Superblock
Joe Hamilton

Superblock, Joe Hamilton's work for *Window | National*, mines the literal and metaphorical connections between virtual and physical windows, and continues his fascination with the screen as a site that merges production, reception and transmission. Here, Hamilton has crowd-sourced images of and around the six physical sites of the *Window | National* project, and a selection of these images has then been intricately collaged, digitally, to create a single complex and layered image. The sites have been combined and collapsed into each other via the surface of the screen to create an image which will then be physically layered back onto the geographic sites and surfaces of the six windows of *Window | National*. Hamilton's construction of a virtual city block, composed of textures taken from the sites in which the work will be installed, emphasises the interplay between virtual forms and physical urban architecture.

The relation between virtual screen and physical place is ambivalent in Hamilton's work, with the screen interface acting as a site of both orientation and displacement. Via online tools precise co-ordinates orient us, and places can be accessed remotely and exactly defined, spatially and geographically. Yet, this ubiquity of instantaneous access to information simultaneously splinters our connection to the singularity of place. The ground shifts below our feet as our attention splits across devices that incessantly imbricate us within broader networks of communication where, as Paul Virilio notes, "*here* and *there* no longer mean anything […] the difference between 'near' and 'far' simply ceases to exist."[1]

Superblock elaborates on Hamilton's Tumblr-based artwork, *Hyper Geography*: a sprawling, scrolling amalgamation of images sourced

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1   Paul Virilio. *The Lost Dimension*. 1984. Trans. Daniel Moshenberg. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1991. p.12.

from other Tumblr users. *Hyper Geography* was translated into the stasis of print, via a book of the same name (Jean Boîte Editions, 2014), emphasising the interlacing, rather than binarism, of the virtual and physical. This translation, collapsing the form of Tumblr with the form of a physical book, served to situate the online archive within a continuum of cultural production in which *bricolage* is not unique to digitisation. Instead, *bricolage*, using what is at hand, is understood as the basic condition of cultural production, shared by books and Tumblrs alike, though this is accelerated and mutated via the digital. Similarly, *Superblock* translates digitally-sourced and manipulated images into a physical form, to be adhered to the six windows of the project.

While *Hyper Geography* resulted in an interplay of the virtual and physical via its oscillation between print and screen, *Superblock* extends this interplay to the relationship between architecture and media. The image itself, a virtual city-block, constructed of textures sourced via digital photographs of the sites, explicitly evokes the continuities and discontinuities between architectural surface and screen surface. The architectural window is particularly significant in this context. As Anne Friedberg has described, the architectural window and the screen are philosophically intertwined. The historical transformation of the window, from an opening for light and ventilation into its role as the framing of a view, acted as a philosophical precursor to the screen of cinema, television and beyond. More recently, the ascendance of the multiplicity of the computer screen, with its simultaneous layered, juxtaposed 'windows' has displaced the singular perspective of the architectural window.[2] The mobility of the window, already accelerating via the train, the car and the jet, gathers velocity with the computer window, where the speed of digital networks abolishes physical distance. By combining the dispersed sites of the *Window | National* project into the singular virtual space of the *Superblock* image, an image that is then physically layered back over these spaces and their architectural windows, Hamilton emphasises both this historical legacy of the window, and also its contemporary mutation, defined by networked simultaneity.

Writing in the early 1980s, Paul Virilio considered the effect of telecommunications technology on the city, which he describes as the 'overexposed city'. This 'overexposure' refers to the centrality of surveillance in the city, its absolute visibility, but also connotes the disappearance of the city, as an overexposed image loses coherence and definition. At the time Virilio was

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2   Anne Friedberg. *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

