

# Superstructure, 1,2,3,4 & 5

March 16 2018, RMIT Design Hub  
Melbourne VIC, Australia  
*Experimental Jetset – Superstructure*

*The city is a discourse, and this discourse is actually a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, as we speak to our city...*

– Roland Barthes, 'Semiology and Urbanism' (1967)

## Superstructure

If the notion of modernism should ever be encapsulated in just one sentence, a good contender would be that famous line by Marx and Engels: "If humans are made by their environment, this environment has to be made human." If there is one common denominator that seems to connect that wide range of disparate views and conflicting movements otherwise known as 'modernism', it surely is the acute awareness that we are shaped by our surroundings, coupled with a deep desire to shape those surroundings ourselves.

Following that line of thinking, it makes sense to interpret the city as the ultimate platform of modernism – the metropolis as the quintessential human-made environment, a forest made of walls and words. And needless to say, the notion of the city as an extension of language plays an important part within this concept of urban modernity. After all, what better way to create a human environment than to create a linguistic environment? Language lives inside us – so our most modernist urge might be to try to reverse this situation, by living inside language.

To speak with Heidegger: "poetically, man dwells." Our cities are poems, our words are buildings.

This relationship, between language and the city, is one of the main themes of *Superstructure* – an exhibition that is simultaneously a 20-year retrospective of our work, and an installation in which we address the very notion of the city as a platform for language.

By focusing on four (sub-)cultural movements that have greatly informed our practice (Constructivism, the Situationist International, the Provo movement, and the Post-Punk continuum), we have tried to explore some of the ways in which the languages of these movements manifested themselves in the city, just as the city manifested itself in the languages of these movements.

Accordingly, the installation is constructed as a city in itself – an abstract representation of a fragmented metropolis, in which these different movements exist at the same time, not unlike overlapping districts or zones.

Colour-coded for the sake of clarity, the discussed models are envisioned as four quarters: The Constructivist City (1917–), The Situationist City (1956–), The Provotarian City (1965–) and The Post-Punk City (1977–).

In Project Room 2, a large time-based piece has been installed, concentrating more on the retrospective part of the exhibition. Accompanied by a site-specific soundtrack composed by Ian Svenonius, this fifteen-channel projection displays a selection of work created between 1997–2018, not unlike a giant 'assembly line' of scanned images.

Parallel to the exhibition, a broadsheet newspaper has been published, created in collaboration with local practitioners – providing possible links between the exhibition in general, and the more specific context of Melbourne.

We hope the exhibition serves as an invitation for further research – and, if nothing else, as a place to dwell poetically.

*Experimental Jetset*

## The Constructivist City

*Paper Architecture  
Scale-model Socialism  
Maquette Modularity  
Bauhaus Bolshevism  
Flatland Futurism  
Utopian Geometry*

**1.1** Modernism is often described as a monolithic, singular entity – in our view, it is far from that. Modernism is a multitude of languages, dialects and accents – a maelstrom of opposing, clashing voices. Manifestos, movements, tendencies, schools, groups, and splinter groups. Fictions, factions, fractions, and fragments. It's a storm blowing, spiralling us forward, propelling us right through history – from the invention of the printing press up until now. (To speak with Walter Benjamin: "this storm is what we call progress").

Within this messy modernist continuum, the beginning of the 20th century occupies an iconic position. From the rubble of violent wars, intense revolutions, grave disasters, and times of deep crises, small groups of artists and designers somehow managed to develop new aesthetic languages, trying to envision (with equal parts optimism and pessimism) possible ways out of the ruins.

Among these groups, we find the Constructivists: a loose subculture of artists, designers and writers, mainly working in the Soviet Union (and other parts of Eastern Europe), roughly between 1917 and 1927 – in other words, during that unique, utopian moment between the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalin. Names often associated with Constructivism are Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Lyubov Popova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Vladimir Tatlin – but this list merely scratches the surface.

In the same way that Constructivism was one of the many movements within the maelstrom of modernism, the whole notion of Constructivism itself was a whirlpool of contrasting ideas and positions. Several groups, sub-groups, academies, institutes, journals, and individuals were in constant dialogue with each other, in a passionate struggle for utopia. Productivism, Suprematism, Cubo-Futurism, Cosmism, LEF, Agit-Prop, Prolet-Kult, Zaum, OBMOKhU, INKhUK, VKhUTEMAS, UNOVIS – the biotope of Constructivism reads as an ongoing, magical spell of mystical '-isms', occult abbreviations and esoteric acronyms.

Added to this, Constructivism also overlapped and connected (through initiatives such as the Constructivist International) with movements and schools such as Dada, Futurism,

De Stijl, and Bauhaus – expanding the scope of Constructivism even further.

**1.2** The city is the ultimate modernist platform – it's not surprising therefore that Constructivism had a vested interest in the urban environment. As the poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky declared, in 1917: "the streets are our brushes, the squares our palettes." Within the Constructivist imagination, the city became a language machine, a spatial poem, a constant source of graphic agitation and propaganda. Through a system of para-architectural structures (newspaper kiosks, typographic pavilions, pop-activist billboards, speaker's tribunes), the city was turned into a three-dimensional manifesto – language as a place to dwell in.

The Section for Artistic Labor (the revolutionary Soviet committee responsible for inviting artists and designers to develop these new forms of street-furniture) was actually headed by a poet rather than an architect, which might explain the strong focus on typography within these projects. But even the more massive architectural proposals (such as Vladimir Tatlin's titanic *Monument to the Third International*, 1919–1920) were treated as platforms to distribute language – after all, Tatlin's tower was meant as a gigantic radio transmitter, the giant spiralling structure designed to broadcast live speeches, straight from the Comintern.

