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**PLAYING WITH THE HIGH LINE:
URBAN SPACE AND FORM**

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“That which changes our way of seeing the street is more important than that which changes our way of seeing a painting.” --Guy Debord; remark given at the inaugural meeting of the Situationist International.¹

i. Introduction

Patty Heffley, “a former punk rock photographer,” as described by Penelope Green in her *New York Times* story,² lives on a building right next to New York City’s High Line Park. The windows of her apartment lead into an outdated fire escape ladder bolted to the side of the brick building. It used to be that at night, one of the lights of the High Line would aim straight at her window, becoming a nuisance. According to Peter Mullan, head of the planning and design office at Friends of the High Line--the private conservancy in charge of maintaining the park--Heffley told them as a form of protest that, “If you’re gonna put the lights on me, I’m gonna give you a show.”³

Heffley went on to decorate the rusty fire escape platform with miscellaneous light fixtures, and colored lanterns. She would turn the lights on during the day to signal people that a performance would happen that night. On one of these performances, she reportedly declared, “This is in response to 31 years of obscurity. Now, everyday there are thousands of people looking in my window. We’re not here to celebrate, we’re here to exploit. Welcome to the Renegade Cabaret.”⁴

¹ Sadler, Simon. 1999. *The Situationist City*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press). 69.

² Green, Penelope. “‘West Side Story’ Amid the Laundry.” *New York Times*, June 24, 2009. Accessed November 19, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/25/garden/25seen.html>

³ *Great Museums: Elevated Thinking: The High Line in New York City*, produced by Marc and Chesney Doyle. (2014, New York: American Public Television, 2014. YouTube video.

⁴ Green, Penelope. “‘West Side Story’ Amid the Laundry.”

Over the course of a few weeks, Heffley would set up seemingly spontaneous shows for the High Line visitors, ranging from science lectures, to singers and professional burlesque dancers. It was because of one of these performances, when the dancer stripped down to her underwear, that Heffley's landlord inform her she was not allowed to use the fire escape in that way.⁵ That was the last episode of the "Renegade Cabaret."

Much can and has been said about the situation described above. But before delving into an analysis of these divergent opinions, and in a more general sense, larger discussions about the High Line's long term effects, I consider the necessity of first looking at the *form* and *space* of the situation; the physical parts and relationships between the parts that allowed for such events to happen and unfold the way they did. This discussion is about the High Line, or rather, the rising urban form known as the High Line, its aesthetics. The goal is to theorize the High Line as a new formal pattern of urbanism that offers creative and political opportunities among city residents, and embodies potentials for democratic expression and activism. An analysis of this kind is necessary today because of the immediate explosion of proposals for highlines, or elevated parks and trails not only across the United States, but throughout the world, from Detroit and Philadelphia, to Sydney and Mexico City. Thus, a consideration of its formal qualities and affordances⁶ must be included in any economic, ecological and social assessment in order to determine its long term impact on the city.⁷

⁵ *Great Museums: Elevated Thinking: The High Line in New York City*, produced by Marc and Chesney Doyle.

⁶ I use the term in Caroline Levine's social and literary sense, and not just as a term used in design theory. In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Levine writes, "Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities...The idea of affordances is valuable for understanding the aesthetic object as imposing its order among a vast array of designed things, from prison cells to doorknobs." p. 7.

⁷ Indeed, a formal analysis of the High Line seems to be the only academically feasible study at this point, given that it is much too early to analyze and predict the long-lasting economic and social effects of the park, particularly in a city as dynamic as New York.

Do we want to play with the High Line? This is ultimately the question that I want to ask, but I only wish to arrive at that question, for the answer will be voiced by the inhabitants of the cities that are now envisioning this form. This question will hopefully serve as a point of departure for subsequent case-study discussions.

