, on either side of the existing or invisible wall.<sup>4</sup> Unlike literature, film, painting, or the popular mass media, the theatre must show its physical, bodily existence and its "liveness," the volatile progress of its human labor, the contingencies of the space in which it labors, and its schizophrenic awareness of its own unreality.

This awareness results from the temporal structure of performance: the work on stage and the process of its creation are suspended and then

disappear. This suspension of the time-space or "world" of performance divides the theatre from itself. It cannot hold on to the reality it imagines and produces, and the lived body of work becomes a fiction the moment it vanishes. What remains is the "hidden scene of production" (Marx), not so much the functional normality of the conceptual and technical processes of rehearsal (beginning again) as rather the unconsciously produced image the theatre has of itself and conveys to its culture.

Theatre's self-image permutates under the pressures of experience, the changing focus of cultural and art critical discourse, and the exigencies of the political economy of which the theatre is a part. There will be different images within the same space of a culture, and they will differ again from those produced in other cultural spaces of the global west/east schism. To invoke the notion of difference is troublesome today, because the old languages of cultural and political discussion seem to be falling by the wayside. The classical modernist dichotomies of subject/object, high/low, left/right, mainstream/oppositional, rational/irrational, elite/popular, and so forth, become useless in the face of the phantasmagoric "global American postmodernist culture."<sup>5</sup> The distorted expressions of this phantasmagoria are appearing everywhere in the Western centers of advanced capitalism, where our abstract vision of the world is shaped by a massive mediation of products/commodities. When Christopher Columbus left Italy and Spain some five hundred years ago to discover the New World, "America" was an image of the future, of distance. That distance has collapsed. We may not have a future anymore, and certainly the idea of a global American postmodernist culture, with Universal Studios and Disneyland as late museums of frontier's end, suggests a profoundly anti-theatrical conception of empty space.

A global culture would be a culture without a perspective. We would be trapped in a perpetual present, in the same space, circulating the same cultural products over and over. The way in which a new "cultural logic" of the "postmodern condition" is invoked by the founding texts of postmodern debate<sup>6</sup> makes one wonder what critical perspective is claimed by theories that speak about the inability of positioning ourselves in an homogenous cultural space. They may not have found a critical perspective because the dissolute phenomenon of contemporary postmodernisms is not yet fully visualized.

But the questions that are asked, if we were indeed at the end of history, are well worth asking as we try to cultivate our complex cultural landscapes. A lot of examples readily come to mind. For instance, the contemporary city, such as Dallas or New York, is perhaps the most complex spatial figure of our time. The fragmented surfaces and the delirious, discontinuous fabric of its sights, signs, and sounds are infinitely difficult to describe. If we analyzed them in terms of the changes, redevelopment, destruction, and gentrification that have occurred over the years since, say, the presumed spatial revolutions of modernist architecture, the dreams of the Modern Movement would no longer be legible

between today's broken sightlines. The visions of Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, Taut et al. would disappear among the gigantic emblems of economic power—the gold, silver, or emerald green glass box skyscrapers of banks, oil companies, or multinational corporations—and the overcrowded freeways, crumbling factories, cheap convenient stores, and decaying urban ghettos.

The dehumanizing, dystopian reality of the contemporary city has been imaginatively portrayed in cynical futuristic films such as *Blade Runner* or *Repo Man* that seem to mock the phallic and mythic architectonics of industrial technology in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. The reflecting mirror facades and glazed transparencies of postmodern architecture could refer back to the other reality of a provocative specular scene of desecuring trompe l'oeil effects and disembodied spaces that announce new immaterialities and imaginary urban perspectives while their stylishness merely accentuates the disproportion between such design and the total crisis of political, social, or ecological responsibility in urban planning. The first discussions about postmodernist "free styles" (Charles Jencks) began in the late 1960s among architects little concerned with the intricacies of urban planning or the politics of strategic destruction and reconstruction played out on the unstable infrastructures of the city's collective body. They were intent on superseding the transparent functionalism of International Style Modernism with their own brand of a self-assertive, stylistic eclecticism. With the most symbol-laden public structures of corporate towers, convention halls, museums, hotels, and super malls, they created spectacular images of themselves. Architects such as Philip Johnson, Michael Graves, Robert Stern, and Paolo Portoghesi now appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Their bold buildings, with their histrionic facades and picturesque effects, not only *were* sublimely useless but pretended to be *fashionably* so.

