

# FRAGMENTING IDENTITIES

ASSEMBLING THE URBAN CHARACTER FROM THE FOUND



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RESEARCH PLAN AR3A010

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*RESEARCH PLAN*









Urban development always introduces a new character to the identity of an encountered site. This is manifested in the demographic, function, ownership, materiality and form of any specific environment. The distribution of entities that differ in these characteristics, and the transitions in-between them, shape the identity of a place. External forces may conduct influence on an existing urban fabric by way of demolition, construction or transformation. In that case the demographic and functional composition is bound to change as it is the very motivation behind urban development processes. The extend of said change and how the newly introduced character is integrated into the current structures determines success in creating qualitative urbanity for people living in the city.

Thus my personal research interest lies in understanding the given specific spatial identity of an urban site and how it gets altered by consciously conducted external influences.

## THEMES

Author (2024)

*sudden transition of residential structures in Kiel*







During the creation of the exhibition piece *The Material Garden of Gift and Waste* we attempted to understand the situation at hand through different lenses pointed at the comparative plane between the given postindustrial site and a garden. Through considering Blikfabriek as a garden and representing it as such we gained a deeper understanding of the site. This methodology helped in grasping the enclosure surrounding it as the border of a walled garden, the seasonal dynamic surrounding this flourishing environment of constant change and the different actors caring for it including their motivations for doing so. The perceived threshold between in- and outside the premises is the result of external forces shaping the site. In 2018 an autonomous and loosely organized group of urban pioneers arrived at the abandoned can factory in Hoboken and started developing it without much consideration for neither past nor future. The resulting liberating spirit of this temporary occupation is an integral part of the appeal it holds for its inhabitants and visitors alike. The rigidity of the enclosure towards the surroundings enables it to be a place with little restrictions for the users. Its closedness enables its openness. This dichotomy and the resulting excluding nature shape the identity of Blikfabriek, marking it as an example of externally originating urban development that seized to react to the identity found on site and embedded itself rather than attempting integration into found structures.

By deconstructing our analysis into lenses with varying focal points we managed to uncover the intricacies of the site and reassemble them into a clear image of the found situation. We conveyed our findings through a multimedial haptic mapping exercise, inviting the spectator of the piece to engage with it and form their own individual set of lenses to observe the site.



Through uncovering fragments of the story hidden underneath the tiles, the identity of *the Material Garden* can be assembled and thus becomes comprehensible. The unpredictable nature of selecting which tiles to turn highlights the subjectivity of perceiving an urban identity. It depends on everyone's individual set of lenses chosen, shaped by past experiences and visions for the future.

Bérénice De Middelée (2024)

Installation view: At the edge, in the center: Assembling Antwerp













**David Teniers the Younger (1651)**  
*The Archduke Leopold Wilhelm in his Painting Gallery in Brussels*

**Nigel Henderson (1953)**  
*Parallel of Life and Art - Installation View*

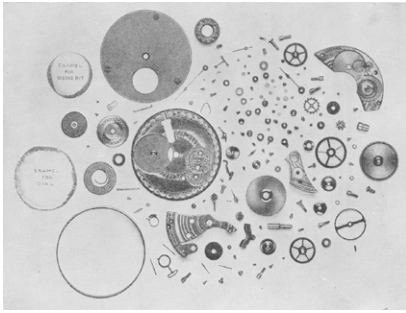
Finding a personal angle for grasping an encountered identity starts with the multisensory experience of perception. The chosen behaviour after perceiving the found, determines the possible degree of understanding what one observes. In their 1956 essay *But Today We Collect Ads*, Alison and Peter Smithson phrased this process as a three step methodology consisting of „[...] picking up, turning over and putting with.“. It outlines their approach to contextualized thinking during formation of the *as found* movement and the beginning of what we nowadays call pop-art. In an attempt of outlining their involvement with the *Independent Group* the Smithsons boiled it down to „wanting what you got, rather than going out and getting what you wanted“. This sufficient notion of cherishing the existing condition, *the found*, made its way into their literature, artistic ventures and architecture alike.

The 1953 exhibition „Parallel of life and art“ at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, created by the Smithsons in collaboration with photographer Nigel Henderson and sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi showed a collection of photographic prints juxtaposing a variety of subjects, all found on the spectrum of life and art. Taken out of their inherent context the mostly rather mundane images gain significance and turn into fragments of a whole - a whole they where initially never intended to form. Their final curation resulted in an abstractable catalogue leaving room for interpretation by the audience and their subjective associations with the found material.

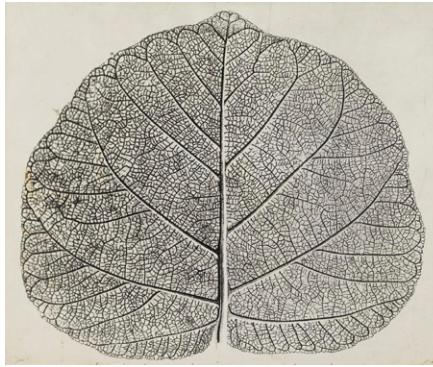
In the opening speech Henderson used the term *imaginary museums* to describe the contributions by the four main curators who collaborated on the exhibition. This being a direct reference to what André Malraux describes as the *musée imaginaire* in his 1947 essay of the same name.