In order to arrive at the question, I plan to lay down the theoretical background of my argument, which focuses on the intrinsic necessity of studying space and form as simultaneous political and aesthetic phenomena. I then want to review the High Line's history, focusing on a few outstanding events that led to the park's current form. Next, I want to open a second line of history and theory to introduce the Situationist International as well as the work and ideas of Dutch radical artist Constant Nieuwenhuys. Once this is done, I want to begin weaving together the two strands of my argument by drawing links between the leading designers of the High Line, Diller Scofidio + Renfro, and their aesthetic and even theoretical similarities with the Situationists and Constant's New Babylon. This background will introduce my main comparative analysis between the High Line's overall form and that of New Babylon before delving into a specific formal consideration of Patty Heffley's event as a situation.⁸ Finally, I will offer a formal definition of the High Line with the goal of consolidating it as a new urban pattern with certain political and aesthetic characteristics and affordances.

ii. Politics and Aesthetics: Theoretical Considerations

The main reason for pushing a study of form as a kind of primal analysis before economic and ecological considerations take place, is because of the latent political configurations embedded in forms, which can encourage democracy and creativity, or unleash

⁸ From now on, I use the term situation in its Situationist context. See page 11 for definitions.

tyranny and boredom. Caroline Levine's discussion of the affordance of forms is useful to understand the High Line, and any urban scale project as both an aesthetic and political object. While Levine's discussion is directed towards social and literary forms, the re-introduction of the expanded concept of affordance into the design disciplines is intuitive and useful, particularly when talking about the grand urban schemes of the 20th century, from the de facto powers like Le Corbusier and Robert Moses, to the radical utopias of the avant-garde movements such as the Situationist International. Thus, Levine's descriptions of form--"bounded enclosures will always exclude, rhyme will always repeat...a panoptic arrangement of space will always afford a certain kind of disciplinary power, and a hierarchy will always afford inequality"⁹--fall into place almost by themselves whether discussing radial cities or New Babylon. Therefore, the form of the High Line is not just beautiful, but also politically charged in ways that may be exploited by the regular citizen. I go into a detailed analysis of this argument later in sections vi and vii.

While Levine's concept of affordance as a property of form that enables both political and aesthetic considerations is convincing, I would like to take a step further into the architectural dimension and talk about forms as sitting on space, and how space itself is inherently both political and aesthetic ground. To do this, I would like to introduce some of the ideas of French philosopher Jacques Ranciere. In *The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics*, Ranciere discusses the basic elements of his thought. For Ranciere, modern discourse has separated politics and aesthetics into specific, often mutually exclusive places.¹⁰ In other words, the political happens at the voting booth and the hall of congress, while the aesthetic is

⁹ Levine, Caroline. 2015. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. (Oxford: Princeton University Press). 6.

¹⁰ Ranciere writes on page 8 that "It is not a mere coincidence that made the art museum emerge at the time of the French Revolution." He then explains that, "The exceptionality of politics has no specific place. Aesthetic autonomy, on the contrary, has specific places."

something delineated by the museum or the private collection. Ranciere argues against this division of the “sensible.” According to him, the point of contact between aesthetics and politics is everywhere in space. Real politics and real aesthetics (as opposed to the preconceived operations and places marked by authorities) happen on the stage of everyday life by way of regular citizen actions and encounters. Ranciere writes that,

“What I mean is that politics, rather than the exercise of power or the struggle for power, is the configuration of a specific world, a specific form of experience in which some things appear to be political objects, some questions political issues or argumentations and some agents political subjects. I attempted to redefine this ‘aesthetic’ nature of politics by setting politics not as a world of competing interests or values but as a world of competing worlds.”¹¹

These worlds are all manifested in space, whether it is Wall St., Ground Zero, or the High Line. As Ranciere summarizes, “there is no political life, but a political stage...The political is the field of encounter.”¹² The High Line is therefore not only a form with political affordances, but a public space and therefore a field or stage where the “real” drama of politics to unfold.

This understanding of space as the field of aesthetic and political change seems to have pervaded the theoretical program of most urban utopias of the 20th century, from Archizoom’s “No-Stop City,” to Rem Koolhaas “City of the Captive Globe.”¹³ As David Pinder writes, “utopian visions of the city are traditionally based on ordered spatial forms. These provide the settings for ordered, harmonious societies in which the ills of the present day are banished to another space and time.”¹⁴ In section iv I frame the way in which these assumptions of space and form are evident in the work of the Situationists and Constant’s New Babylon.