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writing there was a literal exodus of people from many North American cities, occurring in the wake of post-industrialisation, structural unemployment, anti-nuclear strategies and other forces of decentralisation. Virilio suggested that telecommuting would further continue the death of the city, as "the sound of gates gives way to the clatter of data banks." Of course, the demographics of this trend have since been reversed, as urbanisation and urban populations have grown exponentially. But, as is always crucial in Virilio's writing, the *metaphorical* implications remain pertinent. For the city, as *polis*, that is as a place of citizen responsibility and direct democracy, has continued to disappear as urban agglomerations are increasingly surveilled, regulated, corporatized and lifeless, as is perhaps alluded to in the empty streets of S*uperblock*.[3]

For Virilio, urban planning and architecture, the spatial, has been displaced by the accelerated temporality of networked technology. This is not just a physical decline of the city, but the development of a more general and, for Virilio, conceptually central, "aesthetics of disappearance" in which the material supports of older artforms are displaced by the flickering of screens, offering only ephemeral images, unstable and constantly disappearing: "matter is replaced by retinal retention."[4] Cities still exist, of course, but the stability of sensible space is secondary to the temporal movement and discontinuity of electronic networks. The coherence of material urban space is shattered and re-organised by the dispersed velocity of information communication technologies.

The image that comprises *Superblock*, in which direct perception is replaced by the transmitted image, and in which the physical spatiality of the city has been replaced by a screen-based montage

3   For William J Mitchell, the city has moved from the *agora*, to the "anti-agora", particularly in the wake of post September 11 security (*Placing Words: Symbols, Space, and the City*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005. p.141-45) . Of course the decline of public space as *agora* has long been a concern of urban critics (see Mark Gottdiener. *The Theming of America: Dreams, Media Fantasies and Themed Environments*. Second Edition. Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001. p.158-62). Virilio ties this directly to the effects of screen based media, writing: there is no longer the *agora*, only the Cathode Ray Tube (*Lost Dimension*, 19). Mitchell's earlier work had suggested that electronic space could create an electronic *agora*, though the spectre of surveillance brings a more pessimistic perspective to his later work on the relationship between the city and telecommunication. See: William J. Mitchell. *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn*. 1995. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996; William J. Mitchell. *Me++: The Cyborg Self and the Networked City*. 2003. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
4   On the aesthetics of disappearance see *Lost Dimension* p.18, 25, 34-36. Virilio's book length *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* is also relevant here, though the concept is more broadly, and multifariously defined. For discussion specifically relevant to this definition see p.28 of *Aesthetics of Disappearance*. 1980. Trans. Philip Beitchman. Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009.
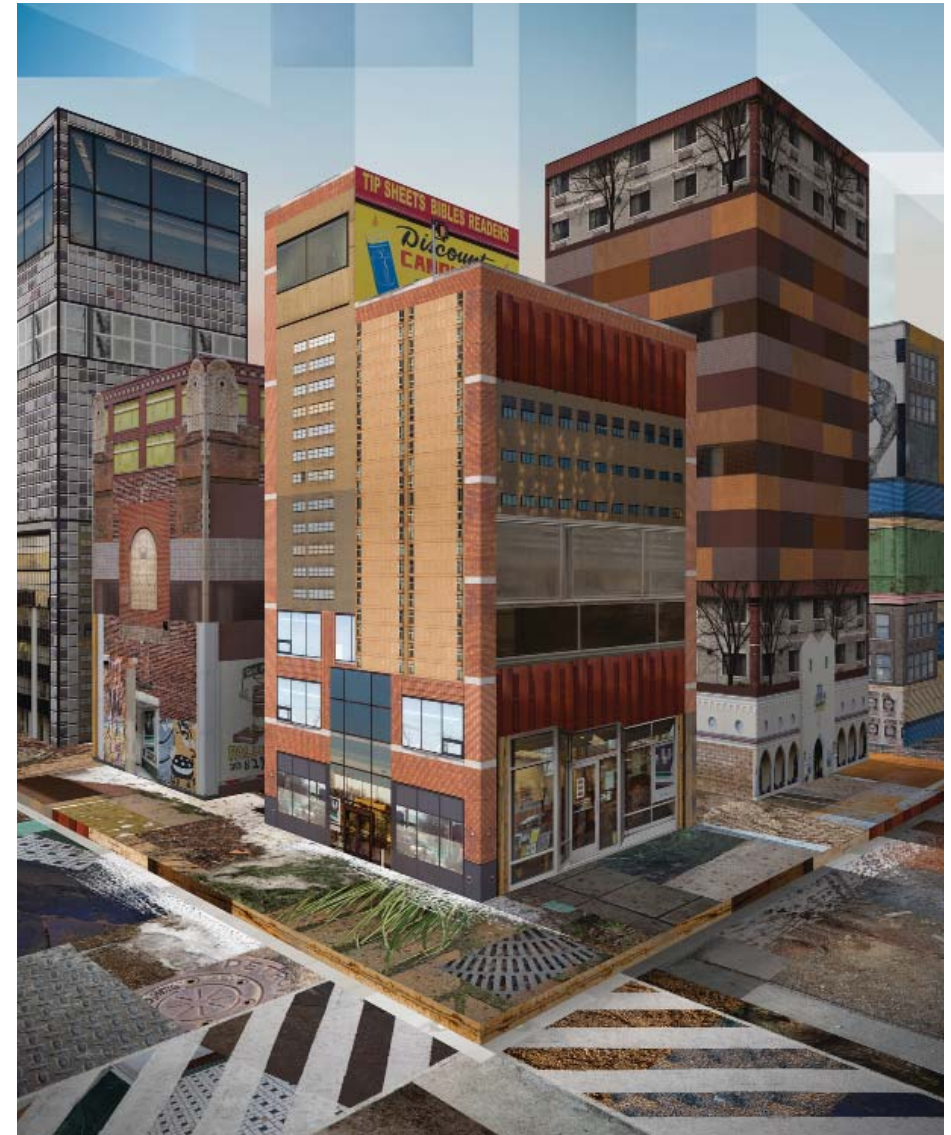
of dispersed surfaces, seems to capture many of Virilio's concerns. However, the physical vinyl, printed in each location, distributed by physical mail, placed by hand on glass windows and viewed, on purpose or by chance, in each of the disparate locations by onlookers who themselves have navigated the urban environment to stand before the image, works against the "aesthetics of disappearance". This aspect of *Superblock*, and the *Window | National* project, is directly referenced within the image through the use of onsite photographic samples. Where Hamilton usually sources material from the internet, he has here employed the services of individuals in each location to capture photographic images of the surrounding environment. The astute observer of the *Superblock* windows will locate images of the physical environment in which they stand, within the virtual image, thus locating the work beyond the frame of the image to incorporate the surrounding environment in each of the locations.

