The Architecture of Aftermath:
— Iconomy and Contemporaneity —

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(1,2) If one were to slow down a videotape of the first plane approaching then hitting the north tower of World Trade Center, New York, at 8:46 am on September 11, 2001, and then zoom in to the instants of impact, one would see the word "American" slide, letter by letter, into oblivion. In Kelly Geunther's *New York Times* photograph of the second plane as it hurtled through the skyscrapers of the Financial District towards the south tower, the blue and gray colors made it, unmistakably, a United Airlines flight. As images that draw us to imagine the deaths of actual human beings, these pictures were, and remain, deeply affecting. They record, among much else, an act of spectacular terrorism — an action of one group of humans against another within a war that is conducted at both symbolic and literal levels — a raid that was, and remains, profoundly disturbing. The profundity it disturbed was expressed, through perversely exact metaphor, in the violent obliteration of the word "UNITED."

These are the opening words of my book, *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). They condense the subject of the book, its analytical approach, but not its hints as to ways forward. In this article, I want to set these elements alongside another text written during the same time frame, in the same setting of aftermath, that was addressed to many of the same issues, and which — it turns out — interprets these issues and what might be done

about them in many, but not all, of the same ways: Retort (Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers, Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso: 2005,2[nd] ed. 2006)(3,4).

The 9/11 attacks were directed, Osama bin Laden told us in an interview published in the *Guardian Weekly* November 12-15, 2001, towards "America's icons of military and economic power." In his October 29, 2004 videotape intervention into the US Presidential election, he detailed his source of inspiration:

> The events that made a direct impression on me were during and after 1982, when America allowed the Israelis to invade Lebanon with the help of its third fleet. They started bombing, killing, and wounding many, while others fled in terror. I still remember those distressing scenes: blood, torn limbs, women and children massacred. All over the place, homes were being destroyed and tower blocks collapsing, while bombs rained down mercilessly on their homes…As I looked on those destroyed towers in Lebanon, it occurred to me to punish the oppressor in kind by destroying towers in America, so that it would have taste of its own medicine and would be prevented from killing our women and children. On that day I became sure that oppression and intentional murder of innocent women and children is a deliberate American policy. It seemed then that "freedom" and "democracy" are actually just terror, just as resistance is labelled "terrorism" and "reaction."
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> －Osama bin Laden, *Messages to the World, The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, ed. Bruce Lawrence (London: Verso, 2005, 239-40).

He goes on to mention the impact of US sanctions against Iraq imposed by "Bush Sr," and the vast bombing campaign launched by "Bush Jr" in order, as he

puts it "to remove a former collaborator, and install a new one who will help steal Iraq's oil, as well as commit other atrocities."

There is no denying the facts here, however different might be one's conclusions as to how to act in their light. Nor the power and impact of bin Laden's rhetoric, timing and media savvy with regard to his intended audiences. Since 9.11.01, at least, it has matched in its effectiveness that which the Bush administration – massively more resource rich – has mustered in defence of its own policies and actions. Indeed, it looks as if the former may outlast the desperate incoherence and waning effectiveness of the latter(5,6).

9.11.01

As an event, that which occurred on September 11, 2001, has been much inflated, its impacts exaggerated, its real effects smothered in hyperbole. But the deeper shifts of which it is one of many morbid symptoms cannot be denied. Responding to questions from Hal Foster of *October* magazine, the Retort group get closest to the most acute formulation that I know:

Everything about the basic furnishing of human oppression and misery has remained unchanged in the last 150 years – except that the machinery has been speeded up, and various ameliorations painted in on top…Nevertheless we do think that there is something distinctive about the Old New of the past four years. *Afflicted Powers* is an attempt to describe it. Very roughly, what seems to us unprecedented is the starkness – the extremity – of the confrontation between New Oldness and Old Newness. No one, surely, came close to anticipating that the opening of the 21st century would be structured around a battle between two such virulently reactionary forms of world

power (or will to world power), and that both sides would see so clearly that the battle is now to be fought by both bombs (crude attempts at recoloniza-tion, old-time resistance struggles, crowds waving the latest version of the Little Red Book) and images.

