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Inter-Objective Criticism: Bernard Tschumi and Le Fresnoy

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Two developments that may appear to move in opposite directions have together left contemporary architecture in a kind of discursive black hole: the tendency to pursue theoretical issues within an increasingly distant historical context on the one hand, a development initiated by Manfredo Tafuri, and the total instrumentalization of theory as operative design method on the other. Both of these postwar developments seem to act as prophylactic protection against the intimacy associated with traditional criticism. Consider Heinrich Wölfflin, for example, as he caressed buildings with his prose and held out the promise of unmediated engagement between subjects and architectural objects: "the dome swells upward . . . we surrender . . . the wall vibrates, the space quivers."¹ Given that the object of criticism is increasingly the architect rather than the building, public displays of affect have become even more troublesome. No wonder the degree of contact and exposure that criticism has traditionally entailed is avoided now by either nestling in the soft folds of historical distance or brandishing the affectless efficiency of instrumentalism.

One solution to this dilemma has been auto-criticism. It is not uncommon today for the most interesting discourses about buildings to be developed by the architect him- or herself. Bernard Tschumi has already provided a compelling reading of Le Fresnoy National Studio for Contemporary Arts, just completed in northern France, in which he situates the project in a formal and institutional tradition of experimentation. While the accounts provided by architects tend to be dismissed as inadequately critical or overly professional, a puritanical discomfort with what is perceived as onanistic narcissism actually underwrites this rejection. But the debate about architects who promiscuously write about themselves is interesting for what it reveals about the project of modern criticism in general. Since at least Edmund Burke and Denis Diderot, criticism has attempted to regulate the proper relation between subjects and objects. As soon as philosophy invented aesthetics by defining the dynamic between a beautiful object loved by a desiring subject, criticism became necessary to establish acceptable limits and forms for this eroticism.

The exchange between subjects and objects has today developed into an almost psychodynamic model of architectural criticism in which a basic yet unspoken question always lurks: How does the building make me feel? The architect/critic who occupies the position of object and subject simultaneously breaches the boundary between the two positions and transforms the traditional eroticism of the language of criticism into auto-erotic criticism. The distaste that this particular breach often provokes is merely symptomatic: any criticism will tend to subsume autonomous objects into an all-absorbing self when its primary question is "How does the building make me feel?" In other words, the architect/critic exposes the extreme narcissism of the modern critical project in general.

Rejecting the question of the proper (or even improper) relation between architectural subjects and objects might permit a new emphasis on interobjective questions such as, "What is the effect of this architectural object in the world of other objects?" Criticism

might lose interest in "How does it make me feel?" and develop strategies for considering "What does it do?" Criticism, unlike theory, which is concerned with general and abstract questions, or history, which focuses on development, would assume the responsibility of accounting for the local specificities of particular objects. Le Fresnoy affirms the potential of such a strategy; it is not a building at all but rather an emergent agglomeration that can only be understood in terms of the interaction of its constituent parts. With an indefinite form that resists psychic projection and without a single author with whom to establish a narcissistically satisfying rapport, Le Fresnoy demands attention to the interobjective dynamic the building engenders.

No new public building in France can be thought outside the context of the *Grands Projets* where the impact of a strong, centralized government on architecture is evident. The way in which this almost banal use of architecture for political purposes creates a space and a need for a critical architecture is inconceivable in the United States. A