Such stylishness also pretends to be free from the burden of historical reflection and present repercussions of inner city crises. The low comedies of public notoriety (as in the case of Johnson's Chippendale ATT Building in New York or Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans) were never questioned. Did the fashionable posturing beyond failed utopian aspirations of the functionalist austerity of High Modernism express a new "cultural logic" or an embarrassing disarray of values or both? One perhaps needs to look more critically at the equation between postmodernism and the conditions of a degraded pluralism under late capitalism than is suggested by Fredric Jameson's speculative insight and self-incorporation into the "originality of postmodern space."<sup>7</sup>

I am sympathetic, since I stumbled into the same confusion at the same MLA conference in Los Angeles in 1982. I am less inclined, however, to follow Jameson's elaboration on John Portman's Los Angeles Bonaventure Hotel. He assumes the spatial dislocations and the bizarre and bewildering perceptual teasing of this hotel's interior need to be considered a particularly fascinating postmodern architectural analogue to

the ecstatic dispersions (of the body, of thought, of images, of capital, commodities, values) experienced at the edge of our late culture. For Jameson, it is the edge of a panic that keeps us immersed in a "hyperreality" that he links to the "great global multinational communicational network," the "hyperspace of capital," and the "space of postmodern warfare." It seems that Jameson is caught up in the *spectacle* of the dizzying "hyperspace" and the milling confusion he describes as the "complete world" or "miniature city" of the Bonaventure's interior. He starts out to criticize the depthless, placeless autoreferentiality of a hotel architecture that attempts both to create fantastic spatial and perspectival ambiguities inside its monumental and mannerist atrium (where you are dazzled by spaceship elevators shooting up and down but cannot find the way out of its multistoried dome) and a radical dissociation of its closed structure from the downtown neighborhoods (via hidden entry-ways and aggressive mirror glass surfaces). He ends up instead focusing on the kinaesthetic excitement that this "new total space" might induce for those prepared to congregate in it. Congregating in the Bonaventure's miniature city, Jameson argues with obvious references to the populist "consumption" of the Beaubourg in Paris,<sup>8</sup> ought to result in a "new collective practice" of experiencing mutated leisure-time space and of the bodily perceptions needed to grasp—and actually find your way through—this designed ambience.

Even as Jameson knows it impossible to gain a total vision of this new space, he insists that there must be a cultural politics and a radical aesthetic that can invent ways of cognitively *mapping* this new totality. This radical aesthetic must be able to interconnect a wide range of cultural phenomena (as he considers the Bonaventure connected to current writing, film, music and painting) with relations between multinational capitalism, new technology, and postmodernism as the dominant "cultural logic" in this new "world space." But unlike Walter Benjamin who in the *Passagenwerk* attempted to reconstruct the prehistory of capitalist modernity and commodity production out of a topography of concrete urban images (the "scene" of the capital of nineteenth-century France), Jameson's theoretical constitution of a hegemonic postmodern space articulates itself aesthetically without "prehistory," so to speak. It is as if the older idealism of an autonomous culture of modernism, or the revolutionary avant-garde's project to transform art and society were exploded.

Jameson locates this rupture in the 1960s and implies that what found cultural expression through the desire for an uninterrupted present or the polymorphously perverse theatricalization of everyday life in the 1960s, eventually collapsed into an ever-expansive commodity system where the polymorphous fetishism of Andy Warhol's soup cans or Marilyn Monroe portraits is the order of the day.