Even factories were re-imagined as devices for communication – in this regard, we should mention composer Arseny Avraamov's *Symphony of Factory Sirens* (1922), a musical performance that included actual industrial sirens and smoking chimneys

**1.3** Most of these para-architectural structures remained unbuilt – like the October Revolution itself, the scale-models, drawings and collages never fulfilled their utopian potential. Tatlin's tower, a true icon of Constructivism, was never erected – although the existing scale-model can be regarded as an impressive piece of para-architecture in itself. Looking at historical photos of this oversized maquette being paraded through Moscow, one feels the borders (between technical drawing, scale-model, street-furniture, para-architecture, and actual architecture) simply melting into thin air. Models turn into buildings, buildings into models – reality becomes a graphic collage, a manifesto of dreams unfulfilled (or at least, not-yet-fulfilled).

Having said that, it might be wrong to regard these unbuilt structures as 'unrealized'. As the Australian academic Mary Gough suggested (in a recent essay on Gustav Klutskis' fantastic 'Screen/Tribune/Radio/Orator/Kiosk' drawings), a case can be made that these para-architectural proposals were indeed realised – through the printing press. By being circulated through books and magazines, these sketches and collages gained a material dimension that can easily rival that of actual architecture.

As the Constructivists tried to realise their graphic language in

the city, ultimately, it was the city that manifested itself in the graphic language of Constructivism.

(EJ)

## The Situationist City

*Subversive Cartography  
Diagrammatic Nihilism  
Proto-psycho-geographies  
Bitter topo/typologies  
Monochromic Schematics  
Disinfographics  
Labyrinthine Urbanism*

**2.1** Out of the ashes of the great movements of the early 20th century (Bauhaus, Dada, Surrealism), a new generation of painters and poets emerged. Embittered by WWII, and highly critical of past avant-gardes, this new breed of modernists pushed an agenda that was meaner, leaner, and far more aggressive than previous efforts. In France, a theoretical street gang called the Lettrists splintered in two factions, one headed by the poet Isidore Isou, another centered on the filmmaker Guy Debord. In Denmark, the CoBrA-affiliated painter Asger Jorn founded the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus (MIBI). And back in Amsterdam, another CoBrA-member, artist Constant Nieuwenhuys, turned his attention to architecture and urbanism – an interest that would lead to his long-running New Babylon project (1956–1974).

When these groups eventually ran into each other (during a tumultuous conference in Alba, in the summer of 1956), the resulting collective named itself the Situationist International (SI).

Through a strategic process of purges, expulsions and exclusions, the leadership of this platform fell more and more into the hands of Guy Debord, who streamlined the SI into an ultra-political, ultra-theoretical fighting unit. Militantly iconoclastic, the movement dedicated itself to Marxist-inspired attacks on the 'Society of the Spectacle' (a model of current society in which everything is reduced to mere forms of representation). It seems only fitting that the twelve issues of the movement's journal (published between 1958 and 1969) came wrapped in minimalist metallic covers – each issue polished like an individual bullet.

**2.2** Within the Situationist mindset, the city was meant to be treated as language – through a daily routine of aimless drifting (a method described as the *dérive*), the urban environment was to be read, analysed (and criticised) as a text, as a piece of prose or poetry. Roland Barthes (in *Semiology and Urbanism*, 1967) and Michel de Certeau (in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1980) both characterised the specific relationship between the city and the wanderer as a dialogue, a discourse, or a form of speech. It was the Situationists who explored this territory before them.

This notion, of the city as a text to be (close-)read, is most clearly illustrated in the memorable paragraph from Michele Bernstein's Situationist novel *All The King's Horses* (1960), in which a young girl asks one of the main

characters what he does for a living. "I study reification," he answers. The girl then assumes he must be working "with big books, and a huge table cluttered with papers" – to which the Debordian protagonist replies: "No, I walk... I mostly walk." The implication is clear – streets are meant to be read, and to drift is to study.

Since the city was seen as the main text, it also meant it could be annotated. And thus, the streets were inscribed with footnotes – in the form of graffitied slogans, subversive posters, and political pamphlets. Already in 1953, Debord famously painted *Ne Travaillez Jamais* on a wall near the Rue de Seine – and in that same year, Dutch photographer Ed van der Elsen took pictures of Lettrists in the streets of Paris, their baggy clothes filled with proto-punk slogans.

This apparatus of spatial footnotes grew to new heights during the student riots of 1968, when Paris was completely filled with Situationist-inspired slogans, political graffiti, typographic posters, and billboards turned into barricades. In the French journal *Utopie* (1967–1978), Jean Baudrillard described this brief moment (of 'applied situationism') as follows:

*Walls and words, screen-printed posters and hand-made flyers, were the true revolutionary media in May 1968. The streets where speech started and was exchanged: everything that is an immediate inscription, given and exchanged. Speech and response, moving in the same time and in the same place, reciprocal and antagonistic.*

**2.3** While the graphic language of the Situationists manifested itself in the city, the notion of the city simultaneously appeared in the graphic language of the Situationists – in the form of cartographic maps, diagrams and collages.

Guy Debord and Asger Jorn shared a fascination for the schematic language of subway maps and street plans – a language that perfectly lent itself for *détournement*, that typical Situationist method of visual appropriation.

An iconic example of the Situationist use of diagrams can be found in Debord's *The Naked City* (1957), a psycho-geographic, cut-up, fold-out map of Paris. This fragmented, subjective piece of cartography criticised the very notion of objective representation, while hinting at new ways to experience our material environment – a perfect illustration of the subversive relationship between printed matter and the city.