¹¹ Bowman, Paul, and Stamp, Richard, eds. 2011. *Reading Ranciere*. (London: Continuum Books). 7.

¹² Bowman, Paul, and Stamp, Richard, eds. 2011. *Reading Ranciere*. 4-5.

¹³ Pier Vittorio Aureli goes into a fascinating review of these and other utopias in his book “Possibility of an Absolute Architecture.

¹⁴ Pinder, David. 2001. Utopian Transfiguration: The Other Spaces of New Babylon. *Architectural Design* 71, no. 3 (June):15-19.

iii. History of the High Line

The High Line started out as a ground line that served the burgeoning industries of Manhattan's West Side during the latter half of the 19th century. The traffic nightmare that was unleashed as New York's population exploded was, by the 1920s, killing pedestrians and provoking accidents on a daily basis. Finally, in 1924, the city ordered the removal of all grade level rail crossings. A proposal to build an elevated rail was approved by the city, and the new infrastructure became operational in 1933. By the 1960s however, a significant decline in railroad usage convinced the city to demolish the southern part of the High Line. The last train ran down the High Line in 1980. The line was not officially declared as abandoned however.¹⁵ During the 80s and 90s, multiple neighborhood groups called for demolition of the entire structure labelling it as urban blight, as weeds and trash covered the tarnished tracks. A second fragment of the south section of the High Line was demolished to give way to apartment buildings, bringing the structure to its current terminus in Gansevoort St, in the Meatpacking District. In 1999, a *New York Times* article reported that CSX Transportation, the latest owner of the High Line, was open to suggestions for reuse of the elevated tracks. Weeks later, a community hearing was held for Chelsea residents to consider the fate of the High Line, which had now been scheduled for demolition by the Giuliani city administration. It is in this meeting that the two co-founders of Friends of the Highline (from now on Friends), Chelsea residents Joshua David and Robert Hammond, met and agreed to save the structure from the bulldozer.¹⁶

¹⁵ "Abandoned," is a technical term used to describe a line with no further potential to serve as rail traffic.

¹⁶ All historical facts were taken from Joshua David and Robert Hammond's *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City's Park in the Sky*. The book is, as far as I know, the most detailed account of the High Line to date.

Over the next ten years, David and Hammond gathered support from the community as well as wealthy and influential Manhattan residents, including designer Diane von Furstenberg and her husband, IAC Chairman Barry Diller, actor Edward Norton, and a host of Wall Street executives and professionals. Crucial to their effort were Joel Sternfeld's photographs of the natural beauty growing on the abandoned tracks of the High Line.¹⁷ The photographs, requested by David and Hammond, and taken over the course of two years, captured the changing wilderness of the High Line throughout the seasons, instilling it with romantic value and spreading the desire to save and transform it, with minimal changes, into a park.¹⁸ A battle of interests ensued between the Friends and the Chelsea Property Owners Association, who wanted demolition. A lawsuit by Friends blocked the demolition order until the new Bloomberg administration, which was supportive of the High Line, took office. After several calls for proposals, the team of James Corner Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro won a final competition to design an elevated park and trail. The High Line Park opened to the public on June 8, 2009, ten years after Hammond and David first exchanged business cards.

Essential to our understanding of the development of the High Line is the realization that, given the historical circumstances, they were only two possible outcomes for the infrastructure: demolition, or extensive renovations. While many detractors of the High Line's current design criticize it for being artificial, a tourist trap, and wastefully expensive as well as an engine for

¹⁷ Sternfeld's photographs were all published in the book *Joel Sternfeld: Walking the High Line* with accompanying essays by Adam Gopnik and John Stilgoe, who further romanticize the idea of the High Line as "New York's secret avenue," (45) and "the way spring actually looks in New York" (49).

