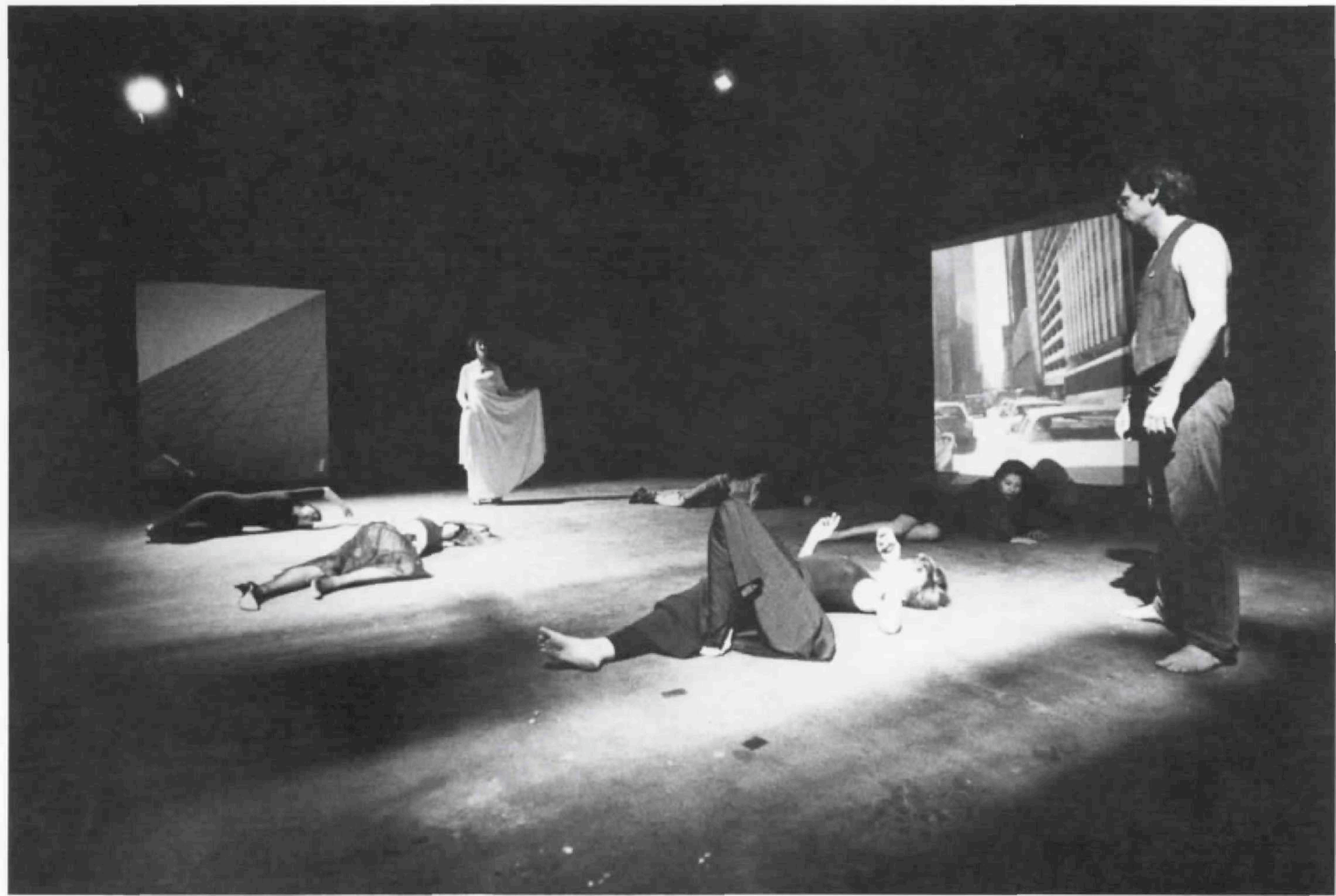


The exterior is the result of an interior.

Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*

Johannes Birringer

COLLATERAL DAMAGE



Below: A scene from *Invisible Cities*, 1989, Lawndale Art and Performance Center.

I had meant to write about two performance-exhibitions, *Invisible Cities* (1989) and *Ad Mortem* (1990), which I staged at two alternative art galleries in Houston after having moved to the city in 1987.¹ Both works were perceived as performance art, and the audiences seemed to accept the premise that the scenographies I built did not reproduce the viewing conditions of modern "realist" theater but rather translated the space of visibility itself into decentered, multiperspectival, and simultaneous processes of projection (multi-screen, video and film images), sound (prerecorded and live), physical movement, and fragmented narrative.

The spatial and temporal dispositions of the intermedia performances resulted from questions that my collaborators and I had posed during our research. In describing this research as a kind of ethnography of social space, I want to emphasize that we were less interested in the architecture of Houston than in our psychopolitical relationships to the environment and its effects on our bodies and our sense of identity. In other words, both works *performed* a relationship to the city in which the architecture and construction of social space are themselves neither stable nor given but are continuously redefined by our variously experienced and imagined perceptions of urban realities. As in performance, my writing here cannot speak from the position of architecture and its theory and practice. Rather, it approaches the other side of the social and economic conditions within which the interplay of architecture and experience must be reimagined and our ideological environment reinterpreted.