(EJ)

## The Provotarian City

*Poetic Sloganeering  
Open Language Machines  
Blown-up Information Networks  
Mass-Media Magick*

**3.1** In short, Provo was an Amsterdam anarchist movement that existed for just two years (1965–1967), although its existence resonated for years to come, in the Netherlands and abroad. Through printed matter, conceptual

# Superstructure, 1,2,3,4 & 5

activism and speculative political proposals (the *White Plans*), the Provo movement forever shaped the modernist landscape. Part art movement and part political party, Provo was a loose-knit collective, consisting of individuals with very different ambitions: subversive agendas, artistic motives, utopian ideas, concrete plans. Between 1965 and 1967, these motives and agendas briefly overlapped, creating a unique and singular movement. A movement that liquidated itself in 1967, during a self-declared act of 'auto-provocation'.

Right after the liquidation of Provo, some of the main figures remained active in various post-Provo groups. One of these activists was Rob Stolk (1946–2001), who played an important role in the early Dutch squatters' scene (Woningbuuro de Kraker, 1968), in Aktiegroep Nieuwmarkt (the action committee that successfully protested against the demolition of the Amsterdam Nieuwmarkt district, 1967–1976), and in the Maagdenhuisbezetting (the student occupation of the University of Amsterdam, 1969).

Stolk's activism forced him to become a printer – since mainstream printers refused to handle the subversive (and sometimes illegal) Provo material, Stolk had no other option than to print these publications himself. And it was exactly Stolk's conceptual use of the printing press that played a crucial role in the relationship between Provo and the city.

**3.2**  
At the heart of Provo is the triangle between the city, the movement, and the printing press.

Magazines were distributed in the streets, posters were pasted to the walls, performances ('happenings') took place on public squares (and around specific statues), mystical slogans were being chanted (such as a repeated mantra of "ugh, ugh, ugh"), and pamphlets were handed out to unsuspecting bystanders.

Protesters filled the roads with smoke signals (according to Dutch beat writer Jan Wolkers, "one of the oldest languages in the world"), while empty banners and white bikes were being carried around during ludic marches. Through these graphic gestures and poetic spells, the city turned into a magic center for applied utopianism.

Meanwhile, the (illegal) printing press of Provo had to be constantly moved, from one location to another, because there was always the danger of confiscation. In that sense, the printing press itself was on a constant *dérive* through the city, echoing the way the Provos themselves were drifting through the streets of Amsterdam – a perfect illustration of the symbiotic relationship between the city and the printing press.

In the case of Provo, it can even be argued that the city itself became a printing press. Through graphic and poetic strategies, Provo turned the city into a place where ideas were enlarged, multiplied and reproduced. In other words, through Provo, the city revealed itself as a device for reproducing ideas – a metaphorical printing press.

**3.3**  
It seems only natural that Provo

(a movement so dedicated to the exploration of the city as a platform for graphic signs) used, as their main signature, a graphic sign representing the city.

The sign of the apple, also known as the 'gnot sign', was conceived around 1962 by pre-Provo pioneers Bart Huges and Robert Jasper Grootveld, when they were looking for a sign to symbolise the notion of Amsterdam as the magic center of the world. Originally, the sign encapsulated a whole range of possible meanings: from a third eye to a fetus, from a skull to a butthole. In 1965, when the sign was adopted by the Provo movement, its meaning was narrowed down to the idea of the apple as a rendering of Amsterdam – an abstract map of the city, in which the circular outline represents the canals, the short stem (or stalk) symbolises the Amstel river, and the dot depicts the Spui (the Amsterdam square where most of the Provo-related happenings took place).

From then on, the gnot sign became the unofficial logo of the Provo movement, appearing frequently in print and on walls. In a sense, it is the perfect mark for Provo: a psycho-geographical micro-map, grounding the Provo movement firmly in the material surroundings of Amsterdam.

Another architectural motif within the language of Provo is the brick-wall-pattern. A clear example can be seen in the first few issues of the *Provo* journal, which came wrapped in brick-patterned covers (the handwritten word 'Provo' appearing as graffiti on a wall).

By turning printed matter into walls, walls were turned into printed matter – both equally valid as platforms for language.

(EJ)

## The Post-Punk City

*Dystopian Ambivalence*  
*Fictional Corporations*  
*Lost Formats*  
*Ballardian Architecture*  
*Dark Modernism*

**4.1**  
When it comes to dating the exact period in which Punk took place, there are two possible approaches.

There is the long-view: Punk as a continuous condition, an ongoing mentality – a narrative without ending ('Punk's Not Dead', and will never die), with roots stretching far back in history (Jon Savage, in his *Punk Etymology*, traces the word back to 1946; while Greil Marcus, in *Lipstick Traces*, reconnects Punk to the esoteric protestant sects of the 16th century).

Next to that, there's the 'big bang' model: Punk as a short, sharp shock – a movement that only lasted for a few weeks (or perhaps even just a few days, or hours, or seconds) during that sweltering English heatwave of 1977 (the so-called 'Summer of Hate'), transforming everything that took place afterwards into 'Post-' (and everything that happened beforehand into 'Proto-').

Surely, there's truth in both models. Punk might have been a singular instant, linked to a very specific space/

time axis – but obviously, it left traces in everything that happened afterwards, its echoes travelling far beyond 1977, and far beyond the English-speaking world.

In many ways, Punk can be seen as a scale-model of modernism itself – an arena of both constructive and destructive forces. Punk covers the full spectrum, from the applied utopianism of 'Do-It-Yourself' to the dystopian nihilism of 'No Future' – and everything in-between. This spectrum widens even further in the case of Post-Punk, when the original Punk Rock movement explodes and splinters into dozens of sub-sub-sub-cultures. Synth-Pop, Two-Tone Ska, Mod Revivalism, Psychobilly, New Romanticism, No Wave, Noise Industrialism, Oi Workerism, US Hardcore – the list goes on and on.