¹⁸ Smith, Roberta. 2001. Joel Sternfeld: Walking the High Line. *New York Times*. December 28. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/28/arts/art-in-review-joel-sternfeld-walking-the-high-line.html> (accessed December 13, 2015).

gentrification,¹⁹ the reality is that, where the High Line ever to be a park, the technical intervention as required by State and City regulations had to be extensive, with no possibilities for the original plants to survive.²⁰ As far as the cost of building and maintaining the High Line, a point is highlighted by Jamie Simone from the AICP²¹ when talking about the Chicago Bloomingdale Trail: projects such as the High Line and the Bloomingdale trail, while socially classified as parks or open spaces, are as a matter of fact infrastructure projects that demand the same amount of budget and safety attention as bridges and roads.^{22,23}

iv. New Babylon and the Situationists

The Situationists were a small group of anti-state marxist artists and intellectuals, whose main mission was to imagine and prepare the terrain for an anti-capitalist, anti-state revolution. The group, led by French intellectual and filmmaker Guy Debord, is particularly relevant in the context of this paper for the clear associations they made between the aesthetics of the built environment, and its political potentials. They saw urban space as the essential medium of the revolution. As Tom McDonough writes in *The Situationists and the City*, “Debord would insist that human freedom would take an urban form.”²⁴ Debord and his followers developed certain important concepts and practices that will be useful later when discussing the High Line. First,

¹⁹ One of the most vocal critics of the High Line is Jeremiah Moss, author of the rather famous blog “Vanishing New York.” In his 2012 op-ed in the *New York Times*, Moss makes public his complete loss of faith in the High Line as a neighborhood park, blaming its very design for the massive crowds of tourists and gentrification of the neighborhood. He does not however, explain in any specific terms how is it that the design or form of the High Line generates such crowds and omits the fact that gentrification was a process well underway in Chelsea by the time Hammond and David met. Moss does recognize however, that the High Line was a victim of Mayor Bloomberg’s aggressive capitalization of Manhattan.

²⁰ David, Joshua, and Hammond, Robert. 2011. *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City’s Park in the Sky*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux). 73.

²¹ American Institute of Certified Planners

²² American Planning Association. “Bloomingdale Trail: An Interview with Jamie Simone. YouTube video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPENITOIg_s (accessed November 26, 2015).

²³ In *Architecture After Images*, Edward Dimendberg writes in p. 189 that “In the end the remediation of the site, rather than architecture, proved the major expense in realizing the park.”

²⁴ McDonough, Tom, ed. 2009. *The Situationists and the City*. (New York: Verso). 30.

the practice of *derive*, defined by Debord as “a technique of swift passage through varied environments.”²⁵ Derive, or drifting, was not to be compared with strolling down the streets; it was a way of activating through a person's body and mind the varied *ambiances* or atmospheres offered by the city. These environments, in the context of Paris, where essentially the distinct neighborhoods throughout the metropolis, which were, in the eyes of the Situationists, either already ruined, or threatened by the so called “good taste” of the bourgeoisie. In the future, Debord would argue, cities would be built entirely for the purpose of derive.²⁶ A second concept is that of *detournement*, or the appropriation of the products and places of capital to project revolutionary messages. Whether subverting the meaning of commercial and political propaganda, or painting militant graffiti on key areas of the city, *detournement* was a method of inciting rebellion and gearing the mood of the population towards critical dissatisfaction.²⁷

Constant Nieuwenhuys was an artist turned visionary architect, who was member of the Situationist International during what Mark Wigley would call the group's “architectural interlude.”²⁸ This is because of Constant's volcanic flow of drawings, models and statements that tried to represent snapshots of what the world society after revolution would look like. His entire project came to be known as “New Babylon.” Constant, generally sanctioned by Debord, saw the future of urban civilization as a worldwide city made out of giant slabs or sectors raised above ground. This city would be in constant construction, its inhabitants free to play the global game of urban planning.²⁹ While machines took care of services and production down below,

²⁵ McDonough, Tom, ed. 2009. *The Situationists and the City*. 78.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 78.

²⁷ Sadler, Simon. 1999. *The Situationist City*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press). 17-19.

²⁸ Wigley, Mark. 2001. The Great Urbanism Game. *Architectural Design* 71, no. 3 (June): 8.