This dissolution into the as yet unrepresentable totality of the postmodern capitalist scene, "where our now postmodern bodies are bereft of

spatial coordinates and practically (let alone theoretically) incapable of distanciation,"<sup>9</sup> is analyzed negatively as the end of critical distance and the final dispossession of the subject as it has been endlessly elaborated in the antihumanist body of poststructuralist discourse. But Jameson's essay does not claim to attack postmodernism from a historical or Marxist position that would, first of all, have to defend its discredited logic and, second, need to distinguish itself from currently fashionable attacks by conservative critics who are driven by their own nostalgia for a lost ideal of modernist culture. Rather, Jameson prefers to engage his totalizing logic positively. He cannot but recuperate, albeit with an insufficiently postmodern body, the polymorphous perversity of the Bonaventure Hotel as the "norm" of the cultural space of postmodernism. He does not comment on the *excess economy* of this architecture, on its wanton diversions and hyperbolic collages of neorational rigor, baroque pomposity and surrealist optical effects, on its labyrinthine mixture of parody and kitsch that distracts from one's radical disorientation inside the simulated landscape complete with lush vegetation, a miniature lake, and bridges. (In this landscape of virtual perspectives, virtual volumes, and virtual mobility, walking is displaced into escalating and "flying" in the space shuttle elevators). As a purely aesthetic technoscape of designed overaccumulation so abstract that the architect had to add information booths and guidance color codes, the Bonaventure turns architecture and property development into aestheticized commodities that participate in the postmodern economy of signs. Of course, equally disorienting designs of perceptual experience abound in fashion, music video, film, and advertising).<sup>10</sup> Finally, the Bonaventure successfully demonstrates how capital is reinforced by elevating the commodity form into an abstractly self-referential and excessive site of power.

When Jameson praises the space shuttle elevators as spectacular, gigantic "kinetic sculptures," he refers to them as "virtual narratives" or paradigms of trajectories and movements that are inscribed on our postmodern bodies. Such an inscription of power calls for a specific analysis. But Jameson then refers to them as machines *replacing* the movement of the body since they can act as pure, self-reflexive signs. His thought breaks off here, and he seems still preoccupied with the qualitative changes in the habits of bodily perception when he, several pages later, comments on the "unimaginable quantum leap in technological alienation" produced by the "new machines" which no longer represent motion (like older automotive machines) "but which can only be represented *in motion*."<sup>11</sup> He then shifts into "a very different area, namely the space of postmodern warfare," quotes from Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, a book on the Vietnam War that Jameson claims breaks with all previous narrative paradigms, since that "first terrible postmodernist war" is no longer representable in the older languages of the war novel or movie. It is worth repeating the excerpt from Herr's text:

He was a moving-target-survivor subscriber, a true child of the war, because except for the rare times when you were pinned or stranded the system was geared to keep you mobile, if that was what you thought you wanted. As a technique for staying alive it seemed to make as much sense as anything, given naturally that you were there to begin with and wanted to see it close; it started out sound and straight but it formed a cone as it progressed, because the more you moved the more you saw, the more you saw the more besides death and mutilation you risked, and the more you risked of that the more you would have to let go of one day as a "survivor." Some of us moved around the war like crazy people until we couldn't see which way the run was taking us anymore, only the war all over its surface with occasional, unexpected penetration. As long as we could have choppers like taxis it took real exhaustion or depression near shock or a dozen pipes of opium to keep us even apparently quiet, we'd still be running around inside our skins like something was after us, ha ha, La Vida Loca. In the months after I got back the hundreds of helicopters I'd flown in began to draw together until they'd formed a collective meta-chopper, and in my mind it was the sexiest thing going; saver-destroyer, provider-waster, right-hand-left-hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder.<sup>12</sup>

This horrific narrative of the fantasized "meta-chopper" as an eroticized machine of death and survival follows in brutal juxtaposition to the admiring exposition on the entertaining "leisure-time space" of the Bonaventure. Jameson apparently wants us to think of his examples of "technological alienation" in a dialectical way that could unite the catastrophic and progressive aspects of postmodernism. If that reminds us of the familiar metanarrative of the "dialectic of enlightenment," it also of course opens out on different perspectives that are suppressed by Jameson's narrativization of postmodern space.