**4.2**  
This pluralism within Punk (and certainly within Post-Punk) might explain why it's near impossible to single out one specific way in which the graphic language of punk manifested itself in the city.

Of course, one could always point to graffiti – that great unifier, connecting all movements and subcultures, from antiquity to the present.

Another link between Punk and the city might be the specific, architectural way in which fashion was utilized by Punks. Through the use of badges, patches, spikes and studs, clothes were transformed into kiosk-like, para-architectural structures. (In his essay 'New Brutalists / New Romantics', Mark Owens does a brilliant job mapping out the similarities between Post-Punk textures and Brutalist surfaces).

**4.3**  
For now, we'd like to focus on the notion of the 'Ballardian', to provide yet another possible link between Post-Punk aesthetics and the urban environment. As many critics (such as Simon Reynolds, in *Rip it Up and Start Again*) have already pointed out, much Post-Punk imagery can be traced back to dystopian themes originally developed by British sci-fi writer J.G. Ballard (1930–2009). High-rise alienation, subway armies, highway wastelands, concrete jungles – these motifs play an important role in both the graphics and lyrics of Synth-Pop, Two-Tone and New Wave bands alike.

Most importantly, what Post-Punk shares with Ballard is a sense of 'critical ambivalence'. Despite his dystopian visions, Ballard actually loved modernity – his attitude towards modern architecture was one of morbid fascination, both affirmative and skeptical at the same time. The same sense of ambiguity can be found in the Post-Punk attitude towards corporate culture. Avoiding the traditional rock formats, many Post-Punk bands remodelled themselves as corporations, organisations, industrial operations (think of groups like Public Image Ltd., Sigue Sigue Sputnik, Heaven 17, and Throbbing Gristle). In an attempt to beat capitalism at its own game, these bands appropriated boardroom strategies, simultaneously embracing and attacking corporate culture.

From a modernist perspective, this 'corporate turn' seems perfectly in tune with that famous line from the

original *Dada Manifesto* (1918): "To be a Dadaist means being a businessman or a politician, rather than an artist." Or, as Public Image Ltd. would proclaim, some 65 years later (in the ambivalently-titled 'This is Not a Love Song', 1983): "Big business is very wise / I'm crossing over into free enterprise." The sleeve of PiL's *Live in Tokyo* (1983) seems to perfectly encapsulate this urgent sense of ambiguity. John Lydon is photographed against a spectacular, Pop-Art-like Tokyo backdrop, the PiL logo on his t-shirt flawlessly blending in with the brightly coloured neon signs on the Shibuya buildings; the graphic language of Post-Punk, brutally inserting itself into the corporate cityscape – and vice versa.

(EJ)

## The Kiosk

*Superstructure in Melbourne*

### 5.1

Working closely with Experimental Jetset, we have invited nine Melbourne-based graphic designers and educators to contribute to *Superstructure*. Together, we have produced a newspaper that connects the ideas explored in the exhibition to the issues affecting graphic design in Melbourne. The Melbourne-based practitioners have been asked to mine their archives and studios to produce an illustrated text. We have asked them to variously reflect on: the importance of research to graphic design practice; the significance of dialogue in a graphic design studio; and the role that exhibition-making might play in extending our understandings of what graphic design can be and do. These themes will also be opened up through a series of free public conversations taking place at RMIT Design Hub.

The newspaper has been designed by Experimental Jetset to paste up on a kiosk, to create a gathering space to discuss and debate graphic design practice and discourse today. The kiosk is an archetypal form of ephemeral, civic architecture. Located on the Design Hub's 'bridge' between Project Room 1 and Project Room 2, this particular kiosk floats like an island off from the main cityscape, physically separate but visually linking the two spaces. It creates a 'fifth zone' that complements Experimental Jetset's exploration of four movements or city quarters, and it represents a symbolic bridge between the Amsterdam and Melbourne contexts.

Here we find contributions from **Paul Marcus Fuog**, who details his studio's strategy of 'Unit of Measure' – a simple, interventionist study that brings a new perspective to understanding public space. **Hope Lumsden-Barry** interrogates the sometimes insular nature of Melbourne's design community and the importance of criticality in exhibition culture to break open new ground for debate. **Ziga Testen** and **Stuart Geddes** interview influential but under-recognised designers whose work has informed contemporary practice – in these intimate but revealing conversations, they explore the pervasiveness of modernism and its divergent yet sustained presence on graphic design in Australia. **Michaela Webb** also undertakes her research in an interview format, mining her colleagues'

experiences in Europe and America to reflect on graphic design practice here and on what we mean when we talk about 'culture' in Australia. **Lisa Grocott** recalls her years spent as a member of an influential Melbourne-based graphic design studio – a period that shaped her practice as a progressive educator in the years since. **Jenny Grigg** explores the idea of materialism within graphic design, and the importance of material inquiry in her practice. **Beziyt Worcou** looks at the flag as a form of politicised publishing, and describes key examples in which cultural and organisational values and ideas have been made public as flags. **Warren Taylor** walks the sticky carpet to explore post-punk graphic art in Melbourne, and the impact of punk's do-it-yourself approach on art and publishing in this city.

*Experimental Jetset: Superstructure* is an exhibition that explores how graphic design shapes our cities and communities through the broader lenses of creative, social and political concerns. By sharing an insight into the work and thinking of these Melbourne-based practitioners, we hope to also draw out new insights into Melbourne's design culture.

**Superstructure curatorium**  
Brad Haylock, Kate Rhodes, Fleur Watson (RMIT University); Megan Patty (National Gallery of Victoria)

**Newspaper contributors**  
Paul Marcus Fuog, Stuart Geddes, Jenny Grigg, Lisa Grocott, Hope Lumsden-Barry, Warren Taylor, Ziga Testen, Michaela Webb, Beziyt Worcou

## Structure and Counter-Structure

Experimental Jetset  
*Structure and Counter-Structure, 2018*  
fifteen-channel video, loop

In Project Room 2, a selection of work is shown as a large, fifteen-channel projection.