²⁹ Wigley, Mark. 1998. *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*. (Rotterdam: /010 Publishers). 9-12.

humans would be free to explore, destroy and construct so called “situations.” Debord defined a situation as “the concrete construction of temporary settings of life and their transformation into a higher passionate nature.”³⁰ Debord sets the new aesthetic of such setting when he writes that “I don’t have in mind plastic beauty-- the new beauty can only be a beauty of situation--but solely the particularly moving presentation, in one case or another, of a sum of possibilities.”³¹ A dispute over the general definition of situation was what eventually convinced Constant to part ways with Debord and the Situationists. Increasingly learned in architecture theory and technique,³² Constant’s projections became ever more defined by details and specific images that displeased Debord’s unforgiving visions of an “atmospheric,” rather than tectonic future.³³ Nonetheless, a common belief in the character of situations was clear: that of a highly stimulating built environment constructed not to serve functions, but to guarantee the freedom of play; not zoned and segregated, but connected, and flexible, not built, but always under construction. Above all, a built environment that could only be activated, mediated, and shaped by the people at their own will.

v. A Situation in Contemporary Design

David and Hammond disagreed on the character of the High Line when choosing the final design team. “Robert viewed the High Line as a landscape primarily, and I was always more interested in it as a structure,” wrote David.³⁴ The competition was configured to include

³⁰ McDonough, Tom, ed. 2009. *The Situationists and the City*. 94.

³¹ Ibid. 62.

³² In *The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*, Wigley identifies Constant’s numerous connections to the architectural community, starting with Aldo van Eyck, who even invited him to meetings of CIAM, to his collaborations on color and housing with Gerrit Rietveld. 20-26.

³³ As Wigley paraphrases in p. 34, “architects must shift emphasis from form to atmosphere so radically that architecture itself will disappear as a discrete practice.”

³⁴ David, Joshua, and Hammond, Robert. 2011. *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City’s Park in the Sky*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux). 73.

four final teams made up of a lead architect and a supporting landscape architect.³⁵ Diller Scofidio + Renfro and James Corner Field Operations were chosen just slightly over Steven Holl and George Hargreaves.³⁶ DS+R were essentially chosen because of their austere design approach and desire for a minimal intervention that would leave most of the space to plants, and just enough hard surfaces for people to walk through. “My job as an architect is to protect the High Line from architecture,” Hammond quotes Ric Scofidio.³⁷ Ultimately, the goal of preserving and featuring the existing structure, as well as rebuilding the “wild” atmosphere of the original High Line was achieved with the design team selection. This did not mean that the High Line was completely devoid of architecture as it is explained in the following section.

As the leading firm of the High Line project, it is useful to look back into DS + R’s career background not just as a formal academic move, but because of the vital resemblance between their work and the ideas of the Situationists and Constant.³⁸

DS + R’s most famous project before their bigger architectural commissions (The High Line, the ICA in Boston, and the Lincoln Center Revitalization to name a few), is an excellent example of the aesthetic and theoretical resemblance with New Babylon. *Blur*, the name given to the project, was a “cloud” pavilion for the Swiss Expo 2002 in Yverdon-les-Bains. Built on a platform off the shore of a lake, the tensegrity structure inspired by Buckminster Fuller looked,

³⁵ Hammond writes on the same page how, had he the opportunity to do it all over again, would place the landscape architect as the lead architect, and not the other way around. He does not elaborate why.

³⁶ The other two finalists were Zaha Hadid, whose design had an almost complete lack of vegetation (Hadid is quoted by Hammond as saying, “Trees are things that architects put in the plan when they do not know what to do with that space”), as well as a major disregard for the existing structure, and Michael Van Valkenburgh with D.I.R.T Studios, who were already working in numerous revitalization projects around New York City. Steven Holl was a close second for his historical association with the High Line referring back to his 1981 “Bridge of Houses” proposal. 73-79.

³⁷ David, Joshua, and Hammond, Robert. 2011. *High Line: The Inside Story of New York City’s Park in the Sky*. 77.