－*Afflicted Powers*, 198-9.

To this list of what constitute bombs we can add airplanes, explosives wrapped around a suicide, videotapes of all sorts, etc.－a list of denotations that will soon merge into visual images of many sorts, as they call up settings in which images of the work of bombs－instantly and globally disseminated－become vital to their effectivity(7,8).

Retort remobilizes Guy Debord's famous analysis of spectacle society, his con-demnation of capital's commodification of all relations, its colonization of every-day life through saturation with the imagery of unfulfillable desire. Retort is rightly sceptical of generalization and imprecision, but we might ask: does Debord's conception of the spectacle encompass everything we need to know about the image in the present situation, especially that of the past four years? Might not those of us with some sense of how visual images work add something to what Retort rightly poses as "the political question of the years to come." Against the fundamentalists, against the supine compromise all around, they ask "what other imagery, what other rhetoric, what *other* set of descriptions might be possible－ones that find form for the horror and emptiness of the modern, but *hold out no promise of Going Back?*" 210

I have been showing, and will continue to show, artworks and actions that pro-pose such *other* imagery. I want to suggest that two broader concepts may be of value: the ideas of iconomy, and of contemporaneity. And to show how, in the case of architecture, spectacle and its spectres have reached their historical

apogee, and are imploding still, creating, perhaps, an endless aftermath.

Iconomy (*eidos*, Greek: idea, thought, image, and *oikonomia*, Greek, *oecono-mia*, Latin: management of household, organization, system, economy)

The 9.11.01 attacks – along with the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, directed likewise against individuals, groups and places that were themselves both actual and iconic – have underlined the central importance to human affairs of the image economy, that is, the symbolic exchanges between people, things, ideas, interest groups and cultures that take predominantly visual form. In recognition of the subtle power and the all-pervasiveness of this trafficking in images, let us call it "the iconomy." This concept describes more than the dense image-manipulation that prevails in cultures predicated on conspicuous and incessant consumption. If anyone required a demonstration of the immediate but also far-reaching significance of the realm of visual culture – in its distinctiveness but also entanglement with those of politics, economics and the ecologies of every-day life – surely 9.11.01 was it. If anyone doubted whether iconic warfare dominated the thinking of those at the heights and centers of world political power, then the conduct, by the US government, of the media war about the War in Iraq should remove such doubts. Indeed, within weeks of the invasion it became clear that the war planners had devoted much more effort to their media campaigns than they had to planning the management of the aftermath of their lightning "victory."

As the occupation of Iraq by the American-led "coalition of the willing" unraveled during 2004, the randomness of aftermath surfaced in multiple ways, few more effective than the photographs of American troops staging scenes of torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in the very cells at Abu Ghraib that had so

notoriously sustained the previous regime(9,10).

The manifest presence of such an iconomic system means that we should not take it at its face value. Rather we should look through its surfaces and ask: what shape did this formation take in modernity, which shapes these days? I concentrate here on the latter question: time permits only the crudest statement of the idea that we should take seriously, and critically, the terms in which "our" time (if ours is what it is), and "our" arts (if that is what they are), is naming itself and naming themselves—primarily through the concept of the contemporary.

