Literally Anything at All: Ornament in the Age of Seapunk

In its latest resurgence, architectural ornament has evolved from a responsibility towards symbolic significance to the ambition of sensual communication through affect. In some cases the visible aspect of affect is accomplished through the tectonic consequences of digitally fabricated assemblies, which though they are nonlinguistic are nonetheless exceedingly complex and dense. Art and media practices of the current moment as embodied in "seapunk" subculture engage in far less complex strategies for decoration and ornament. Seapunk aesthetics rely on the expedient layering of readymade image and pattern without syntactic or semiotic relations but with new rationales for composition and arrangement capable of containing "literally anything at all".

By tracing through this logic, the following paper presents the potentials of this nascent "seapunk" ethos as a conceptual framework for architectural ornament. Methodologically, the authors have experimented, with students and in practice, to borrow techniques from surrealist automatism, optical art, and aqueous craft techniques. The results of these endeavors outline unique approaches to composition, craft, labor, and optical fascination in ornament.

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At 1:50 in the morning on June 1st of 2011 the DJ Lil Internet tweeted "SEAPUNK LEATHER JACKET WITH BARNACLES WHERE THE STUDS USED TO BE."[1] Once a hashtag was added to the term "seapunk" it went viral on Tumblr. The meme started and was refined through the exchange of collages and gifs inspired by the general theme of Lil Internet's tweet. Almost instantly seapunk became a fully formed subculture with its own music, fashion and image culture. The hallmarks of seapunk images include artifacts from 90s head shops like holographic sunglasses, but also turquoise hair, dolphins, pyramids, gradient, symbol fonts, clip art, tie-dye, and of course the sea.

The "____punk" model for cultural production can be traced back to the sci-fi sub-genre of "steampunk" in which artifacts and clothing from the steam-powered era of the 19th Century are seen to re-emerge within the setting of a future

dystopian reality. When K. W. Jeter coined steampunk in 1987 it was already in reference to the popular genre of cyberpunk. Thus "punk" in this context is divorced from its original meaning and simply denotes the act of combination or elaboration on a theme. Steampunk is essentially a postmodern cultural practice; the juxtaposition of artifacts and context trades on the culturally understood status of those artifacts and the narrative of their simultaneity. Steampunk costumes are highly worked pieces that incorporate dense ironic reference to sci-fi precedents.

Seapunk is a fascinating break from the postmodernism of steampunk largely because it operates almost entirely without context. Seapunk is an expedient cultural practice that doesn't bear reading due to its fundamental lack of development. Although there are references to 90s rave culture and early internet culture, seapunk doesn't combine these elements in meaningful ways. Perhaps due to this untethered aspect, seapunk is remarkable for its abundance and its versatility. While the precise meme of seapunk will likely expire now that it has been absorbed into popular culture, the seapunk strategy appears to continue. One of the early seapunk stylists for the rapper Kreayshawn describes the anything goes approach: "People always ask me what my inspirations are, but it could be anything, it could be the color of a nail polish, someone's earrings, a pattern, it could be a book, with a certain color on it. It could be anything, literally anything at all."[2]

In the context of ornament, seapunk offers a very compelling example of how to answer Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's "plea for pattern all over"[3] without resorting to the moribund irony of the postmodern project. The background landscapes in seapunk gifs rejoice in a readymade approach to content within

Figure 1: Seapunk renderings on Tumblr

certain parameters: primitive 3d models of dolphins, palm trees, ionic columns and platonic solids hover above volumes that have been crudely texture mapped with turquoise ocean water. Their arrangement is essentially surrealist. Texture mapping in seapunk renderings is allowed to disassociate from the object it covers and to contain glitches or data loss. Any pretension to technique or virtuosity typical of architectural rendering has been abandoned in the basic urge for novelty in decoration, for filling the empty space of the Tumblr feed.