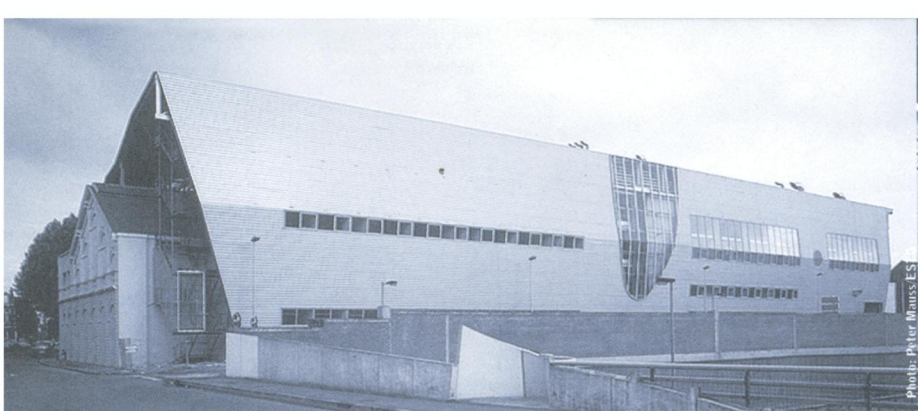
more important aspect of this seemingly anachronistic model of architectural patronage is the question of cultural hegemony it raises. Seventeenth-century France saw not only the buildup of power that still supports strong public building programs but also the move of the center of European culture from Rome to Paris. Although the reign of French cultural supremacy lasted for centuries, the nation has never fully recovered from or even acknowledged its eventual loss of this position.

While even the French admit that cultural capital functions differently today than it did in the 17th century, institutionally Le Fresnoy expresses both this national frustration and ambition in its combined desire nostalgically to prop up French culture while catapulting its traditions toward the 21st century. Locating a new art school, devoted mostly to French students and exclusively to digitally produced sounds and images, in the industrial, somewhat

anonymous northern region of France is a strategic part of this enterprise. As in many manufacturing zones throughout the Western world whose productivity has been outpaced and underpriced by developing countries, the French government is now trying to encourage the north to develop a service-sector economy. But in France the services offered are noteworthy primarily for being packaged in the look of high culture: actually the real service is culture itself. Replacing mining and textile manufacture, France is subsidizing the invention – in an almost diagrammatic nod to Louis Althusser – of a veritable culture industry. In combination with the high status of the projects by Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel, and Christian de Portzamparc nearby at Lille, the French national contribution to this increasingly international hub seems to be a technologically managed, architecturally articulated site for the production of cultural commodities.

Tschumi's task at Le Fresnoy was to structure a postindustrial, francophone, yet internationally ambitious Bauhaus for the digital age: a new kind of institution for the arts with a new relation to technology and industry and a new kind of architecture. Given Tschumi's long interest in media and their relation to architecture, his equally

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Main facade.



Oblique view of elevation.



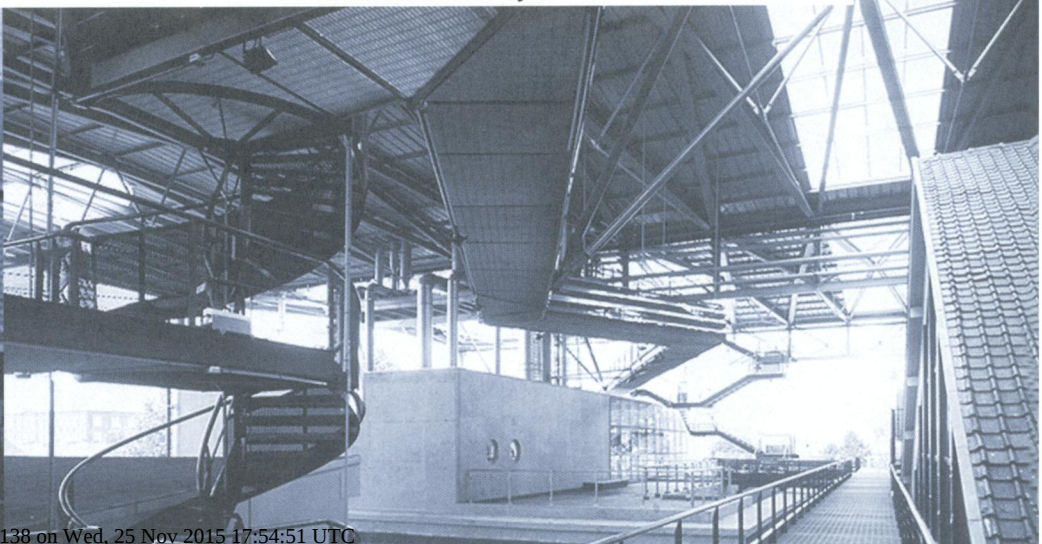
Renovated existing structure, roof overhead.