Contemporaneity

A proposition about the present. *Contemporaneity is the most evident attribute of the current world picture* – encompassing its most distinctive qualities, from the ideoscape of global politics to the interiority of individual being. This picture can no longer be adequately characterized by terms such as "modernity" and "postmodernity," not least because it is shaped by antimonial friction that resists universal generalization. It is, nonetheless, far from shapeless. Within contemporaneity, at least three sets of forces contend, turning each other incessantly:

(i) globalization's thirst for ideological hegemony in the face of increasing cultural differentiation (the multeity that was freed by decolonisation), for control of time in the face of the proliferation of asynchronous temporalities, and for continuing exploitation of natural resources against increasing evidence of the inability of those resources to sustain that exploitation—for these reasons, globalization is destined to fail;

(ii) the accelerating inequity between peoples, classes and individuals that

threatens both desires for domination and persistent dreams of liberation; and (iii) an infoscape — or, better, a spectacle, an image economy or "iconomy," a regime of representation — capable of the potentially instant yet always thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere, yet fissured by the uneasy coexistence of highly specialist, closed knowledge communities, open, volatile subjects and rampant popular fundamentalisms.

   These developments have long prehistories within modernity: their contemporary configuration was signalled in the 1950s (not least in art that prioritised various kinds of immediacy), burst out during the 1960s, has been evident to most since 1989, and unmistakable to all since 2001.

   "Contemporaneity" is the best name for this situation, as all of these qualities are inherent in the concept of the contemporary. Far from being singular and simple — a default for the modern — the contemporary signifies multiple ways of being with, in, and out of time, separately and at once. Of course, these possibilties have always been there — the difference, now, is that they predominate over the kinds of generative powers named by any other comparable terms (for example, the modern and its derivatives). They may be all that there is, and they point to a state beyond periodicity, with all that that entails. (More developed versions of this argument may be found in "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 2006, and, along with some highly developed contestations against it, in Terry Smith, Nancy Condee and Okwui Enwezor eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity and Contemporaneity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, forthcoming 2007).)

Architecture, iconomy, contemporaneity

The icons that were the subject of attack on September 11, 2001 happen to be－or used to be－buildings. A fatal convergence of architecture and terrorism occurred on that day. All buildings, built and unbuilt, suddenly attracted a shadow play of darting forces, chimera of the possibility that they could come under attack, could become target architecture. Yet the buildings under attack on September 11, 2001, were well entrenched within the iconomy. Having become key symbols within the later twentieth century society of the spectacle, icons with the capacity to stand for crucial values, they were actively traded within it. Each of them iconized entire sectors of US society, great formations of US nationality. But they were more than symbols, and the attacks were not (as some commentators rushed to say) a spectacular confirmation of popular postmodern analyses of our times as one in which appearances had triumphed over reality. Rather, the actual buildings were central, tangible embodiments of the complex functions that they housed, the most visible point of concentration of the complex array of powers associated with them. They were literal and figurative portals－gateways to, in turn, the US economy, the US military and US governance. The degree to which symbol and reality are embedded in each other is evident in the seismographic impact of the attacks on each of these sectors, and in the differences of register between them－differences that seem related to the degree of effectiveness of each attack. The special－indeed, spectacular, but also specular－role of architecture in the iconomy of later modernity is what is exposed in modernity's aftermath(13,14).

Architecture is also of relevance here because the conjunction of architecture and symbolism had become, during the 1990s, indicative of both the flashiest surfaces and the deepest currents of contemporaneity. Architecture had

become, of all the arts, the most socially prominent, the best looking, a hot story in the media – in a word, the buzz. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, 1997, was the apogee of this quality: a building defined above all by its striking and infinitely repeated image as an iconotype of high culture(15).

Equally spectacular, but a cul-de-sac, was the Past Modern of Richard Meier at the Getty Center, Los Angeles(16).

So, too, the technological featurism practiced most dramatically by Santiago Calatrava is a reprise of the achievement of the early twentieth century engineer architects and of the quasi-organic imagery and symbolic flourishes of the 1950s: it makes the structure's engineering into the primary point of the spectacle(17).

Paralleling these were the "tiger towers" in Kuala Lumpur, Shenzhen, Pudong, Tapei, Dubai and elsewhere: inflections of the Western skyscraper with local fili-grees, produced by both Western and local architects, that serve as the com-mand centres of "Asian values" capitalism(18).