This "anything at all" approach begins to sound a lot like "altermodernism", Nicolas Bourriaud's answer to the death of postmodernism and title of his 2009 Tate Triennial. In the program for that exhibit Bourriaud explains,

> Altermodernism can be defined as that moment when it became possible for us to produce something that made sense starting from an assumed heterochrony, that is, from a vision of human history as constituted of multiple temporalities, disdaining the nostalgia for the avant garde and indeed for any era — a positive vision of chaos and complexity. It is neither a petrified kind of time advancing in loops (postmodernism) nor a linear vision of history (modernism), but a positive experience of disorientation through an art-form exploring all dimensions of the present, tracing lines in all directions of time and space. The artist turns cultural nomad: what remains of the Beaudelairean model of modernism is no doubt this *flânerie*, transformed into a technique for generating creativeness and deriving knowledge.[4]

Since the altermodern implicitly claims to practice outside of modernism's notion of linear history, many of the problems that have historically emerged around the issue of ornament tend to evaporate. For example, Adolf Loos condemned ornament (by way of tattoo) as regressive in terms of cultural evolution: "The Papuan covers his skin with tattoos, his boat, his oars, in short anything he can lay his hands on. He is no criminal. The modern person who tattoos himself is either a criminal or a degenerate."[5] The notion that the modern person is somehow further along than the Papuan is anathema to the heterochrony of the altermodern in which all times and cultures appear together. If there is an altermodern notion of ornament it is distinguished by the fact that it doesn't avoid the interpellation of subjects through the ambiguity of affect, but rather interpellates as many and as freely as possible since even exclusion in this context becomes the occasion for "generating creativeness and deriving knowledge".

Thus the profusion of decoration and pattern in contemporary popular culture and art practices is fundamentally different from the ornament that results from the tectonics of digitally fabricated assemblies or in the service of affect. Once we assume that there is no basis for categorically denying ornament and resolve to apply it wherever possible, then the deployment of that ornament becomes a very immediate and engaging problem. If pattern should be everywhere what are the rules for its arrangement and composition? The research studio *About Face*, taught by Wei-Han Vivian Lee at the University of Michigan, looked at one of the most demanding compositional activities in architecture, the design of facades. To reinvigorate facade composition as a break from the strict Beaux-arts principles of hierarchy, symmetry, proportion and orders, the studio investigated and drew inspiration from Surrealist techniques.

The Surrealist movement sought to break from traditional thought patterns using the unconscious as inspiration. In music, writing and art, the very word 'composition' assumes a classical basis of conscious arrangement. For Surrealist art, this

compositional quandary initiated a series of unpredictable, automated strategies relying on chance such as cubomania, pliage, decalcomania, and fumage just to name a few. Borrowing these methods equipped the students of *About Face* with a freedom to form and discover novel arrangements in ornamentation and facade design. It was a process driven approach, the mediums being liquids, waxes, smoke, paint, and their manipulations dependent on gravity, folding, blowing, and rubbing. These initial experiments translated into an architectural palette a mere few inches deep on a building's elevation: sills, mullions, shadows, reflectivity, curtains, signage, lighting, paint and colors. The result is an aggregation of architectural facade elements not subservient to a structural, tectonic, or symbolic logic, but rather an affluence of almost-recognizable ingredients to serve as a cohesive building face.

About Face used surrealism as a blind spot in modernism's dominant narrative of linear progress, an escape hatch through which we could explore loose compositional practices. The research studio *OP ARCH,* taught by James Macgillivray at the University of Michigan, saw a similar off-ramp from Greenbergian abstraction in Op Art. In his 1965 article "Modernist Painting" Clement Greenberg opened up the discursive flatness of painting as medium to optical illusions of depth: "The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or trompe-l'oeil, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the


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marks made on it by an artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension."[6]