In particular, I am thinking of the significant work of Paul Virilio<sup>13</sup> whose "aesthetics of disappearance" evolved from his studies of urban space, the history of warfare and technology, and the evolving relations between speed, transportation, film, and politics. What strikes me as crucial in this context is the *image* or *sign of dislocation*—and its larger implications as an ideological expression for advanced capitalism—not captured by Jameson's glowing description of the Bonaventure elevators. Both the space shuttle elevators in their delirious verticality and the helicopters are hardly machines of "technological alienation." They are technologies that facilitate speed and movement that participate in the general formation of "territories of time and space."<sup>14</sup> At the same time, if we think of them in their real and fantasized environments, the Bonaventure Hotel and the war machine in *Dispatches*, they become indispensable to the operation of an excessive and absolutely offensive economy, an economy of "death itself," to extrapolate from *Dispatches* as well as from the theoretical fictions of Georges Bataille and Jean Baudrillard.<sup>15</sup> But how much excess can be accumulated, toward the ex-

haustion of death and the inertia reached at the limit of movement, in an aesthetic mode parading as "floating signifiers," as meta-choppers or metaelevators, in a hallucinatory territory where all external referents (to the body, to transportation, speed, mobility, attack-force, surveillance, and so forth) are extinguished or, rather suspended within a pure, symbolic exchange, an endless cancellation of the real? How deadly erotic can an elevator or a helicopter be once it is abstracted from its technical functions into a quietly terroristic sign that simulates motion "in motion," in purely imaginary relationships to the body and the eye, circulating in the void?

The economy of death that comes into play here revolves around the convergence of *seduction* and *power*. It is analyzed by Baudrillard—in his most excessive and dramatic formulations—as the postmodern apotheosis of simulation in that the circular floating of images (the "saver-destroyer, provider-waster" in *Dispatches*) cancels all dialectical positions (subject/object, cause/effect, active/passive, sender/receiver, and so forth). And as it cancels perspective, depth of field, and real space between sign and referent (what I would also call the *embodied experience* of space and time), it brings the localization of any specific term of a power relation to an end. This model of postmodern power is experienced as fascinating and seductive, Baudrillard argues, because the only "information" of its simulated expressions lies in their cynical display of *effects* (optical illusions) that no longer belong to any rational or representational order constituted by systems of economic power (Marx) or sociological and political power (as delineated, for example, in Foucault's normalized society of the panoptic). No longer a rational foundation or a principle of organization of knowledge and experience, simulated power appears like a figure in an absurdist play, an "endgame" operation in blind laughter covering up the loss of meaning in its endless recursiveness.

The universal fascination with power in its exercise and its theory is so intense because it is a fascination with a *dead* power characterized by a simultaneous 'resurrection effect,' in an obscene and parodic mode, of all the forms of power already seen—exactly like sex in pornography.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the parodic excess of the Bonaventure's simulation of a "hotel"—of a place of necessary regulations of traffic, exchange, communication, accommodation, departure and arrival—makes it an interesting architectural example of the question whether the "logic of postmodernism" can be examined exclusively under the sign of the final abstraction of capitalism's commodity forms.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps instead such an isolated instance of the "overexposed city" (Virilio) needs also to be seen in the context of the very contradictory and shifting fashions in which the largely unresolved physical and perceptual transformations of an advanced technological culture have the power to *affect* people and their actual relations to the perceived environment.