These, then, were the resources available to contemporary architecture when faced with the irruption of 9/11. Plus one other: Libeskind's Jewish Museum Berlin, outstanding among those few efforts by contemporary architects to cope with the modernity's deepest contradictions – in this case, the fact that the city of Berlin was able, in 1942, to imagine itself without its Jews(19,20).

The reaction of architects to 9/11 was the same as for most other people; shock, horror, mourn, then, slowly, rebuild. But "rebuild" will not capture the depth of the challenge. It went to the question of building at all, to the uncon-scious of architecture, to the nether regions of any kind of construction, to some strange, spectral shadows, well away from the glare of spectacle.

On December 18, 2002, the Lower Manhattan Development Authority unveiled the "land use designs" of the groups of architects, planners, artists, etc. that it had chosen to rethink Ground Zero. They constituted most of the outstanding

firms of the moment, so their efforts were a profile of both impact and possibility.

The four currents of contemporary spectacle architecture identified in the first part of this paper were very much in evidence. Extraordinary technology dominated most submissions. Without exception, each design attempted to generate an instant iconotype. The twin towers appeared in most of the proposals, as spectres. Yet a number of recent innovations and speculations as to how to live differently in dense conurbations were also advanced, albeit figuratively－skycities, interstitial parks, roaming ecologies, free-form communities: all of these are key ideas for future building.

Gehry-style complexity infused the United Architects proposal, perhaps due to the input of Greg Lynn FORM and it pervaded the organic, staged "vertical city" of the group led by SOM(21,22).

The assertive geometry of the Meier group's design would have imposed on New York a Modernism more implacable than it has ever absorbed. The thought of its gridded gates marching through the rest of Manhattan is a neo-Corbusian nightmare(23).

Recycling the past was even more specific in Peterson/Littenberg's Garden for New York, a quiet place of recreation surrounded by buildings that repeat the comforting ordinariness of Deco period Manhattan(24).

Foster and Associates' project was two criss-crossed, "kissing" parallelpoids: the lost Twin Towers imagined as benign, gently related forms, as extruded glass Brancusis, as the towers so fondly misremembered by so many after their disappearance. Yet their economic efficiency was well disguised with ecological inclusions. Small wonder that this design received, by far, the most votes in public polling. Yet the computer graphic of this building pasted in to the existing skyline shows it, instantly, to be a ghost of the original WTC, albeit crystal-prismed for the New Age, and to be as out of place as its predecessor(25).

Among the three ideas advanced by Think was a pair of open steel frame towers, with various functions strung within them, such as a World Cultural Center, a performing arts space, a conference center and a 9.11.01 museum. The last took the form of a white shape twisted against itself. Inserted into the towers, and strung between them, it looked for all the world like the wreckage of an airplane: indeed, it was positioned in the skeletons at the points and angles of impact of the attacking planes. The net result was a curious picturing of 9.11.01 part-way through its cinematic unfolding, as if the event were freeze-framed at a moment when the anti-modernist attackers could be seen to have dashed themselves fruitlessly against the might of modernist structure and flexibility, that impossible moment – so deeply desired ever since by the attacked – before time resumed its rush and drew the towers down into the self-destruction that now seems natural to them(26).

Libeskind Studio, building on the Jewish Museum experience, began from a set of anti-spectacular premises (the slurry wall inspiration), and yet did not avoid spectacle in its proposed design, however much it dispersed and diverted its elements . Libeskind worked against iconotypy for most of his design, but succumbed to the pull of height by inserting a "vertical world garden" that would jut from the skyline, a sword-like echo of the Statue of Liberty. The capitalist fantasia of the "Asian tiger towers" are now finding some echoes back in the centers of Western commerce, in the work of David Childs for Skidmore Owings and Merrill, in the dully compromised design of the Freedom Tower for the World Trade Center site, New York(27,28).

Subsequently, bunker architecture has become the norm, although there is a great effort being made to build "green towers," for example, the proposal by UN Studios for a Library for New Orleans following the disastrous flood caused by hurricane Katrina(29).