The *Responsive Eye* show at MoMA in the same year presented the loose category of Op Art to popular success and critical failure. The show encouraged viewers to respond to works simply based on their sense of sight and without recourse to symbolic discourse or ideology. To the art world orthodoxy of the 60s it appeared to have no exclusive grounds of legitimation. Marcel Duchamp responded to the trend in 1969: "Painting should not be exclusively visual or retinal. It must interest the gray matter; our appetite for intellectualization."[7] Op Art presented effects whose validity was simply demonstrated by the fact of their

Figure 2: *About Face* studio work by Andrea Kamilaris and Elizabeth Nichols.

working in the viewer's eye. Effects are in themselves lacking the linguistic power of symbolism; simultaneously they cannot contain the ambiguity associated with affect. The communication of optical illusions is direct and forceful but is incapable of defining a subject.
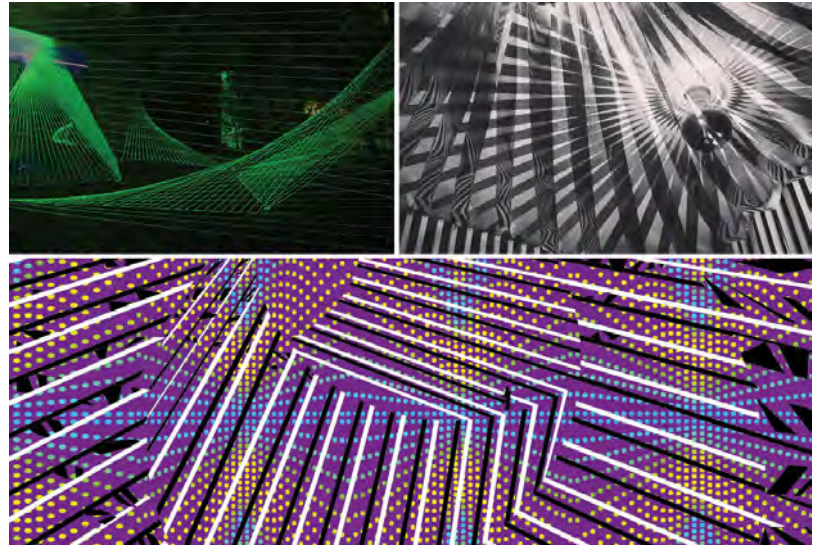
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In many cases the *OP ARCH* studio was simply tasked with the testing or replication of optical effects in the three dimensional space of architecture. By the creation of illusory patterns or motion solely within the retina and visual cortex, the work in one sense was trying to relocate the surface of decoration or ornament from the building to the internal locus of the visual system. These tertiary patterns would then overlay within the existing space of installation to effect a decentering of normative perception. The peripheral drift illusion for example makes use of the heightened motion sensitivity outside of the fovea to create perceived motion in a calibrated pattern. By delaminating these images into a volumetric installation, the moment at which this perceived drifting motion occurs is itself contingent upon the motion of the viewer. To that extent the optical has the potential to inflect the public space of the agora into and across individual subjects.

The results of the *OP ARCH* studio revealed a hierarchy of what could be called patterned 'neighborhoods' in optical space. Whereas Optical Art often traded on perceptual manifestations of 3D space from 2D graphics, the reverse is true in Optical Architecture. Optical Architecture is enhanced by the occasional flatness of space, making what is three-dimensional appear at times closer, or flattened, questioning the users' sense of perception in depth and scale. As such, this fine-tuned calibration of optical effects privileges certain vantage points while relegating large swaths of distinct graphic neighborhoods to glitch-like patterns.