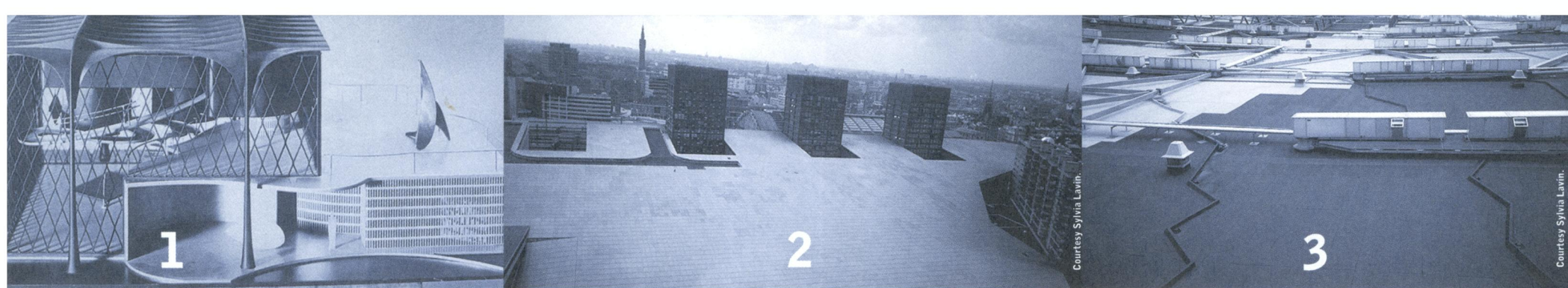


Existing red tile roofs.



Steel stairs and walkways.





1 Paul Nelson, *The Suspended House*, study model, from *The Filter of Reason: Work of Paul Nelson*, ed. Terence Riley and Joseph Abram (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 65.

2 AJN Architectures Jean Nouvel, Euralille Center, Lille, France, 1994, roof.

3 Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Congrexpo, Lille, France, 1994, roof detail.

long albeit complex relation to French culture, and his commitment to art institutions, no architect could have seemed better suited to the instantiation of this program. Nor could the site (for which Tschumi's was the only competition entry to develop a sophisticated reading) have been more propitious. Instead of establishing a tabula rasa, this new art school is located in or, after Tschumi, on a cluster of buildings that had served since the turn of the century as the primary place of leisure and entertainment in the region. A combination of vauxhalls, world's fair buildings and industrial sheds, Le Fresnoy from its beginnings represented the progressive, popular culture long of interest to Tschumi. With almost diagrammatic simplicity, Tschumi suspended an enormous roof, stuffed with massive technological infrastructure, over the existing complex.

Tschumi's design depends on adding a deviant swerve to the roof-building type, typified by [Paul Nelson's *Suspended House*] and Buckminster Fuller's dome over Manhattan, and on the institutional confrontation between high and popular culture. This combination enables Le Fresnoy to function as an architectural wrench interrupting the operations of the new culture industry, laborers for which are to be trained at Le Fresnoy's factory of popular pleasure. The primary product of these operations is the image: not just the image of France or the image as advertising but the image as such. Although the image has received significant architectural attention in recent years, these discussions tend to deny the material dimension of visibility and to suppress the real labor of manufacturing the image. Tschumi's exposes these processes and demonstrates architecture's potential to resist the proliferation of the image as the most perfect of all consumer commodities: a low-calorie, politically innocent source of cultural pleasure.