Invisible Cities was a response to the persistent question that arises from our automobilized experience of space in Houston: to what extent does the constant circulation of traffic correspond to a transitory sense of place and identity – a sense heightened by the symbolic blindness of the downtown towers, which epitomize the mythic self-consciousness of an expanding boomtown?

With economic expectations collapsed and flattened out in the recurring sameness of an endless suburban sprawl, we surmised that mobility itself was blind to the increasing dissolution of all sense of historical connectedness to a memorable past. This sense of

disconnection perhaps reflected an inchoate, equally mythic belief in renewable space and in a renewable future unburdened by the failure of earlier promises of limitless economic growth. The indifference of Houston's suburban sprawl thus seemed to mirror the repression of material differences that we found in the unregulated delirium of steel and glass skylining the inner city. The skyline has become a cherished backdrop for commercial film productions and TV advertising spots. The delirium, however, is mostly an effect of downtown architectural façades that hide another reality: the façades began to appear less glamorous and more frightening when we looked at urban development from the perspective of racially segregated and underprivileged communities.

A scene entitled "Blind City" dramatized the recognition of racial segregation by depicting a heightened moment arising from a banal technological failure. A Hispanic woman and her two-year-old daughter are forced to leave their stalled car on one of the busiest stretches of Interstate 45, the point near Allen Parkway where the north-south freeway divides downtown from Fourth Ward, an African-American community seemingly condemned to deterioration in the shadow of the glass towers. Unable to find help on either side of the freeway, the woman becomes physically trapped inside the flowing traffic, carrying her child back and forth inside a violent borderline. Her experience of isolation is magnified by an image of relentless speed, the cars rushing by – an image that also functions as a dialectical reference to the historical past and the slowed-down time of Fourth Ward.

A second screen projected small-scale slide images in slow motion onto the larger image of the mirror-glass façades of the skyscrapers. The smaller images showed a row of tiny and dilapidated wooden shotgun houses from Fourth Ward. During the months we were working on

the scene, we learned of a new redevelopment plan that would substantially demolish Fourth Ward, Houston's oldest African-American settlement, and replace it with commercial development and new housing. Throughout the projection of the images, the physical performance onstage made it clear that each of the performers in the multicultural cast was trapped in his or her own "zoning law" experience, contrary to Houston's official ideology. We wanted to draw attention to the power relationships that are consolidated by the massive concrete ramps of a freeway system that cuts through the collective body of the city, erecting artificial barriers. Besides supporting and channeling the unrestrained mobility of vehicular traffic, the freeway barriers reflect the mechanisms by which corporate power and commercial real estate interests are separated and shielded from the designed decay and ghettoization of the inner city.

Like the homeless, whose nomadic lives embody the refuse of "city architecture" at the lowest economic and social margins,



the ghetto and the barrio reflect a damaged reality and a form of social desertion, knowledge of which is repressed more and more deeply in the political unconscious. The American siege mentality, which may be one of the historical effects of urban decay and social disintegration, surfaces with full force in the desperate "military" rescue operations that federal and local governments launch in their "wars" on drugs, crime, unemployment, AIDS, and illiteracy. The bitter irony, of course, is that such "warfare" admits unequal economic

development and the failure of urban planning; such aggressions turned against one's own population resemble the aggressions of urban gentrification plans that erase or dislocate neighborhoods and communities.

The question of how to conceptualize and experience community today was raised in a more radical form by *Ad Mortem*. This concert-exhibition addressed social reactions to the AIDS crisis, not only by exposing the silent, unspoken territories of the epidemic, the bodies and experiences absent from political, medical-scientific, and mass media discourses, but also by searching for nondiscriminatory metaphors and strategies for the construction of a cultural space from which those people most affected by AIDS, as well as those who have hitherto separated themselves from the sick and the dying, can make the necessary personal and social choices and resistances. We sought to demonstrate that as a communicable disease affecting the social body as a whole, AIDS has forced us to rethink our sexual identities and social behaviors across the boundaries of historically separate communities. Such border crossings deconstruct inequities on several levels: within the logics and administration of science and health policies; within and between politically and socially constituted communities (e.g., gay communities and communities of color); and in the symbolic communication and the lived experience of the AIDS epidemic. *Ad Mortem* pointed to the invisible suffering and pain caused by a lethal disease; it also searched for social and spiritual practices of communion that can heal the rifts and build solidarity.

