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seven notes on language and the city
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1

Michel Butor, the French essayist and proponent of the *Nouveau Roman*, considered the city to be a literary form. He regarded each to be a living work, a dense jumble of language, spoken and spelled, overflowing with letters, with words, sentences, and signs. This language, when condensed and fixed, transforms itself into texts, which can be collected, piled together, layered and collaged. For Butor, these texts were not only media of the city's expression, but the existence of the city itself. Inverting usual notions of causality, he suggested that texts are not deposited in the city, collected and stored so that they might lie within the reach of its residents; but rather, that people come to the city in order to use, and to serve, the texts that have coalesced within it. This image speaks of the privileged place of language in society, how it entices, suggests and controls, and how both power and knowledge flow through it. And how, drawn like moths to the flame, the city fills with people, attracted to the light and the warmth of its words.

2

If the city is a literature, it is not just verbal, but also a literature of space, of image, and of sound. As in the theatre, the actors of the city do not just speak, they gesture and they move, not in empty space, but in the definite and deliberate settings that circumscribe their world. These settings do not simply support the action, they are meanings in and of themselves, composed of rules, symbols and associations that impart information and define relationships. Not all actors play the same role, and not all points on the stage have equal presence. So, too, with the city. The physical form, the structure and the order of cities, neighbourhoods and streets are not only expressions of the social relations that produce them, they are also formative forces that educate and perpetuate the social body. We know who we are by where we stand, and by the objects that we use. These spaces, as well as the pictures and objects that fill them, form a language of their own.

3

All the spaces and objects of the city share the common quality of belonging to someone. They coexist amongst each other and with the inhabitants of the city; but not everyone has equal right to their use. Every thing is divided and assigned in some way to someone; even the streets belong to the collective of the commune. The use of space, as well as the objects and the symbols that inhabit it, is a fundamental practice of the city, and great energies of communication are committed to the expression of these rights and privileges. It is not only that the laws which codify prerogatives and responsibilities act as regulating texts for the city, but also that the social body continuously defines, expresses, and challenges these rules. Documents of definition - contracts, agreements and rulings - are formal stipulations of the texts that are played out within the many spaces of the city. Much as books, newspapers and magazines capture the word, so do regulations, laws and verdicts reflect and define the use of property and the limits of public space.

4

The text of the city unfolds not only in its streets and squares, but also in the apartments and chambers of the houses that line them. These texts, though invisible to the street, form the greater part of the city. They are the discussions and entertainments of private people, enjoyed in the secure spaces of home, as well as the memos, the meetings and the briefs that fill our offices and agencies. We imagine not only the density of the archive but also that of the library, where the records of collected culture fill shelves arranged row by

row; we can also conceive of the hidden texts of the city, which occupy the living rooms of everyday people, and contribute to the private sense of family and self. These rooms give form to the structures of intimacy, the private hierarchies of domestic relationships. They are not only filled with the writings and images of daily life, they are also texts in and of themselves, expositions of the housing market, past and present, as well as the furnishings of the persons who, for longer or shorter periods of time, make housing into a home.

5

The practices of private spaces are not only played out behind massive walls and curtained windows, but are also projected into the public realm. Indeed, some practices are predicated upon the presence of the public, some private acts require - even demand - an interested audience. For the Greeks, *oikonomos* was the management of the home, and the modern sense of the word still retains its connection to the private realm. Capitalism itself is based upon the activities of uncountable private producers adding value to their property, and selling it further. Yet, while capital profit and economic production are private matters, the machinery of selling must be active in the forum. The city provides for this need in many ways, and so it is filled with the messages of private economy, bright and beaming, which hawk its many wares. The street, although a public realm, owned by the collective and at the service of all those who consent to its rules, remains perpetually responsive to the innumerable strategies of private and economic communication.

6

Signboards, screens and handbills are but a few of the many ways that private economies project themselves into public space; the texts of economic communication can be both verbal and nonverbal. Space, for example, is also a commercial medium. The ground floor transition between house and street can certainly be exploited; glazed windows of storefronts are able to expose private interiors to the public in the street. This exhibitionism can be used to display goods or services, to present commodities that are for sale, or the signification of the space can function in subtler, less direct ways. Often it involves intangible perceptions of the other, which go beyond any specific commodity in and of itself. It is the aura that is associated with the quality of a space, or its place in the city. It can also be non-spatial, such as the aura that accompanies a brand. There are many techniques of the sale, yet all involve a relationship between buyer and seller and are based upon the production of identities that both parties can understand. The construction of this relationship is one of the most intensive labours of the private economy, and a constant source of texts in the city.

7

Identity is one of the most important facts of the city. The street is not only the realm of huckstering business, it is also a place where individuals act out those identities which cannot be bought or sold. Identity is a complex set of expressions that relate an individual to the group and a consumer to the producer, it is the practice through which a city dweller navigates the urban labyrinth, and it provides a perspective from which the many other texts of the city can be read. Identity is produced out of a subtle correlation of the different behaviours used in the various spaces of the city. The sense of self that is felt in the intimacies of the home is measured and tested against that which we perceive amongst friends, co-workers and peers, and the public face is in constant dialectic with the private texts that underlie it. Our age draws more and more upon commercial identities in order to define our own and the identity-generating facility of groups and institutions are marketed increasingly for commercial gain. Yet, while the techniques of production, of definition, and of exploitation constantly evolve, the language of the street retains its archaic power and authenticity. It is the media through which the texts of the city are shared, refreshed and renewed.