Superblock encourages exploration of the urban environment that surrounds the windows. Such a gesture seems particularly prescient given the release of *Pokémon Go* during the installation of *Superblock.* Just as one navigates the world searching for Pokémons, so might the viewer of *Superblock* navigate the specific locations in search of the physical source material from which the image is comprised. The resulting exploration of the surrounding environment would be inseparable from the synthetic environment of *Superblock.* Like *Pokémon Go*, among the proliferation of augmented reality apps, *Superblock* revolves around an unsettled oscillation between the virtual and material, place and non-place, individual and community, which complicates Virilio's work, while maintaining a connection to its concerns.[5]

The site-specificity of *Superblock* cements the otherwise ephemeral image within the particular locations of each window, however this materiality is fleeting, as the cycle of *Window | National* exhibitions sees one image replaced with another and the once physical installation becomes an image on the screen once again, distributed in the form of this catalogue and as documentation of the event. The moment of material presence that the installed images issued quickly disappears into the flicker of the screens where these words are located.

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5   As Christian McCrea has noted, the Pokémon brand, across its various incarnations and platforms over its twenty-year history, has always encouraged physical mobility and sociality. See: Christian McCrea. "Screaming Pikachu in a Crowded Theatre." *The Monthly* 15 July, 2016. https://www.themonthly.com.au/blog/christian-mccrea/2016/15/2016/1468554069/screaming-pikachu-crowded-theatre