I do not think, for example, that the Bonaventure's space shuttle elevators, sublimely hyperreal as they are, need to be seen as a "resurrec-



tion effect" covering up disappearing social and political realities with a "desperate staging"<sup>18</sup> of mobility. The false conquest of space that they simulate—and we are painfully reminded of the fatal explosion of a real space shuttle, the Challenger, in 1986—rather indicates the building's internal struggle to overcome the contradictions between the milling diffusions of its overdesigned ambience, meant to arouse excitement and consumer receptivity, and the practical necessities of regulating the exchange and accommodation of customers who actually choose, and can afford to choose, to sleep in the hotel. Portman's designed postmodern ambience stages a scene built for the heightened aesthetic reception of a commercial business space that would otherwise be as bland and mediocre as the innumerable motels and Holiday Inns across the country. The spectacular architecture of the Bonaventure also embodies the political spectacle of dislocation unrelated to Baudrillard's cybernetic and implosive model of the hyperrealization of "dead power." Rather more concretely, it unleashes the power and the antiurban real-estate speculations of foreign investors and local, downtown interest groups. This dislocation or disappearance, in the context of the downtown redevelopment in Los Angeles, is not yet the replacement of built structures and older urban forms of demarcation projected by Virilio's account of the "overexposed city" (in which a new synthetic time-space is ruled by the interfaces of electronic communications). Rather, a transfer of corporate headquarters and foreign investments (the Bonaventure was financed by the Japanese) into the older inner city residential areas around Bunker Hill has since the 1960s led to the displacement of poor Asian-Hispanic neighborhoods by the sky scrapers and multiblock structures of the new downtown financial district.<sup>19</sup> What is so striking about this pattern of urban redevelopment (with parallel cases in Houston, Detroit, Atlanta, Dallas, and other major cities) is the violence with which such a financial district invades and segregates ethnic inner city neighborhoods. Such a concentration of economic power and high property value in the reckless overconstruction of commercial space, with the simultaneous decay of adjacent areas "designed" to disintegrate or to be taken over for strategic gentrification, does not reflect a homogenizing logic but a territorial economy that we remember from the political, religious, racial, and class segregations of divided cities like Berlin, Belfast, Beirut, or New York.

The territorial demarcations reflect a war machine that has begun its postmodern collapse of economic and military spaces of accumulation. Absolute collective violence—the total nuclear destructibility of the world—could be seen as a heightened expression of the continuous destructions and rearrangements of the cities.

The so-called "technocrats" are very simply the military class. They are the ones who consider rationality only in terms of its efficiency, whatever the horizon. The negative horizon's apocalyptic dimension doesn't strike them. It's not their problem. . . .

The great stroke of luck for the military class's terrorism is that no one recognizes it.<sup>20</sup>

The technocracy of urban architecture, as it designs its Bonaventure Hotels and Trump Castles into seductively disorienting aesthetic wonderlands, need not fool itself into believing that its violent invasions of social space are not recognized. Suppressing this violence compromises Jameson's account of the Bonaventure, and doubtless those who lack access to its upper-class leisure space or who have been hit hard by housing shortage or the general deterioration of urban communities and social relations will be affected differently by the "originality" of postmodern architecture's restricted enclaves. These enclaves of corporate power are not a cultural dominant that could actually subordinate the city's inhabitants, or their heterogeneous cultural practices and social networks, to the enormity of their images and global fantasies. Rather, they are paradoxical private/public territories, both expansive and threatening and claustrophobic. And it is hardly ironic, in the light of the historical continuity of First World capitalism's imperialist, racist, and colonial evolution that commercial megastructures of the Los Angeles downtown come to look like a *besieged site*, formed in the very same "protective maze of freeways, moats, concrete parapets, and asphalt no-man's lands" that Mike Davis traces back to Portman's Hyatt-Regency built for Atlanta's Peachtree Center in 1967:

Downtown Atlanta rises above its surrounding city like a walled fortress from another age. The citadel is anchored to the south by the international trade center and buttressed by the municipal stadium. To the north, the walls and walkways of John Portman's Peachtree Center stand watch over the acres of automobiles that pack both flanks of the city's long ridge. The sunken moat of I-85, with its flowing lanes of traffic, reaches around the eastern base of the hill from south to north, protecting lawyers, bankers, consultants and regional executives from the intrusion of low-income neighborhoods.<sup>21</sup>