The LAMAS (Lee and Macgillivray Architecture Studio) MoMA PS1 entry, *Underberg,* takes advantage of the lessons learned in optical architecture and surrealist techniques to create a civic canopy housing various marble patterned neighborhoods. In this project the confluence of architecture and image is directly inspired by the seapunk aesthetic where a cohesive design is the result of cobbled together inspirations. *Underberg* is understood to be both an iceberg

Figure 3: *OP ARCH* studio work by Missy Ablin, Allen Gillers, Hannah Smith, Yao Wang and Le Nguyen

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and a burg, the voids are the melting crevasses and grid-iron streets, they are lanterns, but they are meant to give shade, they look like big chunks of marble but they float in the air, they are keeping you cool in the summer but the material was eventually going to turn into winter coats. These simultaneous anomalies take shape in fourteen suspended Tyvek blocks booleaned underneath to create a barrel vault corridor, a domed ceiling, and a pyramid tunnel towards the sky. These main platonic figures create the primary perspectives for optical illusions while the avenues and streets of the miniature city are decorated with a series of marbled patterns.

Inspired by the surrealist techniques that decorate a large area in intricate detail with relatively little effort, we investigated the art of aqueous marbling to accomplish the ornamental task of *Underberg*. The Young Architects Program is a unique labor situation where many of the workers are volunteer students. Given this circumstance, the craft of marbling gives each student the responsibility to decorate 500 or 1,000 square feet of fabric. When they attend the event, the recognition of specificity in their own labor hanging 40 feet in the air becomes part of the architecture. The appeal of this crafty "I did that" DIY approach was a kind of back-door return to John Ruskin's notion of the 19th century tradesperson's role in the creation of building.

Underberg was an attempt to use the compositional strategies of seapunk, *About Face* and *OP ARCH* in order to make a place for free subjectivity both at the installation itself and also in its online presence. In any view from inside the courtyard the project filled up so much of the picture plane that it would approximate the visual pleasure of seapunk landscapes. In selfies and on Tumblr, the large swaths of decoration would flatten the background into pattern. We recognized immediately that the competition and its production were by turns created and consumed by the oscillating poles of attention and distraction through the internet. Jonathan Crary posits this oscillation as an accelerating dimension of capitalism:

> Part of the cultural logic of capitalism demands that we accept as natural switching our attention rapidly from one thing to another. Capital as high speed exchange and circulation is inseparable from this kind of human perceptual adaptability, and it imposes a regime of reciprocal attentiveness and distraction. The last decade has been a mere taste of the rapidity with which new forms of visual consumption will continue to supplant one another. Whether there are inherent social or psychic or even physiological limits to this acceleration remains to be seen.[8]

However, alongside the poles of attention and distraction put forth by Crary, the psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan have proposed another opposition, that of "hard fascination" and "soft fascination". Hard fascination pertains to activities that demand full attention and that do not allow for other thinking or reflection. As such the oscillation described by Crary between attention and distraction remains always in the realm of hard fascination and leads to attention fatigue. By contrast soft fascination (looking at leaves rustling in a breeze, images of natural landscapes, water bubbling over rocks in a stream, etc.) allows space for reflection; it "may be a mixture of fascination and pleasure such that any lack of clarity an individual may be experiencing is not necessarily blotted out by distraction, but rendered substantially less painful."[9] The Kaplan's thesis maintains that intermittent exposure to soft fascinations restores the ability for concentration and by this we understand the restoration of subjective space.

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Patterned backdrops, ornament and copy paste decoration all evince the motive of creating an auspice for soft fascination and subjective space within the oscillations of contemporary culture. With the added dimension of wireless connectivity it's not surprising that the definition of the space of the self is no longer self-evident and sometimes feels like cognitive dissonance. Soft fascination in the built environment implies a kind of texture or patterned background of optical interest. Ultimately the tectonics that the building industry has inherited from modernism is less than capable of accomplishing these effects. In order to accomplish the transformation of space with pattern, one must project outwards from the eyes with paint or image.

The illusionary effects of a thin layer of paint have been deployed to interact with architecture in diverse ways over time. At its height in the Baroque the use of trompe-l'oeil inexpensively extended spatial perception—suggesting faux niches, doorways, and domes to create much larger rooms. Yet the transfer of precise images onto variegated surfaces has always involved the use of skilled labor. Even the faux wood and marble painters of the 19th century generally had to apprentice ten years before they could join a guild. Conversely the Supergraphics of the late 1960s sought to erase the boundaries of orthogonal space by overlaying large scale signage inspired graphics across ceilings, floors, and corners.[10] The contemporary ornament of digital fabrication has excelled at the creation of optically active surfaces through the arrangement of components, but these are usually integrally colored or painted piece by piece. Images and texture maps have as yet eluded the decoration of these new surfaces.