³⁸ It was in fact a great pleasure to discover the amazing work of DS + R and how it profoundly relates to de la Machine, situations, and New Babylon.

felt, and acted just like a Debordian situation. Indeed, if Constant had ever dreamed of building a 1:1 scale model of a situation, DS +R's *Blur* would have probably passed his formal test. With 34,000 nozzles, the structure managed to create a vapor cloud that enveloped most of the structure, effectively blurring the vision of all visitors and forcing them to rely on their other senses to find their way through the wet atmosphere. Had it been realized, the original conception of the project would have served as a textbook example on how to build situations for the real world. From projecting film and images on the cloud, to emitting sounds and smells “intended to overcome distinctions between the ‘natural,’ and the ‘artificial,’”³⁹ the envisioned project would have become, as Edward Dimendberg writes in *Architecture after Images*, a 21st century *Gesamtkunstwerk*⁴⁰, nothing short of the Situationists' goal of blending all the arts into a life experience, a situation. In one of their early statements for the project, Diller and Scofidio write:

“Our objective is to weave together architecture and electronic technologies, yet exchange the properties of each for the other. Thus, architecture would dematerialize and electronic media, normally ephemeral, would become palpable in space. Both would require sophisticated technologies that would be entirely invisible, leaving only their effects.”

Just as Debord dreamt, the structure was more atmosphere than architecture; machines would take care of the operations while humans focused on play, and, had Diller and Scofidio realized their own dreams, all the people in the structure would be wandering as equals by virtue of a standardized coat given to all visitors at the entrance. As Dimendberg summarizes, “*Blur*...

³⁹ Dimendberg, Edward. 2013. *Diller Scofidio + Renfro: Architecture after Images*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). 151

⁴⁰ Ibid.150.

was intended as an antidote to ‘visually obsessed, high resolution/high definition culture.’⁴¹ *Blur* was an antidote to the Spectacle.⁴²

vi. The Form and Space of the High Line

The High Line runs across twenty-two city blocks, starting at the railyards of Penn Station, down to the new Whitney Museum in the Meatpacking District. Because of its past, it is decisively not a work of architecture, but of infrastructure. In this sense, it could be likened to the giant slab sectors of New Babylon. They’re both infrastructures of play. Like these slabs, the High Line is elevated by pilotes. Neither New Babylon or the High Line have a decisive point or nucleus. Instead, their form encourages a slow transition throughout the city’s changing landscape. As Dimendberg writes, “the High Line was conceived by the design team ‘to decelerate the visitors’ urban pace.’”^{43,44} One of the main goals of New Babylon was to disorient people, to eliminate spatial rationality and blur day and night, summer and winter to encourage *derive*. While the High Line cannot affect people through active weather conditions, (like *Blur* did, or at least simulated) it does sit passively outside and changes thoroughly with the seasons. Because it crosses an entire zone of one of the most dense cities in the western world, the High Line disorients people by virtue of exposing them to the inherent complexity and contradiction of

⁴¹ Ibid. 150.

⁴² It is almost certain that Diller and Scofidio are directly aware of the Situationists and New Babylon. However, I could not find a single source that cited them drawing connections with either. The presence of Constant and Debord is palpable throughout their work nonetheless, and an entire different project could easily frame their career in that respect.

⁴³ Dimendberg, Edward. 2013. 189.

⁴⁴ Ric Scofidio and James Corner came up with the High Line’s design philosophy: “Keep it simple, keep it wild, keep it quiet, keep it slow.” (189). It is in in this sense, and particularly in keeping it slow, that the High Line as urban form is different from what has been called its predecessor, the *Promenade Plantee* in Paris. The designers of the Promenade, according to Hammond, essentially saw it as a form of pedestrian transportation. Their mistake was not to provide enough seating and furniture once they realized people liked to relax and spend time on the structure (Hammond, 84).

urban life seen from above the street. It is not a museum, as it has been described,⁴⁵ because of the impossibility of curating raw street life. Moreover, it re-defines people's spatial experience of Manhattan, hiding what is usually visible, and revealing what is never featured. It is a tour of backstreet New York. The sometimes subtle, sometimes aggressive introduction of vegetation along the park, as in the case of the Falcone Flyover that lifts visitors further away from the ground and up into a treeline guarded on the sides by tall, abandoned warehouses, only makes such experience the more disorienting. This is but an instance of the many forms on the High Line⁴⁶ that afford creative encounters with the built environment and the people interacting with it.