Randomly scanned items (all designed between 1997 and 2018) are moving across one wall of the hallway, in a continuous scroll, not unlike an industrial assembly line.

The projection is accompanied by a soundtrack created by musician Ian Svenonius (operating under his moniker, Escape-ism) – a sequential suite of looped tracks, composed specifically for this exhibition.

Based on a fictional grassroots movement for 'Alphabet Reform', it's a soundtrack that starts with a murmured discussion about letters, slowly merging into music – going through various stages of discontent, discourse, and folk expression.

(EJ)

## Alphabet Reform

Escape-ism  
(Ian Svenonius)  
*Alphabet Reform, 2018*  
sound composition, loop

**Personnel**  
Ian Svenonius as Escape-ism  
Alphabet Reform workshop voices:  
Ariana Papademetropoulos, Zumi, Alexandra Cabral

# Superstructure, utopia/dystopia

POST  
PUNK

dystopian

SITUA  
TION  
ISM

*In conversation with Experimental Jetset's Danny van den Dungen, Marieke Stolk and Erwin Brinkers, Superstructure curators Brad Haylock, Megan Patty, Kate Rhodes and Fleur Watson explore the making of the exhibition and the studio's ambitions and intent for the show, marking the first major retrospective of the work of Experimental Jetset in the world.*

**Curatorium:** The exhibition design you've created is integral to the content itself and is conceived as an interconnected series of 'cityscapes' – how have you developed the relationship between the works/space/viewer to communicate the ideas within the show?

**Experimental Jetset:** To answer this question, we first have to go back to 2011 and 2012, when we curated a couple of exhibitions on the subject of Provo, an Amsterdam-based anarchist group that existed between 1965 and 1967. While doing the research surrounding those exhibitions, we became more and more interested in the relationship between the Provo movement, the printing press and the

city of Amsterdam – and, in particular, the way Provo employed the city as a platform for language.

In 2016, we turned these insights into *Provo Station: Models for a Provotarian City*, a solo exhibition at the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst (GfZK) in Leipzig. In that exhibition, we tried to transform the linguistic and performative strategies of Provo into architectural scale-models, as an attempt to trace the contours of a utopian Provotarian city – a city based on ludic, graphic and poetic principles.

When, a year later, we were invited by RMIT and NGV to develop a show of our own work, we immediately decided to somewhat broaden the retrospective scope and took the opportunity to turn the exhibition into a personal research project, returning once again to some of the themes we had explored in our earlier exhibitions on Provo, in particular the way in which the city can be envisioned as a platform for language. So, for the Melbourne exhibition, we thought it would be interesting to focus on four (sub-)cultural movements that

hi-tech

low-tech

CON  
STRUCT  
IVISM

utopian

PROVO

(each in their own way) have served as inspiration to our practice and to investigate (although in a subjective and perhaps even intuitive manner) the various ways in which the languages of these movements manifest in the city – and simultaneously, to look at the ways in which the city manifests itself in the languages of these movements.

The four movements we eventually chose to work with – Constructivism, the Situationist International, the Provo movement and the Post-Punk Continuum – are all historical moments that have influenced our practice as graphic designers – but we also felt that these four movements somehow formed four pieces of the same puzzle, which was another important reason for us to focus on these movements.

In some respects, these movements oppose each other; in other respects they seem to mirror each other, or even overlap. In fact, in the early stages of our research, we created a (somewhat oversimplified) diagram, in which we placed the four movements alongside the axes of technology and utopianism.

Although we later discarded this ultra-simplistic way of interpreting the movements (the realities of these movements were way more complex, more layered and more ambiguous than this schematic model suggests), the diagram helped us to envision the exhibition as a city consisting of four quarters.

We like the various meanings of the word 'quarter' (literally, 'a fourth'). On the one hand, it's a word that refers to an area of the city (such as the Parisian 'Quartier Latin', the neighbourhood that played such an important role in movements such as existentialism, lettrism, etc.) – while on the other hand, it refers to a period of 15 minutes: a dial divided in four. So that's how we envision our exhibition – as a city, consisting of four (partly overlapping) areas. But perhaps also as a clock-face, divided into four periods. It's an installation that unfolds itself both spatially and temporally.

And that's how we eventually arrived at the concept of an installation divided into four (colour-coded) quarters – The Constructivist City, The Situationist

City, The Provotarian City and The Post-Punk City – with each quarter dedicated to a particular movement, a specific moment in history.

The next question we had to ask ourselves was how to connect our own practice with these four historical movements. After all, the exhibition had to include a retrospective component as well – a selection of our own work. And we certainly wouldn't want to let the two layers (the research project and the retrospective part) serve as too literal (or too direct) illustrations of each other. Ideally, the two parts would relate to each other in a loose, dialogue-like way – but how to achieve that?

In an attempt to come up with a possible solution, we went back to the original four movements and identified a couple of sub-themes (or sub-sub-themes) within them (undercurrents such as 'paper architecture', 'subversive cartography', 'poetic sloganeering', 'corporate dystopianism', etc.) – and these motifs then served as devices (even if only for ourselves) to locate possible connections between our work and these movements.

In other words – the links we suggest, between our work and these movements, are based on themes rather than on forms. And even then, we certainly wouldn't dare to suggest that our work exists on the same level as these historical pieces – in the exhibition, we display our work on the back of the panels, literally as added footnotes to these larger cultural narratives.

**C:** Can you describe the process of working with Ian Svenonius on the soundscape you developed for *Superstructure*? How does the inclusion of sound art provide an added dimension to the body of work?

