



Construction site, Sarasota, Florida, 2002



Ashton Road rail crossing, Sarasota, Florida, 2002

Light Space

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We have to take things and find visibilities in them. And what is visible at a given period corresponds to its system of lighting and scintillations, shimmerings, flashes produced by the contact of light and things.

– Gilles Deleuze¹

The suburban city empties at night. Office buildings, parking lots, and shopping centres lie vacant yet illuminated. Light is directed at objects and spaces to protect them from the perceived insecurity of darkness. Light supports communication, inviting commerce and social activity through signage and intensity. It gives purpose and discipline to the urban environment at night. But it also produces unintended illumination, bringing peripheral spaces and things into focus. Much like a close-up in film, light transforms mundane objects into spectacular, jarring events that stand out from their context. Streetlights and floodlights capture objects and textures in their glow, setting infrastructure, vegetation and urban detritus on fire with intense hues of orange and yellow, or bathing them in the increasingly ubiquitous cool glow of LED light. Interior lights bleed out from office buildings and strip malls, bringing dark and empty spaces into view. Light is a weapon, not unlike the blinding glare of a police flashlight, demanding that the urban dross confront a startling and sometimes unwanted visibility.

Floodlights and flashlights throw light onto darkness, carving space out of a void. But lighting systems also allow the space of the city to seep inward. Though installed as a defensible barrier for interior environments,

it opens them up to scrutiny. We might think of the glass curtain wall of an office building or the window of a single-family home as a screen. A peeping tom or pedestrian can see what goes on inside through the glass or projected onto a curtain. And screens, as Akira Mizuta Lippit reminds us, are a metaphor and staging for Enlightenment, the watchful eye of power and knowledge.² But like an x-ray, streetlights, car headlamps, and other forms of illumination flatten and blur distinctions between inside and outside. They disturb the comfort and authority of an external gaze or protected interior. In its place, nocturnal life inhabits something akin to a blurry glow, recalling Beatriz Colomina's observation that transparency in architecture produces an x-ray effect, an "occupiable blur."³

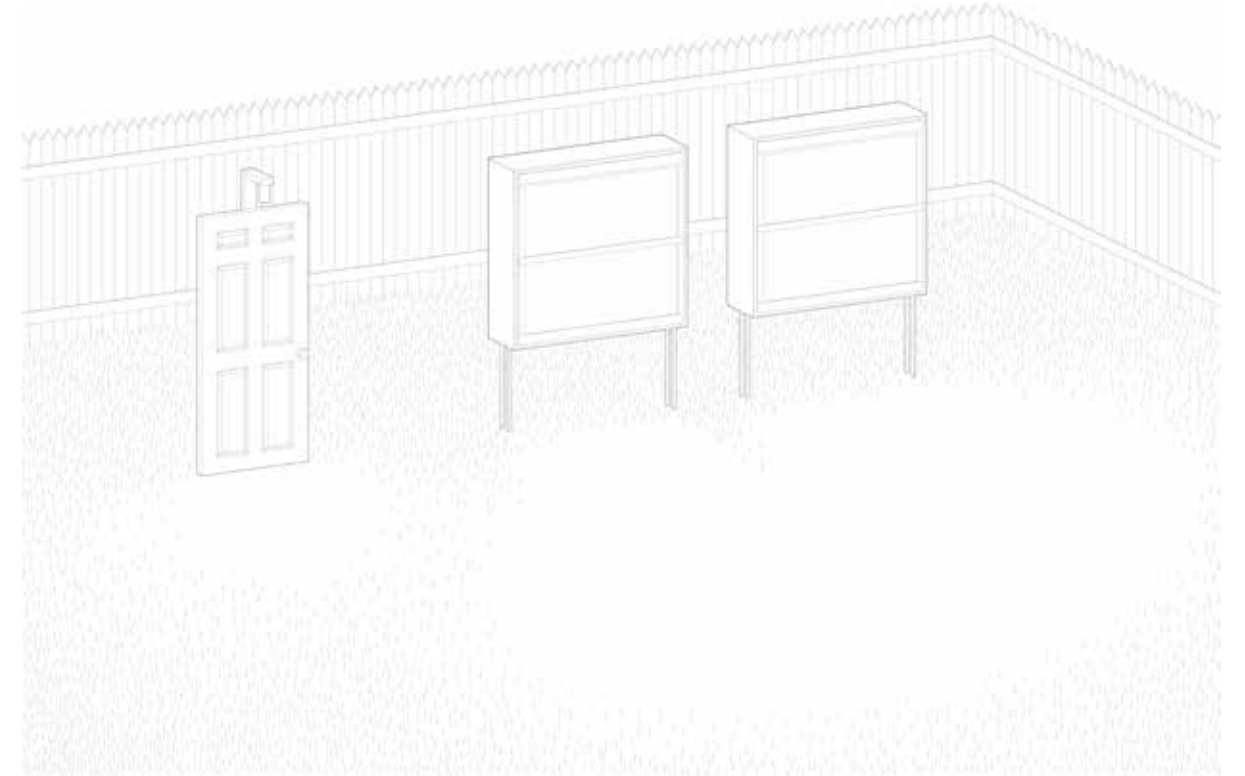
Blurring and bleeding, light thus appears as a profoundly ambivalent medium of urban experience. It facilitates control and policing, but undermines control at every turn. Light cannot be reduced to its uses. Think of Marshall McLuhan's proposition that electric light "escapes attention" when we pay too much attention to what it communicates, to its content.⁴ He saw that interpretations of light represented a failure to understand media in general. You don't notice electric light until it "spells out a brand name," or when it shines onto a surgery table, or perhaps even when the flashlight glares in your face.⁵ You miss the "message" of its medium: its encompassing and transformative effects. In the city, its effects might support new forms of control or "safety," as when floodlights are used in place of policing.⁶ But it might also reveal other possible futures, or histories. Recall that light is a marker of transitions between inside and outside, but also between past and future. It can lay the groundwork for future