The High Line is of course, very different from New Babylon. If it is a work of art, is a completed work of art, as far as its formal construction is concerned,⁴⁷ whereas New Babylon was meant to be temporary, and in a perennial process of construction. The High Line is tiny compared to any of the sectors Constant envisioned, which would rise 60 feet into the air and cover entire square miles. New Babylon was a place for living. The High Line is strictly a recreational place. Most relevant of all, High Line visitors agree to follow a series of rules. New Babylon was a free for all game scenario.

⁴⁵ Moss writes in his August 2012 New York Times Op-Ed, "My skepticism took root during my first visit. The designers had scrubbed the graffiti and tamed the wildflowers. Guards admonished me when my foot moved too close to a weed. [I've never seen guards on the High Line, not even near closing hours on an August Friday night]. Was this a park or a museum? I felt I was in the home of a neatnik with expensive tastes, afraid I would soil the furnishings."

⁴⁶ There are thirteen officially declared "features" on the High Line according to the visitors website. These range from viewing platforms, to playgrounds, and sunbathing terraces. While many of these can be neatly framed as situations throughout the Neo-Babylonian structure, the case of Patty Heffley highlights the fact that almost any corner of the High Line spontaneously suggests its transformation from tourist attraction to situation.

⁴⁷ The art, people, seasons, and city around the park change on a daily basis however, so in this sense the High Line experience is built on a daily basis.

Nonetheless, because of the scale, and the form as well as the way it sits on the city the High Line in its existing park form adds a new layer of complexity to the fabric of New York. Before renovation, only a few able bodies would dare to adventure into the grasslands of the High Line. Now, virtually anyone alive can experience it, the structure becoming a stream of half New Yorkers, half out of city visitors.⁴⁸ As Heffley said, “everyone is now looking at my window.” The High Line thus presents a number of potential situations; existing forms that encourage a social and political performance, and grant unique and until recently forbidden or out of reach vantage points into other people’s lives, work, and play. As the architects of the High Line say, this park is about seeing and being seen.⁴⁹ Its height grants a perspective of the metropolis that is neither tactical nor strategic.⁵⁰ It is simply *horizontal*-- a disruptive aesthetic⁵¹ across the “wave of verticals.”⁵² Humans no longer stacked on top of one another in a hierarchy, but slowly threading their way through the middle.

Or it may be that the High Line, (and *Blur* for that matter) may be an element of the Spectacle; a distraction, a procession of capitalist tourists. It is here that I go back to Patty

⁴⁸ Fairly common statistic shared by the Park administrators, Dimendberg’s narrative, and Jeremiah Moss’ article.

⁴⁹ *Great Museums: Elevated Thinking: The High Line in New York City*, produced by Marc and Chesney Doyle.

⁵⁰ I refer to Michel de Certeau’s concepts presented in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Strategy, the “solar eye” (92) of the planner, granted by the infinite height of the map, or that of the 110th floor of the former World Trade Center; and tactics, “the practices organizing a bustling city characterized by their blindness.” (93) In other words, the non-prospective view of the street pedestrian.

⁵¹ I refer to the concept of dissensus or aesthetic disruption of the political espoused by Ranciere. Thomas Markussen writes on p. 5 of *The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism*, “Aesthetic dissensus is not about an institutional overturning or overtaking of power. The ultimate goal is not the realisation of grandiose social utopias through violent acts, riots or revolution, but a non-violent unsettling of the self-evidence with which existing systems of power control and restrict the unfolding of our everyday behavior and interaction.”

⁵² Michel de Certeau writes on p. 91 of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, “Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals.”

Heffley's story with the goal of framing it as a situation. A recent dissertation⁵³ argues that while Patty Heffley's performance was an interesting event, the fact that no one called for her re-appearance after it was dismantled by her landlord serves as evidence that even though the spatial arrangement fosters these kinds of creative encounters between strangers, there is no political follow-up; there is no revolution afterwards. In other words, Heffley's idea was just another show, another spectacle. An interview with Heffley reveals that she was not planning on doing this for a long time in the first place.⁵⁴ She was essentially teasing her landlord, the high line visitors, and her neighbors. One of them was bound to snap before long. The show did not go on, because it went on as far as it could. As Heffley said it herself, she wasn't celebrating a show, but *exploiting* a spatial and therefore political and aesthetic situation.

