

# introduction Postscript as Pretext

## **the fox and the octopus**

We first used the term metis as tutors, in conjunction with a final-year design project at the University of Edinburgh.<sup>1</sup> In this context, students were invited to make, using actual materials, a full-scale construction of a part of a project upon which they had worked for the previous seven months. Beyond being a construction study, this called for responses that would reflect and exploit the potentialities and powers of the 'object', whether considered iconic, erotic, or otherwise. In this context, metis seemed to offer a way of circumventing modes of talking about making in terms of an ethics of craftsmanship or truth to materials. In place of honesty, metis introduced notions of guile, cunning, and trickery; but also of seeing and seizing the particular possibilities imminent in a certain milieu or context. Metis did not operate through principles formulated in advance and applied to stable situations, but rather involved a kind of opportunism glimpsed in a fluctuating world. Certainly it invoked a high degree of craftsmanship (the artificer Daedalus being the emblematic metis-man), but this was a craftsmanship that tended to efface rather than display itself, whether in the necessarily illusionistic structure of the hunting trap or the magical auratic object.

In their study of metis in Greek culture, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne spelled out its operation in terms, that seemed to us, to have a real contemporary relevance. "Its field of application", they wrote, "is the world of movement, of multiplicity and of ambiguity. It bears on fluid situations which are constantly changing and which at every moment combine contrary features and forces that are opposed to each other."<sup>2</sup> Always immersed in practical operations and without the assumption of the privileged overview (as its journey is only known at the end, its pretexts are only ever postscripts), it progresses by hunch and anticipation, by "feeling its way and guessing".<sup>3</sup> If an approach grounded in assumptions of certitude imperiously establishes frameworks or drives ways through, metis, as a situational practice, can only use what is at hand to establish shifting orientations in a mobile environment which it must attempt to channel: it dissimulates, doubles back, circumambulates, tacks, and will try, if it can, to trap the wind in a bag.

In Greek thought, the fox and the octopus were the creatures which best demonstrated and symbolised metis. The fox because of its ability to reverse itself, to suddenly alternate between opposing conditions. Playing dead, it tempts other creatures to approach before springing to life. The octopus because of its polymorphy, which is also a polysemy. It is a "living knot" or labyrinth which can blend into its background and whose indeterminacy is epitomised in the black stain of ink which it secretes.<sup>4</sup>

### **cartography and cacography**

One of the major interests of the work presented in this book is the performative possibilities inherent in the 'representational archive' – the maps, site drawings, photographs, historical documents, etc. – through which any architectural project, even prior to its design, presents itself. Crucially, it insists upon representation as the true 'site' of the architectural project. Architects tend to talk as if they worked directly upon architecture's physical sites. But this is almost never the case. Instead they work upon representations through which those sites are mediated and which come to describe and direct actions to be taken upon them. Even if its implications have rarely been pursued, historically this has served to underwrite definitions of architecture: architecture is something that is communicated; it is worked out in advance, follows a design (and therefore deals in representation) and this distinguishes it from, so the story (unproblematically) tends to go, the brute immediacy of mere building, the vernacular, etc..

The representational codes within which projects are constituted and pursued are not neutral but value-laden: they bring selected elements in certain ways into the "architect's field of visibility" while hiding others.<sup>5</sup> The Ordnance Survey map, for example, emerged historically within the horizon of military, legal, and economic concerns, and these underpin its representational form. Once the vision it presents has been denaturalised – once, that is, we no longer understand it as a neutral device which conveys the site 'in itself' – the question arises as to how one might work with it to extract other stories, to brush it against its grain. Two possibilities come to mind. One might return to the territory in order to remap and hence remake it according to a different set of values and procedures which are then used to infiltrate, unsettle and collapse the source map.<sup>6</sup> This is the fox's strategy (of reversal). Equally, one might become interested in the pathologies of the map, in those moments where the representation seems to lose itself, and in the architectural possibilities they contain. One could, in other words, treat it as a performative document on the basis of a cacography.<sup>7</sup> To do this, according to Michel Serres, we would need to turn our attention to stammerings, mispronunciations, dysphonics, background noise, jamming, statics, cut-offs, hysteresis and interruptions in the communication. Everything, that is, where representation thought as identity fails in the face of its material, empirical instantiation: where the line has broken because of a printing failure, or the ink has bled... Here we are in the realm of the octopus. Legibility has lapsed; codes of representation and reading have become unhinged; chance, polysemy and a new interpretive demand have entered.

## repetition... hesitation... deviation

These projects attempt, in working upon their constitutive representational archives, to exploit the iterability of architectural representation and, in particular, the "logic which links repetition to alterity".<sup>8</sup> More specifically, the emphasis falls upon the repetition as a reperformance which produces sequences of differential effects; from these opportunities unfold. This defamiliarisation is akin to the uncanny effect of the word which, by being whispered over and over again, is gradually detached from its meaning until only its strange materiality is experienced like clay in one's mouth.