The urban milieu, Office Light, installation, 2011–12, Lawndale Art Center, Houston Texas



Office Light, view from the street



House Set, axonometric site drawing

events, such as at a construction site, or can illuminate things forgotten and left behind. And though it blinds and sometimes obscures, paying attention to the contact between light and things reveals unfinished landscapes. Light illuminates things that might have been, and things that might yet be.

OFFICE LIGHT, 2011–2012

Office Light, an installation in Houston, Texas, was surrounded by the hallmarks of a neighbourhood in transition: a parking lot, contemporary townhouses, a vacant lot, a homeless shelter, and an art centre. The structure positioned an office ceiling in an outdoor space, subjecting an otherwise unoccupied space to the white glow and visibility of an office interior. Standing in the open space behind Lawndale Art Center during the winter months of 2011–2012, it was comprised of a two-by-four-foot office ceiling grid that contained twelve office

lights. All architectural presence, including walls and ceiling tiles, was stripped away and remained only as a trace, reducing office light to its purest form of transmission. The ceiling itself hung just below eye-level, softly discouraging pedestrian access and suggesting that it be viewed from afar, from the vantage point of the street.

HOUSE SET, 2004

Drawing on the flatness of theatre sets, House Set imagined the façade of a suburban house in Orlando, Florida, as an illumination device. Everything about the house was removed except for its illuminated surfaces, and a lighting system was set up in the backyard of the bungalow. Instead of looking out toward the street, the windows and door looked into the back of the house, directing the light inside. The domestic window was converted into a large lighting fixture; suspended on thin pipes and contained



Window Unit



Window Unit, lightboxes and building, Orlando, Florida, 2004

by black boxes, its glass was shielded by translucent plastic diffusers and lined with reflective material on the interior. Its diffuse light projected frontally, accompanied by a domestic exterior door and porch light. Rather than invite curiosity, the luminous intensity functioned as something of a surveillance device, watching its companion house from behind.

WINDOW UNIT, 2004

In a well-known letter to Viktor Nekrasov, Le Corbusier writes of “the problem of the fresco,” a problem of covering surface with painted, illusory worlds.⁷ Citing the Sistine Chapel and other painted architectures, Le Corbusier argues that the fresco destroys the walls and ceilings that it covers, changing its character. Does light do the same? Architecture and cities transform at night into an altogether different architecture of visibilities, a selective landscape of surfaces. *Window Unit* transformed the exterior of a building by adapting its mechanisms. Sited in

a series of windows that faced an abandoned rail yard in Orlando, Florida, it lifted and filled each open window with a volume of light. The space of the window was converted into a lighting system, and air conditioning units were replaced with lightboxes that illuminated the adjacent exterior and interior walls and windows.

NOTES

1 Gilles Deleuze, “Life as a Work of Art,” in *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 94–101.

2 Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 42.

3 Beatriz Colomina, “X-Screens: Röntgen Architecture,” *e-flux journal* 66 (October 2015), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/66/60736/x-screens-rntgen-architecture>.

4 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor, 1964), 24–25.

5 Ibid.

6 For instance, see the use of floodlights in housing projects in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, in Jeremy Smerd, “Floodlights Outside Housing Projects Underscore Glaring Issues of Security,” *Crain’s New York*, <http://www.craigslist.com/article/20160621/OPINION/160629965/floodlights-outside-brooklyns-housing-projects-underscore-glaring-issues-of-security>.

7 Quoted in Richard Serra, “Tilted Arc Destroyed,” *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 203.