Such practices, which we discovered in community-based church, support, and self-help networks, are largely underdeveloped. If we were to use "architecture," therefore, in the literal and metaphorical sense of *building as a politics of choices*, as a process of public and cultural decision-making that responds to social needs and social changes, it would not be sufficient to recall the failures of the technological aesthetics of an earlier avant-garde, whose utopias of a "collective space of urban well-being" we can observe in buildings that

"exist by means of their own death," as Mies van der Rohe wrote. Nor would it be sufficient to extend Manfredo Tafuri's critique of "design and capitalist development" into current academic debates on postmodern theories of decorative historicism, stylistic eclecticism, pluralism, or, as in the case of Peter Eisenman, a displaced, grotesque architecture of "decomposition." We have nothing to learn from Las Vegas, Dallas, Los Angeles, or Eisenman for that matter, except perhaps that displaced architecture reveals the increasingly abstract, theoretical relationship between architects and the late-capitalist decision-making processes that may determine the shape of the future.

I would suggest, therefore, that we reconsider the limits of community – and the fragmenting effects of differences within communities that we experience under the impact of a local and global health crisis such as AIDS – on concrete political interrelationships with technologies of social, racial, and economic repression and marginalization. To speak about construction, destruction, or preservation of buildings or public spaces or neighborhoods implies, in my experience, also speaking about resistance to discursive control (whether by the media or within a scientific, legal, political, or military context) over the construction of identities and the experience of power relationships. Silence equals death. Self-determining communities need to be able to speak and to mobilize the bases from which they can organize their interests. As Cindy Patton observes in response to the development of AIDS community organizations and activism: "People living with AIDS would not stay quiet for long. Their discourse shifted to a critique of the oppression of early death and unnecessary infections resulting from treatments delayed and education denied. Then the media stepped in to co-opt the new discourse by transforming the lived experience of people with AIDS and their friends into human-interest stories which performed the pathetic absolution necessary to a society complicit in wholesale slaughter (and that performance is not unique to AIDS)."²

If we want to speak about construction, or rather rebuilding, of community in our city, we need to see how the urban condition reflects social relations of domination and unequal access to the city. Extending my example of the AIDS crisis and the activist response to the marginalization and stigmatization of affected groups, I would argue that the technocratic definitions of the city by experts and managers need to be resisted, because current expert legitimations of urban development, dictated by the necessities of control and profit, necessarily conceal the fact that the interests of state institutions or the private sector conflict with the needs of those who are already suffering the consequences of economic and social policies. These policies have in fact produced the displacement we see in the homeless, the unemployed, the uninsured, the undereducated, and the underprivileged.

We have become refugees in our so-called public spaces, which we don't own, while our diverse cultural and social practices and ideas are denied representation in the homogenizing media and information systems. Our economically and racially segregated cultural space, which was never unified in the first place, can *only* be represented by unitary systems of information control that misrepresent or efface reality. The worst scenario may nevertheless open our eyes to the mechanisms of exclusion. We have experienced it in the media "coverage" of the relentlessly brutal war in Kuwait and Iraq, coverage of "surgical strikes" and "carpet bombing" on an unprecedented scale that failed to produce an assessment of the real destruction and the disastrous effects of technological warfare on the whole region. I began to write this essay under the immediate impact of the war, and I was consumed by a sense of powerlessness at being forced to watch an electronic media war constructed as a surreal mixture of disinformation, macho patriotism, and entertainment without reference to the physical devastation of a culture and a civilian population. All along, the United States government and military command used the vacuous rhetoric of a "new world order" to deflect attention from American economic and

political interests in controlling the Middle East and in demonstrating military hegemony.

What has not been discussed is that this "new world order" resembles the old order. It does this in the linkage between military aggression and social, economic, and racial oppression, and in the linkage between the high-tech war abroad and the technologies of social control at home in our cities and our media. Silence equals death. We may already be condemned to live in a permanent war economy, but we are still learning to come to terms with the idea that this economy also threatens the survival of community and social cohesion.

To resist militarism is to understand the linkage between the enormous costs of this war to the Arabs and the continuing "collateral damage" produced by the crises in our own urban environment: poverty, housing, health, education, multicultural integration. Across our various differences, we can easily identify with Edward Said's description of the irony that "we Arabs are of this world, hooked into dependency and consumerism, cultural vassalage and technological secondariness without much volition on our part. The time has come where we cannot simply accuse the West of Orientalism and racism and go on doing little about providing an alternative."³

We are also of *this* world, sharing it with people of different color or sexual preference, with the elderly and the unemployed, with people with AIDS and the homeless. Alternatives for building coalitions and shared communities must come from our expert knowledge of secondariness and exclusion from the discourses of technocratic power. The preservation and reinvention of our multiple cultural and social identities will depend not on architectural and urban design solutions but on our ability to understand community as a spatial and political formation, a continuous process requiring a clear articulation of needs and claims in order to attain political leverage and contest the power of the administrative state. Architecture historically has been on the side of the state. Community activism will always find itself on the other side. ■

Notes

- 1 *Invisible Cities* was performed at the Lawndale Art and Performance Center in October 1989; *Ad Mortem* was staged at both DiverseWorks and Lawndale in December 1990.
- 2 Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 130.
- 3 "Ignorant Armies Clash by Night," *The Nation*, February 11, 1991.



Video stills of "Blind City" from *Invisible Cities*, 1989, Lawndale Art and Performance Center.