Interrogatory architecture

I conclude by highlighting two other currents, both of which occur within what is, now, widely recognized and named as "contemporary architecture," both of which offer critique and hope, because their architectural outcomes evolve from a detailed process of contextual *interrogation*. These currents differ mostly in scale, in the degree of their usage of symbolic language, in their closeness to or distance from the demands of "late capital," and in the specificity of their connection with the conditions of contemporaneity. Within this work, there is, as we might expect, an enormous variety: from a celebration of present complexity to an enormous anxiety about it. One current appears in some of the projects of OMA-Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid and Daniel Libeskind, and in the speculative environments of Diller/Scorfidio. Critique is evident in the symbolic war architectures of Lebbeus Woods, and the installations of Thomas Hirschhorn(30,31).

But the deepest responses to the conditions of contemporaneity appear in much lesser known practitioners of alternative, nomad, survivalist architecture, ranging from the prototypes of Krystof Wodiczko, Lucy Orta, Ilona Németh and Andrea Zittel presented in international art shows to the specifics of urban collectives such as Slumdwellers International and Global Studio, and the practicalities of designs by Peter Myers that are used in the Australian outback by Aboriginal people. Myers's Knockabout Walkabout house prototype is transportable on a truck anywhere, may be entirely assembled with a power drill, and is liveable on or off the grid(32,33).

My conclusion is this. From Manhattan to the Australian outback, more and more artists and architects are reacting against the violence that is the spectral underside of the spectacular surfaces of the iconomy; they reject the exploita-

THE **ARCHITECTURE** OF **AFTERMATH** TERRY SMITH
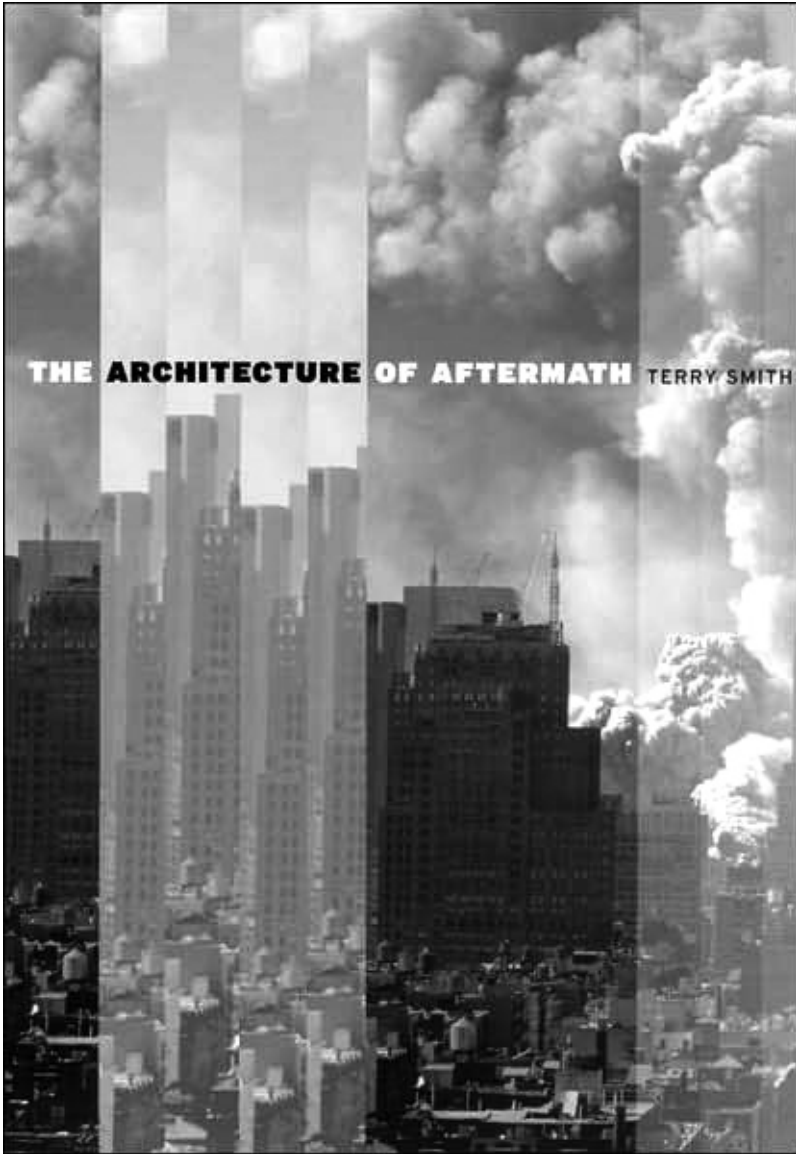
tion, inequity and instanteity that characterizes the overreach of globalization and the failing politics of Empire; and they seek acute and accurate insights into the conditions of contemporaneity. In so doing, they are attempting to forge truly contemporary ways of being in time, of dwelling in location, of newly shaping self, and of conveying these insights effectively to others.

