

...the walls are perforated; you speak, hear, and see through them. They force people to sit on one's lap inside the one-chair lounges or lay inside niches meant to squeeze in several people.

Stripped Bare

by Nathalie Aguinaldo

Project Stripped Bare is an urban quest for the real that challenges its citizens to question personal inhibitions and awaken to the fascinatingly perverse reality of the city. Set in the city of Chicago, Stripped Bare provokes its urban dwellers to take a second look at something that they never noticed in passing, but that was already there, an attempt to reveal and reaffirm what Slavoj Žižek calls the desert of the real, the notion that in a simulated world, reality is in actuality a desert, empty, and in light of the events of September 11, the United States' perception remained complacent to the realities of the rest of the world. Stripped Bare gives space to these realities, a place where perverse, even perhaps comic scenes of the real are created to challenge the urban dweller to perform and raise awareness to larger urban and global realities. If the city's facades and urban frontage maintains the simulacra of an unreality, then, the desert of the real lives in the residue, the in-between and leftover spaces of the city, the alleyway. In a city so dense with shiny tall skyscrapers and that continues to build and fill the empty spaces of the urban fabric, the alleyway becomes an extreme example of residual space, at times intensely compact and many. Situated in the alley, a space where secrets slip and the taboo resides, Stripped Bare attempts to seduce the urban dweller into confronting the desert of the real, the taboos that we know of, but have become desensitized to and refuse to acknowledge—the dirty, scary, erotic, perverse, intriguing, exciting, irresistibly delicious reality.

The residue is a term used by Jean Baudrillard to explain what is left of the image after the over-load of information. What is left of the real is hard to define and left to its molecular constituents. Distinguishing from the real and unreal,(1) then raises the question of what is really true. Can we really believe all that we see? Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Zizek are main characters that question the meaning of the image and reality in contemporary time. The question of what is real is the driving force behind Stripped Bare. The project's quest for the truth leads one to a series of moments that leaves one intrigued and wanting more.

Baudrillard writes, **"Modernity is dominated by the expulsion of the natural order. A residue."**(2) After the bombardment of images the image in the end no longer means anything and nothing is really shocking anymore. And if the world is left with residue, then what remains with our relationship with the image? If nothing is shocking anymore, do we remain numb, idle and accept that there is no more sex? What is left of the world to shock, intrigue, desire and suffer, the drive that runs all human beings? Baudrillard offers a glimmer of hope:

'What do we do after the orgy?'-what do we do after the orgy of modernity? Is simulation all we have left? With the melancholy nuance of the idea of a 'vanishing point' and the 'degree Xerox of culture'? I forgot to say that this expression-'after the orgy'-comes from a story full of hope: It is the story of a man who whispers into the ear of a woman during an orgy,' what are you doing after the orgy'?

There is always the hope of a new seduction.(3)(Zizek)

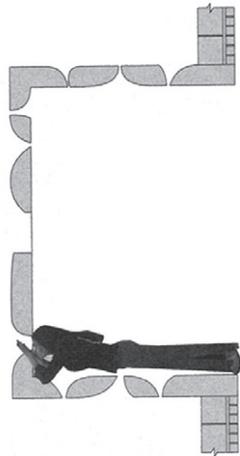
The Desert of the Real explains the notion that in a simulated world, reality is in actuality a desert; devoid of all those things that the simulated world tells us exists. Slavoj Zizek uses this expression to explain Americans'

perception of September 11th. Hollywood cinematic productions of terrorist catastrophes leading to the events of September 11th. like Independence Day made the seeing of the collapse of the Twin Towers surreal. What was most shocking about September 11th, Zizek explains, is that America got what it fantasized about, that the unimaginable impossibility actually happened. The unreality in which we live in the United States keeps everyone complacent and blind to the realities of the rest of the world. Stepping out into the real means exploring outside one's own personal space and letting go of personal inhibitions and prejudices. As Surrealist thought and beliefs defied conventions of the norm, choosing instead to experiment with the perverse, dirty, and at times disturbing taboo, Stripped Bare gives space to the repressed and censored taboo. The real in its unedited form, is a daunting, but intriguing place. Perhaps a breath of fresh air and a reality check from the seemingly okay and simulated city.

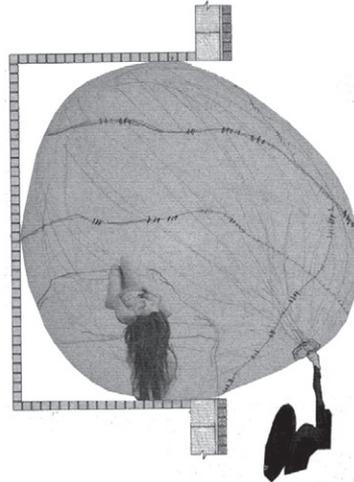
Feed Me Chocolate

The program aspires to create a series of events that will strip bare the urban dweller of her/his unconscious desires while at the same time awakening her/him to the realities of the city. The sequence of events, the quest, is an irresistibly teasing one, a full frontal exposure that at the same time can never be fully realized. The program also brings together the citizens of the city in close proximity to each other in the creation of strange and awkward approaches that create an intimate relationship with the other. The tensions and awkward situations created by the intimate spaces of the program further pushes the envelope of normal social interaction, offering intriguing yet potentially dangerous invitations to perform.