**EJ:** We have known Ian Svenonius for quite a long time – in fact, the first time we saw him perform was in 1992 with his band Nation of Ulysses – at an Amsterdam venue, Korsakoff. From the start, we were fans – not only of his music, but also of his writing. The sleeve notes he wrote (and still writes) are amazing – part pop-art poetry, part political manifesto, part rock criticism, part surrealist, agitprop.

In 2000, we first asked him to write an essay for us – at that time we were guest editors of issue 57 of *Emigre Magazine*, an American typography journal, and Ian very generously contributed a piece. A couple of years later, we showed one of Ian's texts to Stuart Bailey, editor of *Dot Dot Dot* – an influential graphic design magazine at the time – and Stuart decided to publish the text, with an introduction written by us.

Fast-forward to 2015, we invited Ian to write an essay for our monograph (*Statement and Counter-Statement: Notes on Experimental Jetset*, published by Roma Publications), which again resulted in a brilliant text. Shortly after that, Ian asked us to design a sleeve for his solo album (*Introduction to Escape-ism*, 2017, Merge Records) and we are currently working on a sleeve for his second solo album.

To make a long story short (and to answer the actual question): a while ago, we were mailing back and

# Superstructure, low-tech/hi-tech

forth, discussing the sleeve of Ian's upcoming album – when, in a moment of unexpected clarity, we asked him if he would be interested in making a soundtrack for a film piece in our exhibition [Project Room 2]. Ian was immediately enthusiastic and, after exchanging all kinds of ideas and plans, he eventually came up with a fantastic concept: a sequential suite of looped tracks, based on this fictional grassroots movement for 'Alphabet Reform'. It is the perfect companion to our film – it really emphasises the more deconstructivist (and perhaps even destructive) tendencies within our work.

A lot of critics regard our work as functionalist, utilitarian, affirmative, positivist, rational – which we always consider a complete misreading of our practice. We are glad that Ian recognises the fact that our work also has negativist, disruptive and destabilising dimensions – that our practice is based both on construction and deconstruction. The whole notion of 'Alphabet Reform' fits perfectly within this context.

*My idea is that, since your work deals with the disassembly of language, the theme of the soundtrack could be 'Alphabet Reform' – starting with a murmured discussion about letters, and then emerging as music (or a semblance of music) by the end, going through various stages of discontent, discourse, folk expression, etc. But it will be subtle, almost ambient...*  
– Ian Svenonius.

**C:** The subcultures you identify throughout the exhibition could be 'read' from a different perspective within an Australian context – is there a different type of mediation required when talking about the Provo movement to an audience in Melbourne rather than to one in Europe or do you feel the themes are universal?

**EJ:** Although the chosen subcultures seem to be historically rooted in the European continent, it is safe to say that the dominant discourse around these movements takes place in a decidedly 'Anglo-academic' sphere: across universities in the UK, the US, Canada and Australia. In fact, we consider many texts written by Australian scholars important to our research, such as Mary Gough, McKenzie Wark.

In that sense, as non-English speakers (or at least, non-native-English speakers) and, as design workers with no university background, we can only approach this discourse as the autodidactic outsiders that we ultimately are. In that way, we feel that we represent our own ideal audience – we are learning about these movements while putting together the exhibition and we hope this sense of learning is somehow transmitted through the installation.

**C:** Design education is another key aspect to your practice, primarily at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, where we witnessed some incredible examples, from graduating students exhibiting graphic design. In your roles as educators, do you reflect on the exhibition-making process with emerging designers? Do you think designers need to know how to exhibit their own work?

**EJ:** Indeed, we feel strongly linked to the Gerrit Rietveld Academie – we studied there between 1993 and 1997 and taught there between 2000 and 2013. However, we cannot take any credits for the way in which the graphic design students exhibit their work – if anything, it is the Gerrit Rietveld Academie that has influenced us.

One thing it's important to understand about the Gerrit Rietveld Academie is that it is more or less rooted in movements such as Bauhaus and De Stijl. In fact, the architect of the building, Gerrit Rietveld, was once (in his younger years) a full-fledged member of De Stijl – and although Rietveld had removed himself somewhat from some of his earlier ideas by the time he designed the school, we like to think that the spirit of De Stijl is very much alive in the building.

In other words – the Gerrit Rietveld Academie was, during the time we studied there, pretty much dedicated to the synthesis of all arts (and perhaps even more importantly, the synthesis of art and the every day). In a practical sense, this meant that there was no distinction made between the arts – there was no hierarchical division. Painting wasn't seen as a 'higher' art than fashion design, for example. The school was completely open and transparent, without any real borders between the departments. Of course, there were separate departments (graphic design, photography, architecture, etc.), but the boundaries were fluid. The first year was a shared year (the Vorkurs, modelled after the Bauhaus) for students of all departments, creating a sweet sense of flux.

And as far as we know, this is still the case.

So we think it's only logical for a student from the Academie to not consider graphic design as a two-dimensional, 'flat' practice – but instead, to consider a book to be part of an installation, to consider a poster to be a prop in a performance, to consider architecture as a language, to consider fashion as a form of cinema, etc.

And these are indeed principles that we also hope to transmit through our teaching – and through our practice as a whole. In fact, *Superstructure*, as an installation, is one big attempt to confuse the boundaries between printed matter and spatial architecture – to suggest that pages are walls and, walls are pages.

**C:** Your work often evokes formal strategies of late-Modernist graphic design. What do you understand to be the significance of this approach in a contemporary context? And how do you understand your audiences' relationship to the history you evoke?

**EJ:** We always felt that our personal graphic language owes a lot to the cultural landscape in which we grew up – the social-democratic structuralism of the Netherlands in the 70s, which was largely shaped by late-Modernist designers such as Wim Crouwel, Ben Bos, Juriaan Schrofer, etc.