As an art school, Le Fresnoy is devoted to what we, in an English-speaking context, call visual culture. An emerging academic discipline and artistic enterprise, visual culture developed primarily in cinema studies, merged with literary and cultural studies, and is now moving into traditional art history and fine art departments. The digital image teleologically culminates this story, and a focus on the digital manipulation of sound and visual images characterizes Le Fresnoy. Under the rubric of visual culture takes place a quest for an anthropologically as well as a historically universal image unconditioned by material or disciplinary particularities. This image, freed from any specific object or viewing subject, emerges from a long and complex history of visibility but significantly relates to what one might call the logic of the Lacanian image. Building on the work of both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan located the image somewhere between an actual thing and a purely internal object. Split off even from the eye, the image for Lacan is a psychic projection received through the desiring gaze of a subject. In this definition of visibility, which is at

the heart of the whole enterprise of visual culture, the image is stripped from any material support, historical specificity, or cultural dependency.

Le Fresnoy is an institution is devoted to the logic of this image. In fact, its catalogue for the exhibition, called *Projections: Transporting the Image*, defines vision as "a pure artistic illusion." This is no surprise since the psychoanalytic definition of the image has long dominated film studies, the discipline on which visual culture most obviously relies. The emphasis on dematerialization further facilitates the incorporation of this particular notion of the image into the discourses on electronic media. As an architectural proposition, however, Le Fresnoy reveals that architecture has a significant role to play in opposing the miraculous ascension of the image by insisting on the material and visual unity of form. In the Lacanian account of the image, the moment of crisis is the split that

occurs when the image leaves the surface on which it is projected. At this moment, the image becomes a free-floating signified outside the various facts of the real. Le Fresnoy suggests instead that it is perhaps not the image that is a projection, but rather that it is the desire to escape being attached to a matrix that is projected by visual culture's theory of the image. As the skin of the roof folds into a plane with depth and space, with function and technique, the dermis becomes a fleshy construct in which the image is shown to be embedded. As a result, the surface is no longer a conceptual membrane or even a psychic object but a concrete thickening in the visual field, a densification of matter within which the image is produced and contained.

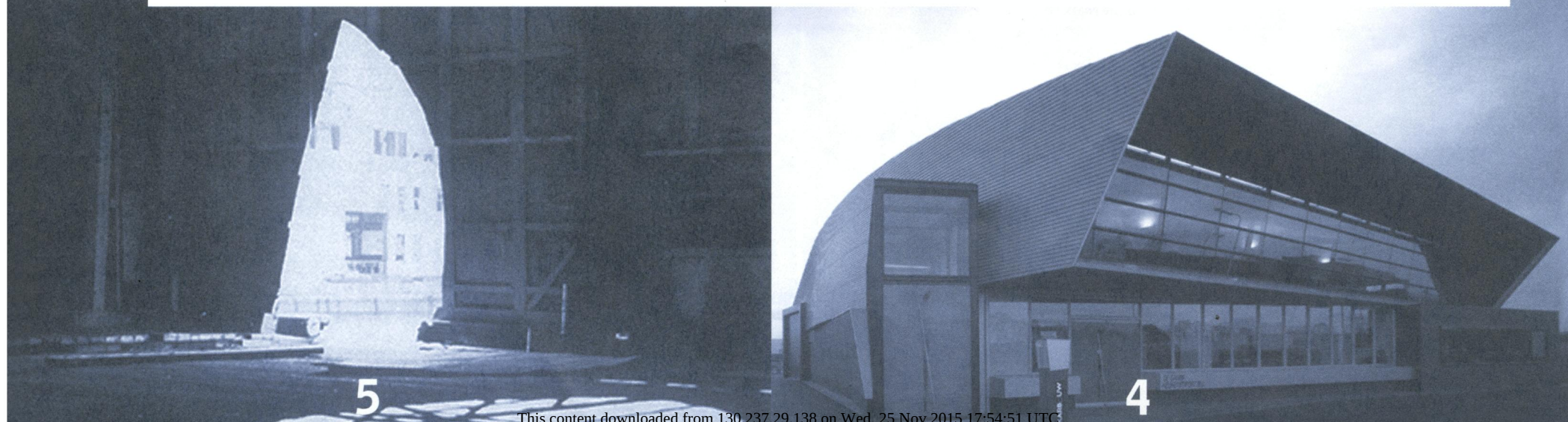
The big roof of Le Fresnoy is not a signified: it is not easily assimilable to the long tradition of shed buildings in which the roof symbolizes architecture. Nor does it function as a false front or a field of information or a topological entity as do several recent projects by [Nouvel, Koolhaas],