To think that a legitimate political act must lead to outright social change disregards the common field of the political Ranciere describes in his work, and which also supports Michel de Certeau's notion of tactical practices that,

“take advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depend on them... A tactic boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order suddenly to produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place. Cross-cuts, fragments, cracks and lucky hits in the framework of a system.”⁵⁵

While de Certeau places strategic power on space, and tactical power on time, the disruptive aesthetic of the High Line--that is, its elevated horizontal, cross-sectional aesthetic--subverts strategic space by offering, as in the case of Patty Heffley, endless spatial opportunities for political situations that happen outside the respective proper places of politics

⁵³ Warren, Julia. 2014. *The High Line: A 'Suburban Space' for an Urban Public*. B.A. diss. University of Pittsburgh.

⁵⁴ *Great Museums: Elevated Thinking: The High Line in New York City*, produced by Marc and Chesney Doyle.

⁵⁵ de Certeau, Michel. 1988. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press). 37-38.

and aesthetics, tactics and strategy. Perhaps the comparison is far fetched, but taken on a point by point basis, the High Line may be considered a designerly form of activism because “it exploits these [dominant] political conditions by turning them into new enabling conditions for unintended urban actions.”⁵⁶

vii. Conclusion

If we zoom out of Patty Heffley’s situation, we can understand the uniqueness of the form and space of the High Line and its relationship to the city. It is a public park running across a universe of independent actors. It is not a museum because the Park does not control what gets painted on the neighboring walls, or what people do inside their windows while pursuing their own lives.⁵⁷ Independent artists⁵⁸ have set up their works of art separate from the formally commissioned artists, and often react to them. Protests, which are visible from the High Line, have happened on the neighboring terraces and roofs, and on the highline itself.⁵⁹ As Dimendberg writes in his politically toned-down assessment of the High Line,

“If there is a paradox in the project, it resides in designing spaces to encourage new uses and generate surprise, a ludic agenda that evokes the tensions between architecture and spontaneity explored in *New Babylon* (1959-1974) by Constant Nieuwenhuys.⁶⁰ Though not radically contesting property and social relations as did the unrealized designs of the Dutch architect, the High Line can be enjoyed here and now, a

⁵⁶ Markussen, Thomas. 2011. *The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design between Art and Politics. Nordic Design Research Conference 2011*: 6. http://intranet.dskd.dk/fileadmin/PDF/Disruptive_aesthetics_of_urban_interventions_final_tm.pdf (accessed November 24, 2015).

⁵⁷ Sometimes, the High Line doesn’t even control what happens on its own grounds, as the numerous examples of “improper” actions such as protests, nudism, and sex demonstrate.

⁵⁸ One of these artists, Jordan Betten, who lives and works on a building next to the park, performed the painting of a mural on his own building terrace for the people looking from the High Line, as shown in the documentary *Elevated Thinking*.

⁵⁹ Protesters have gathered to protest the High Line itself, as well as for instance, the use of exotic lumber from the Amazon to cover the surface of the 10th Avenue Square Overlook. They subverted the glazing of the overlook by filling it up with a demonstration sign that read: “FSC Lies: Amazon wood is not sustainable.” What was meant to be a voyeuristic/spectacular situation was transformed into an ideal protest space and form, an excellent example of *detournement*.

⁶⁰ Dimendberg finally breaks the silence regarding Constant’s latent influence on the work of DS +R, by comparing the High Line to *New Babylon* in this short but rewarding statement.

reminder that tangible urban improvements remain possible in an imperfect world and in a prosaic cityscape.”⁶¹

This well crafted statement does not take away from the democratic affordance of the High Line and its very real potential to inspire aesthetically political encounters on its space. The form and space of the Highline, as I hope I have proved in this paper, are prone to be taken over by the practice *and* performance of everyday life. If for a conclusion I may offer a formal typological definition, I would define the High Line as the idea of a long horizontal stage that cuts across the layers, hierarchies, and history of the metropolis, to show, through human interaction, a living cross section of such complexity. What scenes, encounters, and activities may this new vision provoke is unknown and represents either a risk or an opportunity to the cities now considering getting their own High Line.

⁶¹ Dimendberg, *Architecture after Images*, 2013. 193.

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