Everything around us was designed in that particular structuralist language – the school atlases, the stamps, the

telephone books. In fact, the city in which both Erwin and Danny were born (Rotterdam) boasted a logotype designed by Total Design. In that sense, we were literally born under the sign of late-Modernism. (Except for Marieke, who was born in Amsterdam, under the sign of Provo – but that's another story).

And because of that, we have always regarded this late-Modernist language as our mother tongue, as our folk art. It's the only language we feel qualified to use – not in a 'functionalist' or 'objective' way, as designers like Crouwel originally intended it (as if this is actually possible), but instead in a highly subjective, intuitive, almost emotional way. We see the legacy of late-Modernism most of all as a poetic one. It's a language we somehow retrieved from memory and now use to tell our own stories with.

It's also a way for us to come to terms with the dismantling of our cultural and social infrastructure. Being born in the late 60s and early 70s, we feel we experienced the last days of social democracy – right before the neo-liberal turn, right before the whole process of privatisation. And somehow, we feel that our graphic language, with all its references to the social-democratic structuralism of our childhood, and to the Post-Punk memories of our teenage years, is perhaps a way for us to deal with this sense of loss, this feeling of failure.

In this total neo-liberal environment in which we now live, and in which we also participate (we're certainly no saints), we still hope that our work can keep a certain memory alive. The spirit of collectivism, encapsulated in aesthetics, in graphic design, in ink – like a genie in a lamp, waiting to be awakened.

**C:** Has the process of conceiving and designing *Superstructure* provided any new insights while reflecting upon your collective body of work? What would you most like audiences to experience?

**EJ:** In the cityscape installation, we show a selection of our work that we categorised according to a number of themes, or rather sub-themes, distilled from the four main movements. Forcing ourselves to look at our own work through the lens of these sub-themes (categories such as 'poetic sloganeering', 'subversive cartography', etc.), we came across some connections within our work that hadn't previously occurred to us – so in a sense we did gain some new insights into our work.

To give a concrete example – while doing research on the Situationist International, it became clear to us that Guy Debord and Asger Jorn were obsessed with maps, city plans, diagrams, charts, schematic representations. But instead of using this diagrammatic language in a scientific, 'objective' fashion, Debord and Jorn used this medium in much more intuitive, dissident and poetic ways.

Going through our own work, we came across a very similar fascination for diagrams and charts and, just like Debord and Jorn, the way in which we employ this diagrammatic language in our own work is seldom systematic and almost never rational. Our goal

is usually to somehow subvert this diagrammatic language, to turn it into something more elastic – to create some friction within the authoritative framework. In short, this whole diagrammatic (and anti-diagrammatic) undercurrent in our work would have escaped our attention if it wasn't for *Superstructure*.

What do we want the visitor to 'get' from the exhibition? That's a hard question – we never think about 'the audience' in such absolute terms. But what we do hope to get across (not only through *Superstructure*, but through our work in general) is a certain sense of 'materialism' – the feeling that we are shaped by our material surroundings and that we have to actively shape these surroundings in return. Ultimately, people like you and me create our environment, and so, people like you and me can change it. It's perhaps a certain awareness of dialectical materialism we are after – a going-back-and-forth between making and being made.

And the Modern city is the perfect platform to observe this process of shaping and being shaped – after all, we are building cities, while cities are building us. So it's certainly a sort of materialism we are trying to reveal here – but a materialism of the ecstatic, exhilarating, accelerating kind. Concrete poetry in motion. That's a bit of the feeling we would like to get across.

**C:** On account of the critical and conceptual moves that recur through your practice, you have a very recognisable visual language. How do you balance your own interests and inquiries with the needs of your clients and their audiences?

**EJ:** Again, we don't really think about audiences and clients in such absolute terms. The way we see it – we have a certain practice, an ongoing body of work, and this practice brings us in all kinds of unexpected situations and contexts. And the only way we can react to these ever-changing circumstances is through our own language, our own viewpoint – our own tone of voice. There is no other possibility for us – we can only be ourselves and our own language is our only tool.

In an earlier interview (2013), we expressed it like this:

*We realise that a small group of people (a very tiny circle of graphic designers aware of our work) might recognise a certain tone of voice, a specific accent, all throughout our body of work. But this dialect is not something we are ashamed of. It's our natural voice, our authentic way of talking. We're not like actors who need a wig and a funny voice for every different role. We're more the type of actors who use their own faces and their own voices – but still know how to perform.*

But that doesn't mean that our language is fixed or static – in fact, in the same way that we use our graphic language to shape certain situations, these situations also shape our graphic language. We always carry our previous projects with us, in one way or another – we are constantly being influenced by our shared experiences. In a sense, we are being shaped as much as we are shaping.

## Image credits

*Utopian/Dystopian, High-Tech/Low-Tech, Experimental Jetset, 2017*

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# Superstructure, Superstructur

## Introduction to the exhibition

*Experimental Jetset – Superstructure* is the first major exhibition of Amsterdam-based, internationally celebrated graphic design studio Experimental Jetset in Australia.

Curated and designed for Australian audiences, this exhibition is both a retrospective of the work of the practice – founded in 1997 by Marieke Stolk, Erwin Brinkers and Danny van den Dungen – and a large-scale installation in which they explore the relationship between graphic language and the city.

Responding to RMIT Design Hub's mission to present creative, practice-led research and design process, *Experimental Jetset* has identified key sub-cultural movements that have inspired their own studio practice. As a result, the exhibition is conceived as a journey through four quarters of an imaginary city that represents four conditions: The Constructivist City, The Situationist City, The Provotarian City and The Post-Punk City. These moments in time have been layered with existing and newly created works, including film, collage, posters, prints and installations.