Through our work on marbling with *Underberg,* we became interested in aqueous

Figure 4: *Underberg* by LAMAS for MoMA PS1

transfer as an expedient way to apply decoration to complex three dimensional surfaces. The modern equivalent of this technique called hydrographics or cubic printing is the method by which printed artwork or pattern can be applied to complex surfaces through aqueous transfer. The process of hydrographics is relatively simple. A given graphic is gravure printed onto water soluble film. By laying the film on water the inks are reactivated while the film dissolves. A thin layer of image as paint remains suspended on top of the water. At this point an object of any shape and of almost any material (metal, plastic, glass, ceramics, hardwoods, bone, and etc.) is submerged into the bath through the layer of floating ink and the graphic is transferred onto the object by the water's hydrostatic pressure. After excess film is washed away, the object is dried and gets a topcoat of protective sealant.
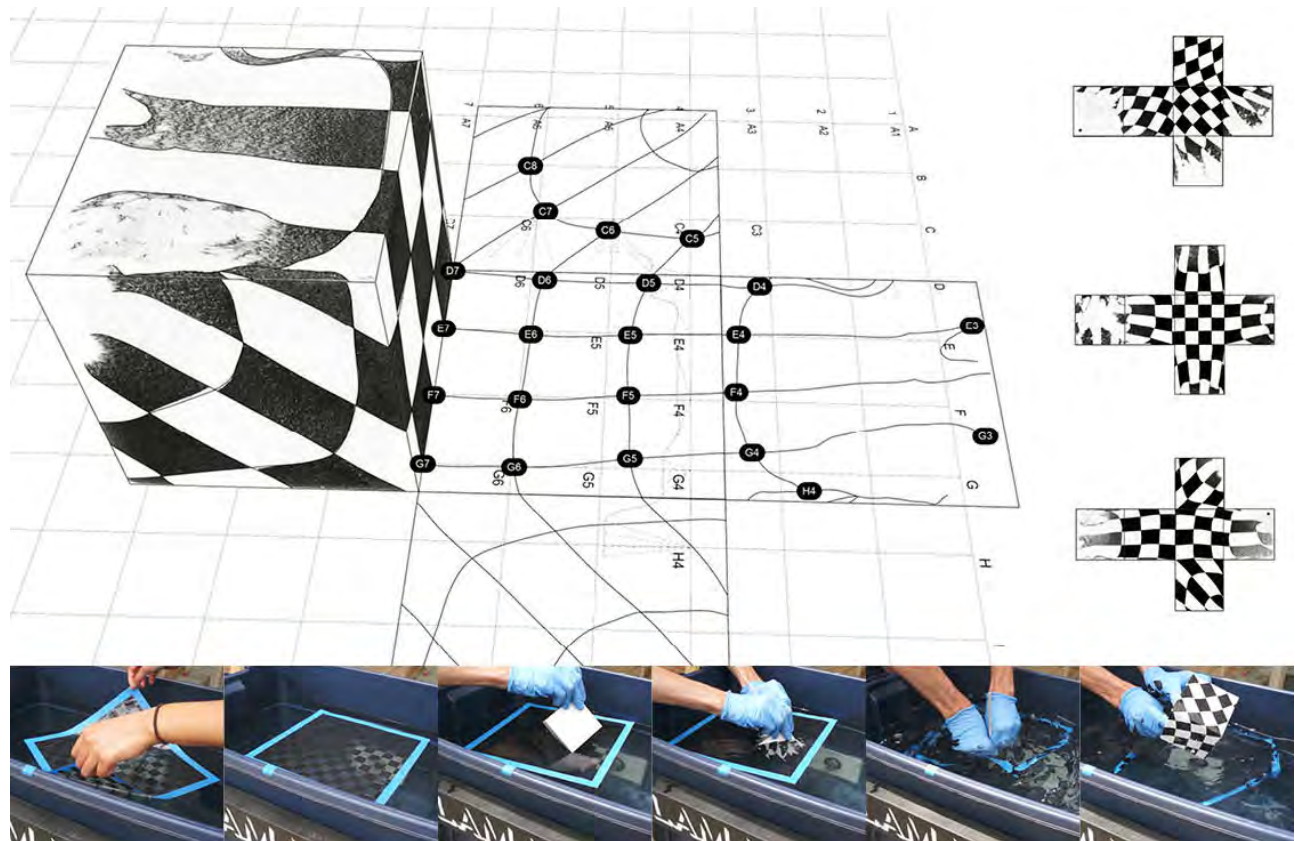
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Through researching this technique, we found a whole industry in the service of high end finishes but also a DIY culture of surface decoration. In similar ways to the creation of soft fascination in seapunk renders, hydrographics is able to enclose the modern subject in faux natural materials and images of foliage whether in the interior of a car or deployed on surrounding objects. Wood textures in cars can be transferred to the plastic interior panels with embossed wood grain texture already in the ink. Furthermore, the geometry of the plastic substrate in most cases has been redefined to coincide with forms that could commonly be turned and shaped on traditional woodworking machines. The images that adhere to these forms are further customized to show cross-grain and end-grain relative to where they should be on the shape.