and [Ben van Berkel] respectively. Rather, Le Fresnoy's roof is an enormous surface in which the meaning of the signified adheres to the materiality of the signifier and through which the image is exposed as structured, supported, made, and technologized. The folded, stuffed space of this surface effects a transformation of the original complex of buildings and indeed of the entire neighborhood: via the vantage point of Tschumi's roof, the town's thick epidermis of red roof tile is reconstituted as an ocean of undulating surfaces. From within what Tschumi calls the space in between but from within what could also be called the variable density of the surface itself, architecture does not serve as a screen for projected images but performs as a producer of fluid connective tissue that stages the corporeal drama of contemporary life.

An important aspect of this drama is the sense it provides of breaking taboos: like sneaking a peek at the catwalks and lights in a theater or the projector at a movie, at Le Fresnoy you are positioned in a landscape beyond the normally permissible field of vision.

5 Gordon Matta-Clark, "Days End," detail, 1975, from *Mary Jane Jacob*, Gordon Matta-Clark: A Retrospective (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985).

4 Van Berkel & Bos Architectuurbureau bv, Barbouw Office and Works, Amersfoort, The Netherlands, from *El Croquis 72* (1995).



This notion of various registers of perception and their relation to navigating complex territories leads to a second aspect of the modern story of the image: the psycho-physiological tradition of cognitive mapping. In the 1960 *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch defined the image as the result of the interaction between immediate sensation and memory of past experience. Through this interaction of raw perception and cognitive processing, according to Lynch, subjects construct images that function to provide orienting structures of meaning and relation. Although this account of the image admits the importance of the specific character of form and matter in the world (in a way that the Lacanian image does not), it too is ultimately most interested in the semiology and received meaning of the image. For Lynch, forms are to be positively evaluated on the basis of what he called "imageability," the capacity to evoke in the observer a vivid apparency and legibility. Images in this scenario are comforting devices that enable not merely the interaction of observer and environment but that stabilize, monitor, and freeze the potentially fluid, illegible indeterminacy of viewing subjects in the world. Imageability thus functions as an instrument of striation transforming the perceptible field into a map as knowable ahead of time as a perspectival grid.

Le Fresnoy resists the logic of this image just as it does the Lacanian picture: the entire complex of Le Fresnoy has what can only be described as tremendously poor imageability. Standard forms of architectural representation, from drawings to photographs, are wholly inadequate to this building. Vertiginous, cut and sliced, multidirectional, and simultaneously interior and exterior, this accumulation of effects recalls the structures captured in Gordon Matta-Clark's films and cibachrome montages¹. Tschumi, however, does not provide the supplemental images that were central to Matta-Clark's anarchitecture and that restored a sense of wholeness and completion to his projects. In fact, Le Fresnoy spurns every aspect of form that Lynch said guaranteed a good architectural image: its edges are indistinct, its paths are multivalent rather than directed, interrelations destabilize, and it shuns the monumental status of the landmark. Le Fresnoy goes so far as to refuse even a facade, providing instead only a series of receding profiles that are difficult to grasp. In this landscape of half-seen faces, the need to be in the world, simply to be acted upon by the world, overpowers the need to map: as you stand on a slightly vibrating catwalk in this space above the image-making machine, new possibilities for navigating are compelled to emerge.

