

Plant/Room

Upon entering the gallery we might immediately sense the ineluctable, upward drag that even the simplest notion of an escalator exerts upon our bodies and minds. It has a different gestalt effect, deriving from the built environment rather than sculpture per se. Sitting there in the middle of the space, sketched in pine and plywood, it leads nowhere and yet by its very nature implies departure, arrival, transit, typically through civic-scaled retail or mass transit spaces of one kind or another. Perhaps here at Gertrude we are led upstairs to the artists' studios. But more likely we are led up into to the ether of metaphor where the escalator's real function in the modern city is a vaporous figment for many other relations besides.

To this end, Giblett quotes Rem Koolhaas and the Harvard Design School from *Mutations* (2001) on the topic:

'The escalator radically modifies architecture, effectively triggering a vast new domain of construction, which we now

inhabit almost automatically and thoughtlessly, and without any sense of its true scale or radicality'. Paradoxically, the most radical architecture has been the most popular and the least noticed. Not only has the escalator made new scales, territories and spaces available to us, it has also delivered us – in a way few can resist – to the new forces that so profoundly shape our cities'.

Today there seems no other way to move about enormous public and commercial spaces but in single file, and zig-zag up and down. Sure, there were once steps and an arduous passage through narrow ribbed corridors, traversing impressive domes and monuments, or elevators that restricted movement within narrow hidden and enclosed vertical channels. But as Rem Koolhaas et al suggest, with the escalator came 'flow', which has been incorporated openly into the very design of civic space, such that the view of hundreds or thousands of others moving effortlessly in space becomes a principal feature of the escalator; as important as the actual escalation.

Since it's not just our own movement through public space which is important – for political, economical and social reasons – but the appearance of the movement of others in concert, by design. Public space seems public space by virtue of this manifest co-ordinated traffic, and the spectacle of public space, which the escalator effectively manages, is key to its role. In short it provides consensus to the passage of people engaged in various activities and transactions, physically co-ordinating the sale of goods, the exchange of values, shared beliefs.

From which function the escalator has drawn its potency as a symbol of the recent past. For Jean Baudrillard, lining



the outside of the Centre Pompidou, evacuating the interior, the escalator facilitated the implosion of meaning and cultural significance, rendering the world a degraded, amoral simulation, a society of spectacle, reification and bogus democracy.

For Frederic Jameson, the escalator manifested the disjunction 'between the body and its built environment' which characterised postmodern public space, by reducing the need to physically, arduously traverse atriums, arcades, and lobbies such as abounded in the Westin Bonaventure Hotel in LA, the case study at the centre of *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Thus the escalator was for Jameson a 'symbol and analogon of the incapacity of our minds to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects'.

The simple form of an escalator – dislocated, isolated and fabricated from common materials in a gallery – may therefore be a profound cipher for the complex relations that typically cohere around it, and which have been variously interpreted. To see it disconnected renders it

more plainly a dynamic junction in the construction of civic identity; a node or conduit in modern social relations; a trope or figure of recent social political discourse. By any reckoning, it's a lynchpin in the construction of the late 20th century spectacle.

Giblett further extrapolates its function in two pencil drawings alongside. In one, a city grid seen from an elevated viewpoint - proliferates endlessly in constantly changing configurations. The flat tops of buildings arising from the grid resemble an abstract alphabet in formation, as if the metropolis speaks its own language, a code. A second drawing illustrates various types of Australian mushrooms side-on, growing densely together in an impenetrable fungi jungle, the stems and caps writhing in an overall paisley.

Indeed, despite the oft-cited antithesis between nature and culture, cities are often compared to organic structures and forms, perhaps most often to concrete jungles, and their exponential growth and development does compare to some rogue flourishing natural species. The two viewpoints within the drawings – one massive and aerial, the other miniscule and intensive – bear out the comparison across scale.

Yet perhaps the last thing we notice about Giblett's show is a green light from beneath the escalator, wherein we discover a kind of greenhouse, an obscure crack in the city edifice, in which real plants are growing. Thus 'organicism' is not simply a literary flourish in the comparison of nature and culture, not only a condition of the model or the representation of fungi and urban development, nor is it subsumed as a category within philosophy, but the genuine basis for them all, an inescapable ground to which all life, all endeavour must ultimately refer.



From which confronting fact may derive an ultimate 'green' purpose for the work, running counter to the melancholic hyperreal theories of Baudrillard and Jameson - indeed running counter to the predominant theoretically turn in the 80s generally - such as when during the Paris protests of 1968, the Situationist International would graffiti the footpaths: 'beneath these stones the earth'. Or such as more recently when the two gaping craters exposed after S11 revealed and celebrated that same shocking substrate. Life springs from such cracks in the pavement and it's a primal, radical scene to behold.

And so it is the mushroom that compares to the escalator, as the visual trace of a subterranean, arterial life-force - the mycelium and the one-cell-wide hyphae - which comprise in the main part that discrete kingdom, separate from plants and animals, which rises invisible, inevitable from beneath to the surface.

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Front cover (left to right): *untitled* 2003-2004 (detail), pencil on paper, 120 x 240 cm; *untitled* 2003-2004 (detail), pencil on paper, 120 x 240 cm
Inside cover (left to right): *untitled* 2004, pine, plywood, fluorescent lights, sound, plants, 370 x 150 x 850 cm; *untitled* photograph 2004

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