This alterity in repetition occurs in two ways. On one hand, through a recontextualising whereby the representation becomes grafted into a new condition. The project for Ottawa is patterned by this approach. Maps representing different chronologies are grafted into one another; the property lines which striate the site are set into the aerial photograph; the aerial photograph, remade on the basis of these lines, is grafted onto the map; and the resultant assemblage is resituated, and reperfomed, within the context of the narratives which are the prompt for a graphic recoding of the city. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the strip which travels through and reperforms the existing Canadian parliament building before being gathered by the fold mechanisms, as a 'double', and sedimented within the project's site: the fox, again. And on the other hand, by the effects that come from the processes and technologies of copying; the moments in which the 'noise' of transmission is felt and the image breaks down; events which would, in the last instance, make each repetition specific and guarantee it a radical unrepeatability. In opposition to any tendency to see images as having a pristine virtuality, the stress here is upon the specific material instantiation; and this is defined as much by the material 'support' of the image (paper, canvas, electronic screen, etc.) as it is by the mode of transmission and 'materiality' of the image itself. These materialities, which are the conditions of possibility of the image, simultaneously unfold patterns of (productive) interference. In the Ottawa project this is, to take two examples, played out through the very material manipulation of the paper strips (the material support of the image makes certain procedures available while disqualifying others) and in the attention paid to the dissolution of the aerial photographic image. More generally, interference in the image becomes akin to the "rhinoceros skin seen through microscope" which Deleuze discusses with reference to Francis Bacon: cacography (the ink cloud of the octopus) is like the "catastrophe" upon the painting's surface which deterritorialises it and returns it to a productive moment that, while thickly modulated, is prior to meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Of all the projects presented here, the theme of repetition is most insistent in the 'mimetic urbanism' proposal for Verona. Using a suggestion given in the brief that the area of Verona South be considered a double of the old city, the project developed using a sequence of transformational copying strategies. The animation frames are thought of

as describing, in a quasi-mathematical sense, an iterative process. We start at a point – at the source element, which is like a 'guess' in its relationship to its final configuration – and move via transformational iterative stages toward a destination. The iteration spans between two values: the 'guess' and the 'solution'.

To describe the opportunities within representation and its failure that these projects try to seize does not account for the particular decisions taken. How were the choices made? How were trajectories established within the field of possibilities offered? This can only be a question of judgement and anticipation in which the full range of architecture's concerns must participate. The good decision is the most connective: the one which extends, proliferates, ramifies, and most compellingly implicates architecture. Many preoccupations and enthusiasms underlie this work, but perhaps the most important have been the urges to locate the projects within an urban imaginary and to modulate architectural space in its interconnectedness from the urban assemblage to the detail.

### once more with feeling

Odysseus, a remarkable metis-man (who was even described as an "octopus") was an equally remarkable traveller. The image of the traveller runs through these projects, from Latitude and Longitude Resolved to the Cabinet of the City in which the Grand Tourist reappears. The traveller, as well as being a cipher for the uncertain, incremental, negotiated processes from which these projects emerge, is the paradigmatic performer, manipulator, and misuser of maps whose pristine qualities soon give way to wears and tears and strange diversions as they are misfolded, ripped and torn, hung out as a shelter and up to dry. And of course the traveller is also a collector (as was – to take us back to the beginning – John Soane), an accumulator of souvenirs (another representational archive) through which the journey may be re-membered but from which other itineraries are sure to be dreamt and drawn.<sup>10</sup>

1 We were introduced to it by Alberto Pérez-Gómez's essay "The Myth of Daedalus" in *AA Files*, 10, 1985, pp. 49-52.

2 Vernant, Jean-Pierre and Marcel Detienne, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, Janet Lloyd, trans., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 20.

3 Vernant, *Cunning*, p. 4.

4 Vernant, *Cunning*, pp. 34-39.

5 "Architectural drawing affects what might be called the architect's field of visibility. It makes it possible to see some things more clearly by suppressing other things... We have to understand architectural drawing as something that defines the things it transmits. It is not a neutral vehicle transporting conceptions into objects, but

a medium that carries and distributes information in a particular mode." Evans, Robin, "The Developed Surface: An Enquiry into the Brief Life of an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Technique", *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*, London: Architectural Association, 1997, pp. 194-231, (199).

6 Dorrian, Mark, "Mapping as an Architectural Strategy", forthcoming in Poulin, Frédéric, ed., *Figurations/Transferts: Les figures de la ville dans le développement des savoirs et l'intervention spatiale*, Paris: CNRS, 2003. Also, Corner, James, "The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention" in Cosgrove, D, ed., *Mappings*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, pp. 213-252.

7 Serres, Michel, "Platonic Dialogue" in *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, Harari, Josué V and David F Bell, trans., Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1982, pp. 65-70, (66).

8 Derrida, Jacques, "Signature Event Context" in *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bess, trans., Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982, pp. 307-330 (315).

9 While not "manual" in the sense that Deleuze discusses, these interruptions in the image also "reveal the intrusion of another world into the visual world of figuration. To some extent they remove the [image] from the optical organisation that already governed it and made it figurative in advance... we can no longer see anything,

as in a catastrophe or chaos." Deleuze, Gilles, "The Diagram" in *The Deleuze Reader*, Constantin V Boundas, ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 193-200 (194).

10 Soane, in whose country house Latitude and Longitude Resolved was installed, was both a fox and an octopus. On his museum as a topography of travel see Tafuri, Manfredo, "The Wicked Architect: G B Piranesi, Heterotopia, and the Voyage" in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, Pellegrino d'Acerno and Robert Connolly, trans., Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1987 pp. 25-54 (40).