By giving up the legible image, Le Fresnoy constructs the vertiginous effects of movement, the multivalent possibilities of a transitional space, and the undirected productivity of collective play. Indeed, for all of Tschumi's interest in programming, Le Fresnoy's most compelling production is a program-free, suspended space of pure circulation. Urban in its zoning of functions, which separates sites of display from areas of production from districts of leisure, and thereby distinguishes public from private, and urban in

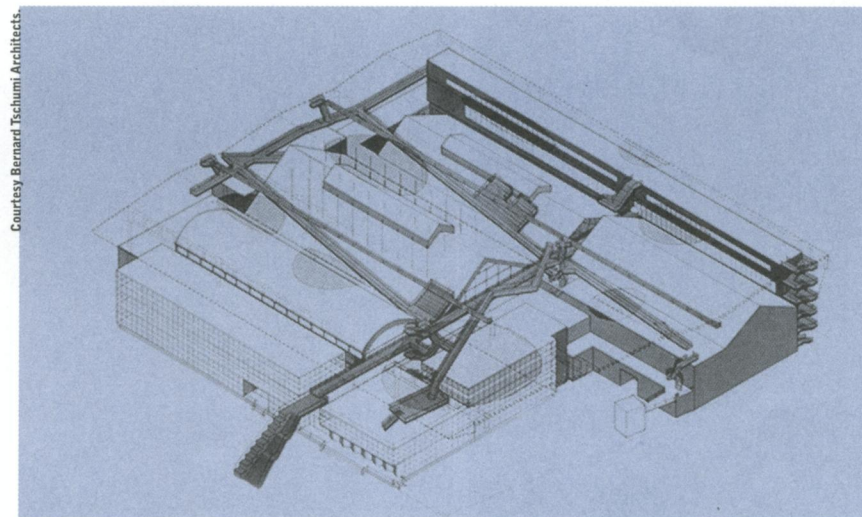
its agglomerative form, Le Fresnoy is post-urban in its preference for surprise events over a stable city image. By producing a space of free circulation through a dynamic urbanistic building, Tschumi finally achieves for architecture, perhaps for the first time, the effects of a Situationist *dérive*.

Instead of just illustrating Guy De Bord's *Society of the Spectacle*, Le Fresnoy obstructs the free flow of contemporary images and uses this very resistance to articulate new conditions of visibility. Despite the many differences between the Lacanian image and Lynch's notion of imageability, both share a clear sense of direction. Lynch's image is inherently about orientating and imposing direction on the landscape. Direction in the Lacanian image is imposed by the geometric relations among the subject, the image that is always ahead, and the projector that is always behind. Thus, both models of the image retain the monocular focus and geometric linearity of perspective. At Le Fresnoy, these simple lines of vision are entangled by the possible images and various apparatuses that proliferate in all directions. The diffusion of potential sites for the production and

reception of images parallels the mass deployment of computers and suggests a new way of understanding the scopic regime of the digital and post-filmic age. Our perception may now be operating in a field of diffuse horizontality, where thick and variable surfaces modulate lines of sight that are interfered with by forces in the world.

By not expending effort to make viewers "feel" one way or another, Le Fresnoy is able to lay an important claim to the kind of labor that architecture can perform today. Architecture has not really entered into the discussions of visual culture in any significant way, yet architecture's particular expertise in the real matter of the surface and its capacity to act as an obstruction to the disincorporation of visibility are increasingly urgent potentials. This is all the more true as architecture is itself internally in the

process of adjusting to the madly unfolding surfaces of indeterminate value produced by Alias and other modeling softwares. By undertaking the task of materializing the image through the surface, by concretizing the processes of image production and by intensifying the problematics of image consumption, Tschumi has used Le Fresnoy to give new force to the performative effects of architecture in the visible space of the real.



Rendering showing circulation and existing structures.

1 Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, 1950), 63–65, as quoted in Mark Jarzombek, "De-Scribing the Language of Looking: Wölfflin and the History of Aesthetic Experientialism," *Assemblage* 23 (1994): 36.