The events that occur in the program happen in the extreme voids, the extreme emptiness, in the very intense and small openings of the site. At times extremely uncomfortable, but that create moments of intrigue, shock, and doses of reality.



Peeping Tom
What do you see?



Home: Temporary Housing Units



Hair Shop: Give Hair:
Love Lounge



Reach Out: Hold Hands:
Secret Admirer

A List:

Toilet

Feed me chocolate

Secret letters (anonymous drop boxes, letters to participants/real mail boxes)

Under the skirt (dress shop that does not sell, on display)

Wash your hands (after chocolate)

Fetish Feet (shoe trading posts walking in others' shoes)

Film projection (images of political nature, of an erotic nature, of participants)

Playing Dress-up (like at a carnival where you put on period costumes and take photos with a staged background)

Tell me a story (anonymous conversation booths, telling the story of others)

On the walls (objects in small cracks, exhibition pieces)

Hair shop (give hair)

Trading cards

Soup Kitchen

Pins and needles (needle exchange)

Temporary sleeping units (alley-site for the homeless)

Internet hubs (talk to the world)

Forbidden love (staircase lounges/West Side Story)

Draw me (featuring street artists)

Dance with me (slow)

Magic Show

Precious Things

Pillow talk

Make-up room

Potluck

Shadow box

In the closet

Text message (caller unknown)

Secret admirer

Footprints

Smile (photo/documentation of what happened)

Chicago: Alley Capital, Urban Matrix

Chicago was the featured city in the movie *The Matrix* in which the city is portrayed a desolate landscape after a global war. Morpheus greets Neo, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real." The deserted city is supposed to represent the real reality, the one that the matrix simulates and refuses to allow people to see.

Chicago has 1,900 miles of alleys, the largest network of alleyways in the nation. Over 90% of Chicago's city blocks are bisected by alleys. The intent, then, is to transform the urban fabric by activating the extreme residual spaces of the city. The alley is depicted in films as the site for car chases, where Batman's parents are murdered, and where the staircases of *West Side Story* become a site for forbidden love. This place is where both criminals and heroes hide and lurk in its dark corners and seek refuge.

The alleyways can be seen as a reversal of the figure-ground map, where the buildings begin to disappear as the alleyways seep through and reveal itself as figure instead of ground. The maps represent how the alleyways become activated, spread, infects, and grows throughout the city. Reality burns through the map, seeping through and at times invading the private spaces of the adjacent buildings.

Pass the Map

Playing off the idea of the *derivè*, *Stripped Bare* maintains an unpredictable nature and the location of a network of alleyways change daily. There are rules that may or may not be broken. I imagine these maps to be folded up and handed out to people like the daily newspaper.

Take Daily. Begin Here.

There are a series of seven alleys that become activated and change location everyday. I imagine the city in time to grow exponentially in opposition to the figure-ground map as RED-reality seeps and burns through the map.

Every day there is a theme that runs through the alleyways.

The maps exhibit three possibilities in which the program is then organized in a somewhat loose manner by theme. The first map, for instance, attempts to raise awareness to GLOBAL EPIDEMICS, map text excerpt: kiss and pass it on. Sit and lounge. Meet and greet your friendly neighbors. Strangers. And now best friends. Red spreads. Red infects. Red cells. The second map takes on program that deals with IMAGE VS. REALITY, May cause dizziness. Confusion. Deception. What do you believe? These drugs. These drugs are quick. Tear the screen and don't forget to watch the magic show. Feed me chocolate. Get inside those shadow boxes. The third map, the theme of SHARING RESOURCES, May cause hair loss. Be generous. Overdose. Give a part of yourself for others to survive. Don't miss the potluck and share your favorite dish. Share your bed. Become blood brothers. Trade cards. Trade partners and dance with me (slow).

Get Inside Those Shadow Boxes

Stripped Bare's small pockets of enclosure, niches that are as tight as 9 square feet or as low as 3 feet in height talk about the spatial possibilities for the program. They are small niches that push and punch through, eating away at the bricks. They talk about the thinness of the walls and how people squeeze inside and poke their bodies through them. Like the alley staircase, the walls are perforated; you speak, hear, and see through them. They force people to sit on one's lap inside the one-chair lounges or lay inside niches meant to squeeze in several people.

There are love swings that are attached to the roof on railings that transport people through the site, swinging from the top to the bottom of buildings. There are other structures, like the swings, that hang, sit, and rest throughout the landings of staircases and are attached with cables and hooks or that plug inside the niches that punch through the adjacent buildings. The architectural intervention is one that invades private space, eats away at the walls, infects and attaches, and forces people to squeeze and interact in dangerous and perverse ways.

In the end, reality slips in, grabbing the insides out and into the larger community outside. Stripped Bare is anti the shine, the glamour and glitz of State Street. Rather, it is dirty and sexy at the same time. Stripped Bare forces one to change perspective. We no longer walk the streets heads down looking at our feet. Look up and around and see the world through new eyes. Up the endless staircases and landings that stretch out forever. What will remain is residue. Soon, the city will be painted in RED.

Nathalie Aguinaldo recently graduated from the Masters of Architecture program at University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (M.Arch. '06) and is currently working as an architect in Chicago.

Endnotes

- (1) Zizek, Slavoj. Welcome to the Desert of the Real.
- (2) Baudrillard, Jean. "Integral Reality." The European School.
<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/ baudrillard/ baudrillard-integral-reality.html>
- (3) Baudrillard, Jean. The Conspiracy of Art (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), p.110.

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