1　Kelly Geunther, *United airplane approaches South Tower of World Trade Center, New York, September 11, 2001*, photograph 2001

2　*New York Times*, front page, September 12, 2001

3　Al Jazeera television, Osama bin Laden video address, October 2001

4　Walid Raad & The Atlas group, *We Can Make Rain But No One Came to Ask*, still from DVD, 2005

5　Al Jazeera television, Logo for program on terrorism, October 2001

6　Time Magazine, *Why the War on Terror will Never End*, 26 May, 2003, cover

7　Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, stills from film, 1973

8　Protest March, sponsored by United for Peace and Justice, relating to Republican National Convention, New York, 29 August 2004

9　Deep Dish TV Network, *Shocking and Awful: A Grassroots response to War and Occupation: The Real Face of Occupation*, still from video, 2003-5

10　Richard Serra, *Stop Bush*, portable poster, lithocrayon, 2004

11　Steve McCurry, *World Trade Center tower collapsing*, 1 and 2 of sequence, photographs, 2001

12　The Pentagon Attacked, September 11, 2001, photograph, 2001

13　Steve McCurry, *World Trade Center tower collapsing*, 3 of 3, photograph, 2001

14　CNN Television, Ground Zero logo, November 2001

15　Allan Sekula, *Diptych: Bilbao*, photograph 2001, from series *Titanic's Wake* 1998-2001

16　Richard Meier, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 1991

17　Santiago Calatrava, Milwaukee Art Museum, model, 1997-2001

18　Cesar Pelli, Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur, model, 1995

19　Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum, Berlin, 1989-1999, façade

20　Daniel Libeskind, Jewish Museum, Berlin, 1989-1999, ground plan

21　United Architects, World Trade Center Design Model, 2002

22　Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, World Trade Center Design Model, 2002

23　Richard Meier and others, World Trade Center Design Model, 2002

24   Peterson/Littenberg, World Trade Center Design Model, 2002

25   Norman Foster & Associates, World Trade Center Design Model, 2002

26   Think, World Trade Center Design Model, 2002

27   Libeskind Studios, World Trade Center Design Model, 2002

28   David Childs of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and Libeskind Studios, Freedom Tower design, World Trade Center site, New York, model 2003

29   UN Studio, Project for New Orleans Library, New Orleans, 2006, section, model

30   Lebbeus Woods, Berlin Free Zone Project, drawing, 1990

31   Thomas Hirschhorn, Superficial engagement, installation, 2006, Gladstone Gallery, New York]

32   Andrea Zittel, Critical Space, installation, 2006

33   Peter Myers, Knockabout-Walkabout House, prototype, Darwin, Australia, 2001, exterior view during construction, veranda

Many of these illustrations may be found in Terry Smith, *The Architecture of Aftermath* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).