

*Monuments to every moment,
refuse of every moment, used:
cages for infinity.¹*

Half a mile below the surface of the New Mexico desert, the US government is depositing thousands of tons of waste from its nuclear weapons program that will remain potentially lethal for thousands of years to come. Called the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, it raises the question of how we might prevent our descendants for centuries to come from accidentally unearthing this dangerous material. To find a solution, the Department of Energy brought together a number of scientists, linguists, anthropologists and sci-fi thinkers to help develop an elaborate system – in the form of a monument. To warn any future human being of this danger for the next 10,000 years, this monument should consider that we don't know what language will be spoken or what technology will be used.

Anthropologists specializing in non-verbal communication were enlisted to help. They studied the messages that have reached us from the past, such as the pyramids, and determining that stone is the only medium to have established consistency in retaining messages for as long as 5000 years. But even the stone structures we now define as monuments have not maintained the traces of the particular historical will to memory that caused their creation in a stable way. The evolving narrative of history allows for a continual unmaking of the ideological apparatus that is being reinforced by a given monument; the monument ceases to carry out its original function and undergoes a disconnection that provokes the recycling and disposal of meaning - a disconnection that generates waste.

The problem of determining which leftover fragments of the past are 'meaningful' – worthy of conserving – and which fragments might be discarded in the 'rubbish bin' of history is evidenced in this eternal process of recycling and reworking. Hierarchies of broken fragments are established and differentiations between 'dirty' and 'clean' information are made, but the duration and stability of such arrangements is unclear. John Scanlan writes that memory becomes a “graveyard of progress”²; designating the past – the rubbish – to a position just below the surface; just out of sight. Garbage signifies the forward motion of life – a linear notion of progress through acts of consumption; of *using up* or destroying. With both the emergence of knowledge and the performance of artistic creation, we can say that we start “with loose associations, fragmentary ideas and the speculations of curiosity ... in other words, with nothing whole, fixed or identifiable but with the formlessness of what we know as garbage”³. The removal of garbage - of mess, of dirt – from sight clears a seemingly smooth path to the future, optimizing progress and allowing us to rest assured that our past will not come back and haunt *us*.

In his 2002 essay⁴, Rem Koolhaas lays out a definition of “junkspace” as foretelling the present – prompting us to recognize what is already everywhere around us and substituting hierarchy with accumulation whilst promoting disorientation and seamlessness. Junkspace is “the sum total of our current achievement” and we have “built more than all previous generations together, but somehow we do not register on the same scales. We do not build pyramids”. But what of the present will the future recognize as a monument? And what of our *intended* monuments will remain? According to Koolhaas:

“The joint is no longer a problem, an intellectual issue: transitional moments are defined by stapling and taping, wrinkly brown bands barely maintain the illusion of an unbroken surface; verbs unknown and unthinkable in architectural history – clamp, stick, fold, dump, glue, shoot, double, fuse – have become indispensable. Each element performs its task in negotiated

isolation. Where once detailing suggested the coming together, possibly forever, of disparate materials, it is now a transient coupling, waiting to be undone, unscrewed, a temporary embrace with a high probability of separation; no longer the orchestrated encounter of difference, but the abrupt end of a system, a stalemate”.

If architecture is in a state of permanent evolution – continuous conversion punctuated by occasional instances of 'restoration' – does this process claim chunks of history as extensions of Junkspace? If we are endlessly running away from our shadow, can we really understand how our bodies are situated in relation to our environment; our context in space and time? And if the majority of infrastructure is invisible, seamlessly blending into reflective surfaces and freshened air; how do we negotiate the task of *unsticking* this illusion of an unbroken surface; exposing the ragged edges of moments and the stench behind gleaming facades?

- 1 Octavio Paz, *Objects and Apparitions*, 1974.
- 2 John Scanlan, *On Garbage*, Reaktion Books, 2004.
- 3 ^^
- 4 Rem Koolhaas, *Junkspace*, 2002