Davis suggests that the "fortress function" of these "centers" within the decentered and sprawling postindustrial city reveals the coercive intent of metropolitan elites to polarize urban spaces. One could also argue that the displacement of marginalized, adjacent ethnic communities within the lateral sprawl of Los Angeles has created constantly migrating and proliferating strategies of intrusion that keep the vibrant expressions of various black, Asian, Hispanic, or Chicano minority culture alive even as the white dominant mass media pretend they are not or carry on their mainstream homogenization of the world through television. Like the highly mobile and visible force of the illegible graffiti language that defaces the New York subway cars and travels permanently through the underground of Manhattan and the adjacent boroughs, multiethnic popular culture and art in Los Angeles have created interreferential gestures (as in Chicano music addressing and fusing different inherited styles and languages) and activities (street festivals, craft fairs, communal projects, street theatre,

graffiti, posters, murals, alternative video, and community access cable) that use the communal body as material for performance art, and the city and its human movements (traffic, zones of everyday social practice) as material support for a kind of inverse appropriation of the urban landscape. This subversion both interferes with and by-passes the protected and institutionalized spaces of "legitimate culture."

In writing about East Los Angeles Chicano music, George Lipsitz explains that many of the bands have developed their own forms of "postmodern cultural manipulation" by treating ethnic identity and musical genres as plastic and open-ended, creating a *bricolage* of eclectic styles and cultural fusions: Mexican folk music, polkas and corridos, Afro-American rhythm & blues, white rockabilly and country, pop, jazz, and punk. Simultaneously, street slang, folk dancing, clothing styles, car customizing and wall murals become sources of community subcultures.<sup>22</sup> The Chicano band Tierra, which became the favorite band of the Mexican-American low rider subculture in the 1970s, is a good example of such cross-overs. The car customizers themselves play with established codes when they "juxtapose seemingly inappropriate realities (fast cars designed to go slowly, 'improvements' that flaunt their impracticality [and] make ironic and playful commentary on prevailing standards of automotive design)"<sup>23</sup> and name their low riders after songs or political and historical incidents of the past. When low rider events incorporate Chicano music and other performances of local culture that deal with collective history and social communication, and when their parade of redesigned, "slow" cars cruises down the L.A. main thoroughfares, we can speak of a "social sculpture" or an "action" in the sense in which Joseph Beuys described such a creative process as an activation, by means of intervention, of our time and space. When Beuys spoke about basic human energies and used for art ordinary objects and materials of our everyday collective reality, (milk, fat, water, felt, wood, soil) he meant to show how a specific movement can bring dead, elemental material into a form of *social architecture*. He demonstrated a chemical process that was always also a political process of participation, of an opening to a collective consciousness for social change. Shortly before his death in 1986, Beuys referred to himself not as an artist, but as somebody trying to intervene in the structures of society to help building a new world that might be finally inhabitable (directly quoting André Breton's vision of "*un monde enfin habitable*").

If this is one of the unaccomplished projects of the historical avant-garde, it also of course is a project that postmodern art inside institutional spaces cannot accomplish. We have also seen how quickly the underground graffiti of the New York subways can end up as "art works" in fashionable new wave galleries of the East Village. It is of particular consequence, then, to remember Joseph Beuys's contention that art (whether inside or outside of institutions and the commodity market) does not exist yet, and that his "social sculptures" are directed toward the future.

Beuys's action events, installations, environments, sculptures, and teachings themselves perform a movement that constantly shifts and crosses the boundaries of what the dominant culture (mainstream and academic) defines as "inside" or "outside" and consecrates as natural rituals of perception: consider the way architecture relates to property value, or museums exhibit art objects, or media and art critical discourses represent those art objects, and so forth. Praising or ridiculing Beuys as a prophet and shaman, the media in Germany were quite unable to assimilate the work that he built and lived. Nor did they seem to realize, when they attacked him as a charlatan, that they were discrediting their own aesthetic value systems and norms that could not contain the flux of ever-changing categories of identity, both in Beuys's life and in the materials he treated.