Figure 5: Hydrographics research by LAMAS: dipping and mapping distortions on a cube.

By contrast, the other predominant use of hydrographics comes from the hunting community. In order to camouflage their weapons and equipment hunters use hydrographics to transfer photographic collages of foliage to the complex surfaces of their gun stocks. However, the DIY aspects of the technique have combined with a natural urge for ornament or perhaps horror vacui to lead to a proliferation of camouflaged objects that have nothing to do with hunting, including car interiors, game consoles, household appliances and even the skulls of hunted animals.

Our research of the technique has been to map the distortions of the water transfer through the use of a checkerboard pattern on several three dimensional shapes. Ultimately these texture map distortions will be adjusted in order to directly correlate the printed patterns with the object they are being transferred to. This application opens architecture up to the uncharted potential for collaboration between curvilinear surfaces and optical graphics for new spatial effects and material dissolution. In that sense, the closed circuit of the one-to-one design of digitally fabricated components no longer needs to appear as itself but could have a whole new layer of decoration that either contradicts or accentuates its space and surface. With this technology, living in the soft fascination of a seapunk rendering is not such a distant proposition.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary resurgence of ornament in architecture has understandably inspired caution in its practitioners. The last two major resurgences of ornament led to vitriolic disputes and long periods without ornament. When Loos condemned ornament as crime in 1913 he helped put an end to the ongoing developments in ornament at the end of the 19th century, leading eventually to the blank surfaces of the international style. Until recently, the ornament of postmodernism was systematically expunged from the academy after its wild popularity in the 70s. As such the current moment proceeds with caution to take on ornament. The concept of affect as a non-linguistic and therefore non-exclusionary ornament dovetails well with the increased complexity of digital fabrication and digitally aided design. However, at the same time that architecture proceeds with caution, other cultural practices have witnessed a profusion of inclusive, non-disciplined and symbolic form. If this is a result of a new altermodern era that gets us out of the looping of postmodernism and the linear dead end of modernism, it would no doubt be interesting to try these methods out. More decoration might present the most viable strategy, not just for more inclusion, but also the protection of concentration. To paraphrase the altermodern, more ornament with more inclusion could be a "technique for generating creativeness and deriving knowledge". At the very least we might find out that ornament can't be "literally anything at all".

ENDNOTES

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