RMIT Design Hub invited nine Melbourne-based graphic designers to co-produce a newspaper with *Experimental Jetset*, with the intention of connecting the ideas explored in the exhibition with the local design community. Contributors include Paul Marcus Fuog, Stuart Geddes, Jenny Grigg, Lisa Grocott, Hope Lumsden-Barry, Warren Taylor, Žiga Testen, Michaela Webb and Beazyt Worcou. The themes explored in the newspapers form the basis of a program of public events, giving visitors a direct look into graphic design practice and discourse today.

*Experimental Jetset – Superstructure* is conceived and designed by *Experimental Jetset*, the Netherlands.

Presented by RMIT Design Hub in collaboration with the National Gallery of Victoria.

## Curatorium

Brad Haylock, Kate Rhodes, Fleur Watson (RMIT University); Megan Patty (National Gallery of Victoria)

## RMIT Design Hub team

Curators: Kate Rhodes, Fleur Watson  
Creative producer: Nella Themelios  
Technical production coordinator: Erik North  
Technical assistant: Timothy McLeod  
Exhibition assistant: Layla Cluer  
Technical crew: Gavin Bell, Robert Jordan, Simon Maisch, Jessica Wood

## Biography

*Experimental Jetset* is an Amsterdam-based graphic design studio founded in 1997 by Marieke Stolk, Erwin Brinkers and Danny van den Dungen.

Focusing on printed matter and site-specific installations, EJ have worked on projects for a wide variety of institutes, including Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Centre Pompidou, Dutch Post Group and Whitney Museum of American Art.

*Experimental Jetset* taught at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie (Amsterdam) between 2000 and 2013, and currently tutor at Werkplaats Typografie (Arnhem).

In 2007, the Museum of Modern Art (New York) acquired a substantial selection of work by *Experimental Jetset*. Other institutes that have collected EJ material include Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), Art Institute of Chicago, Museum für Gestaltung, Centre National des Arts Plastiques and Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum.

In 2015, Roma Publications (Amsterdam) published *Statement and Counter-Statement – Notes on Experimental Jetset*, a monograph featuring essays by Linda van Deursen, Mark Owens and Ian Svenonius.

## Public Programs

*Experimental Jetset – Superstructure* explores the relationship between graphic language and the city and presents the first major survey exhibition of Amsterdam-based graphic design studio *Experimental Jetset* in Australia. Join the RMIT Design Hub team for a series of public programs that explore the exhibition's ideas and themes along with contributions by local graphic design practitioners and researchers.

All events are free and take place at RMIT Design Hub.  
Bookings recommended:  
[rmitdesignhub.eventbrite.com](http://rmitdesignhub.eventbrite.com),  
[designhub.rmit.edu.au](http://designhub.rmit.edu.au)  
for further details.

**Floor talk with Experimental Jetset: Erwin Brinkers, Danny van den Dungen and Marieke Stolk**  
Friday 16 March  
12.30pm – 1.30pm  
Level 2, Project Rooms 1 & 2

Erwin Brinkers, Danny van den Dungen and Marieke Stolk from *Experimental Jetset* discuss their practice, and the ideas explored in *Superstructure*.

**Mode and Mode 4 launch and reading**  
Saturday 17 March  
12.30pm – 1.30pm  
Level 2, Project Rooms 1 & 2

Issue four of *Mode and Mode* contains a reprint of the lookbook publication *Friction / Parade 99*, by fashion designers Keupr/van Bentm and *Experimental Jetset*. To launch the publication, Matthew Linde and Laura Gardner will read excerpts from the new issue.

**Why research graphic design?**  
Wednesday 21 March  
12.30 – 1.30pm  
Level 2, Project Rooms 1 & 2

Melbourne-based designers Stuart Geddes, Jenny Grigg and Beazyt Worcou reveal insights garnered from research into and through graphic design, discussing its value to studio practice.

**Why talk about graphic design?**  
Wednesday 28 March  
12.30 – 1.30pm  
Level 2, Project Rooms 1 & 2

Reflecting on current and past studio leadership experience, Paul Marcus Fuog, Lisa Grocott and Michaela Webb consider the significance of conversations, people and places for graphic design studio practice.

**Why curate and exhibit graphic design?**  
Wednesday 11 April  
12.30 – 1.30pm  
Level 2, Project Rooms 1 & 2

Looking at developments in curatorial practice and the archive, Hope Lumsden-Barry, Žiga Testen and Warren Taylor examine the importance of exhibition-making as a way to engage with graphic design history and to inform future practice.

**Making Superstructure**  
Wednesday 18 April  
12.30 – 1.30pm  
Level 2, Project Rooms 1 & 2

This program unpacks the 'making' of *Superstructure* in conversation with the exhibition's curators and the Design Hub production team. Here, we peel back the layers of the show – from conceiving the concept, the early development of the content and design, through to its physical production.

**Disclaimer**  
RMIT University has made every effort to trace copyright holders and provide correct crediting and acknowledgements in consultation with the providers of the exhibition.

## Acknowledgements

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## RMIT DESIGN HUB



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## RMIT Design Hub

RMIT Design Hub is a progressive educational environment. It houses a community of architects, designers, curators and students for collaborative, interdisciplinary design research and education within a purpose-built building that also includes RMIT University's School of Architecture and Design and the RMIT Design Archives. The Project Rooms at Design Hub exhibit creative, practice-led research and are open to everyone. Exhibitions at Design Hub visualise, perform and share research ideas and make new research connections.

## Location

Corner Victoria and Swanston Streets, Carlton, 3053

## Opening hours

Tuesday–Friday, 10am – 5pm  
Saturday, 12 – 5pm  
Closed Sunday, Monday and Public Holidays  
*Admission is free*

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