I remember vividly how stunned I was when I first encountered Beuys and saw how he invaded the protected space of institutionalized "high art." During his action event *Iphigenia/Titus*, staged in Frankfurt in 1969, Beuys sat inside an enclosure with a white horse that quietly ate hay and gazed at us. The only other objects he had on stage were a tape recorder playing monotonously recorded readings from Goethe's *Iphigenia* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and diverse materials including sugar, margarine, iron, fur, and a huge pair of orchestra cymbals. There was no recognizable connection between these heterogeneous action components, yet the scenic allegory of Beuys's gravitating position in between the dead texts of cultural tradition and the living horse gradually crystallized into a richly associative confrontation between inert material and organic life. Beuys repeatedly described his interaction with materials that provide warmth or are sensitive to heat as a "methodical" confrontation with the elements of death in an environment of death that must be overcome.

I had not known then how sensitive to heat classical literary texts can be, and I experienced Beuys's intervention—in the presence of the quiet vitality and indifference of the animal—as an attempt to bring each participant into crisis with his or her aesthetic complicity in the mutilation and violation of our lives, symbolically represented in the idealized metaphysics of sacrifice in *Iphigenia* and the unredeemable brutality in the scenes of treachery, rape, and slaughter in *Titus*. No theatre production of these classic dramas could avoid reproducing the ideology of an autonomous art that can be aesthetically appreciated and that severs the audience from any social responsibility. Beuys's shift toward a pedagogical action or sculpting process demonstrates different positions of understanding our implication in a violent and indifferent organic system. In 1976 Beuys addressed the violation of the social body in a haunting installation entitled "Show your Wound," which clearly referred to the destructiveness of the concentration camps and the Holocaust under the German fascist regime. Perhaps Beuys's entire lifework after the war has been an effort to keep visible what is disappearing from our consciousness, and what has certainly disappeared from an art that speaks only about itself or fawns upon the market place.

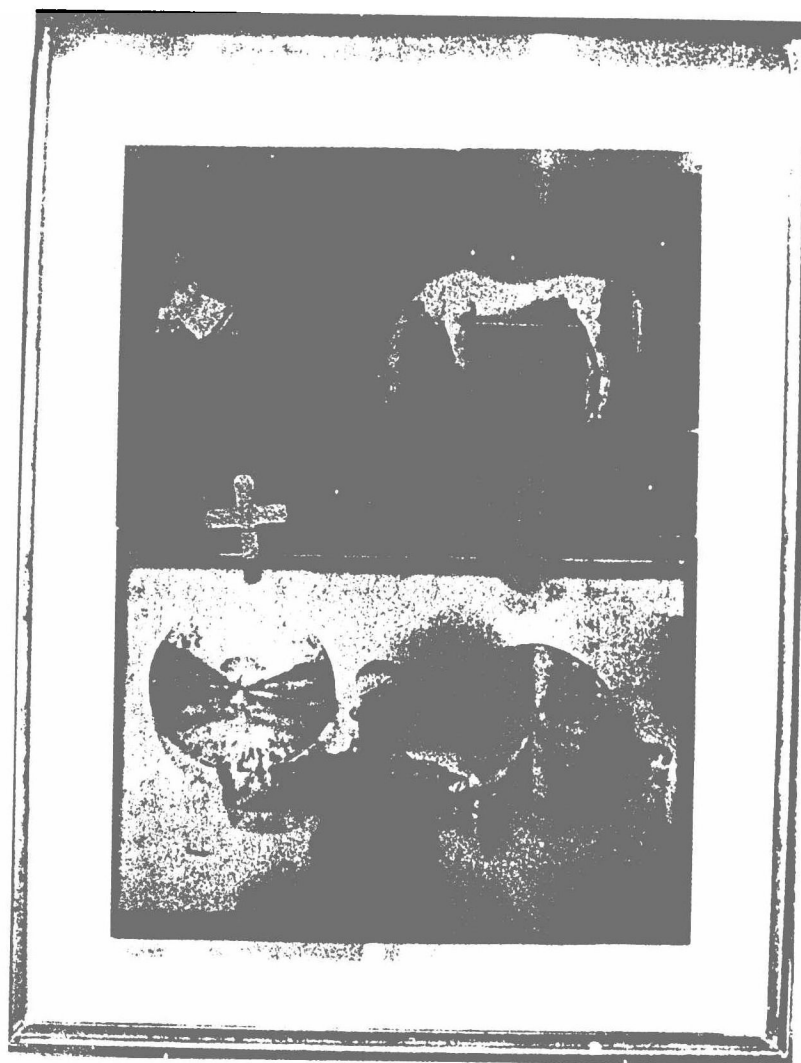


Figure 1. Joseph Beuys, photographic negatives with brown cross, from the action "Iphigenia/Titus Andronicus," Experimenta 3, Frankfurt, 1969. Courtesy Davis/McClain Gallery, Houston.

Most of contemporary art does not wish to be reminded of its failure to accomplish the project of the historical avant-garde. It is disconcerting to think that those of us who write about what is considered avant-garde art today contribute to its failure. Joseph Beuys had always been associated with major museums and art exhibitions in Europe and had made signifi-

cant contributions to the public visibility and international status of the documenta exhibitions, acting out, for example, his three-month-long "Organization for Direct Democracy" piece in 1972. But later he once again took a position completely at odds with the lavishly promoted "art about artists" scene of documenta 7 in 1982 (focusing on neoexpressionist painting) when he initiated the long-term project of the planting of seven thousand oak trees in the city of Kassel, West Germany. Directly related to Beuys's participation during the early 1980s in the ecological and peace initiatives of the Green Movement in Europe, his invitation to the public to help plant trees (at a time when the disastrous effects of chemical pollution and acid rain on the environment were becoming clearly visible and threatening the destruction of the forests, a symbolic part of the historical landscape) in the dreary, grey, and faceless cityscape of Kassel was also meant to provoke a conscious act of *communal healing*, of bringing new organic life to a dead, fragmented, functionalized city. Kassel, a typical mid-size provincial city that was an important center of military industries under the Nazis, was severely devastated during the bombings at the end of the war. With major automobile and chemical industries continuing operation, Kassel quickly went through postwar reconstruction that left it anonymously resembling other cities reconstructed in the same faceless, utilitarian-modern style, divided up into suburban shopping malls compensating for the gradual loss of a vital public center. No riots here in the 1960s; not even a small sign of the grass roots civilian protests that flared up in Frankfurt at the same time, which turned the social-democratic city government's grand designs (supported by a business consortium and the major banks) for urban modernization into a highly politicized battle over the "Manhattanization" of the West End. A spontaneous coalition of diverse left-wing, feminist, and countercultural groups, with ideological ties to the urban guerilla movements of the Italian *lotta continua* and *autonomia* as well as to the militant antiimperialist interventions of the RAF (Baader-Meinhof Group), fought a battle that became known as *Häuserkampf* ("squatters movement"). They began to occupy and renovate those empty buildings that had been bought by real estate speculators. The city was trying to purge the West End population—mostly students, foreign workers, and low middle-class families—in order to transform the old residential neighborhood into a commercial district. After buildings bought were left to deteriorate or to be demolished, the squatters moved in to repossess the site of eviction. It took several years, until the early 1980s, for tactical police forces to clean up the scene. The end of the squatters movement, however, did not end an increasingly diverse and "situationist" development of cultural-political resistance to the hegemonizing tendencies of late capitalist urban ("postarchitectural") *erasure*. This erasure that has less to do with modernization and urban planning than with a wholesale speculative real estate competition for images and commercial clients, in an exchange with political interest. But besides the new twin skyscrapers of the Deutsche Bank in Frankfurt, a virtual replica of the World Trade Center