He claims that through the newly emerging medium of photographic reproduction and the memories one made in their lifetime, we can all curate our own imaginary museums. His emphasis on the interrelation between observed pieces inside ones individual collection helps in understanding the exhibition curated by the four Independent Group members. They invite the visitor into their personal *musée imaginaire* without claiming completeness nor a clear story told. The order of observation and resulting message remains untold and is entirely dependent on the visitors association with the presented work formed by their subconscious interpretation, relating to past experiences and memories. The audience is incentivized to appropriate the exhibition by participating in the same process of „picking up, turning over and putting with“ that the curators engaged in while creating their catalogue of found images. This approach extends the scope of the exhibition towards the realm of imagination the observers bring with them, filling up the tight gaps in between the presented artwork.





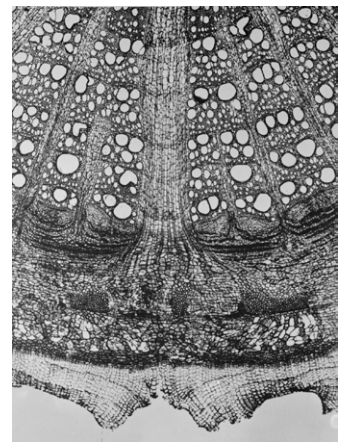
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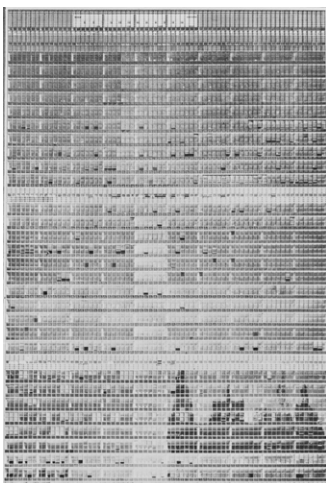
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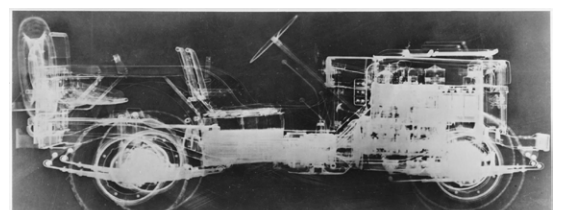
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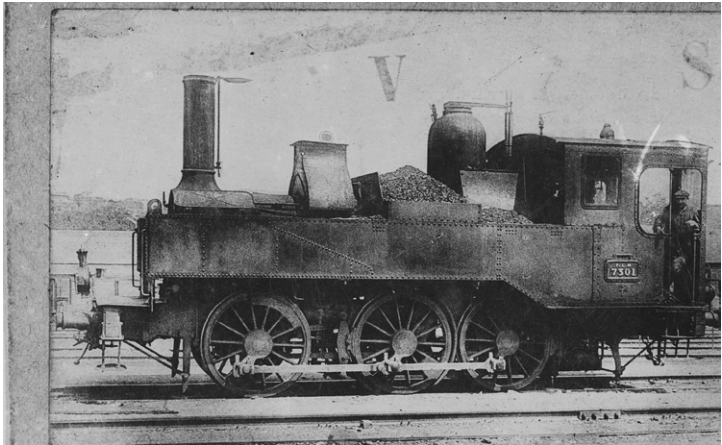


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N. Henderson, E. Paolozzi, A. Smithson, P. Smithson (1953)  
 excerpts from the catalogue „Parallel of Life and Art“



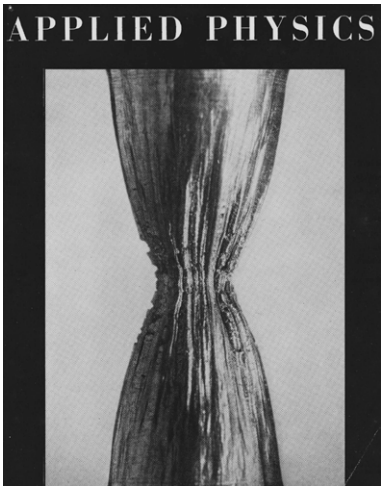
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This kind of interconnected gathering creates a net of relation between the collected objects, each one providing their own character and adding up to a joint identity. Perception of it is highly subjective, depending on which personal lens one chooses to apply. This kind of assemblage follows the framework of the geographical phenomenon of an *archipelago* in which individual *islands* exist in interrelation even though they each have their own character and function autonomously. Even when considering the strict separation through a dividing body of water and the resulting distance between the islands, they still remain in relation with each other through the overarching network they share. Depending on the scope of observation one can choose to analyze these islands on their own, while the level of connection to the context is a constant determining factor in the perceived identity of a place.

When considering the encountered situation in the south of Antwerp as an archipelago, the given postindustrial site to be reimagined represents one of the islands contributing to its formation. The currently inherent separation between *the Material Garden* and its surroundings we ascertained in our joint research supports the hypothesis of Blikfabriek being an island in Hobokens archipelago lacking connection with the overall structure encountered on site. This results in a perceived disparity of identity in the urban fabric.

My personal angle on the situation at hand leads me to ask the following research questions:

### **How can the identity of an urban site be captured by fragmenting and reassembling what is found?**

What findings about the composition of said site can be made when applying the comparative plane between its environment and an archipelago?

Can urban development pay regard to the identity of a place through incorporating found traces into a new design?

Can an architectural intervention give incentives to future inhabitants for „picking up, turning over and putting with“ what they find?

## **QUESTIONS**







*a physical assemblage*

### Extended set of lenses



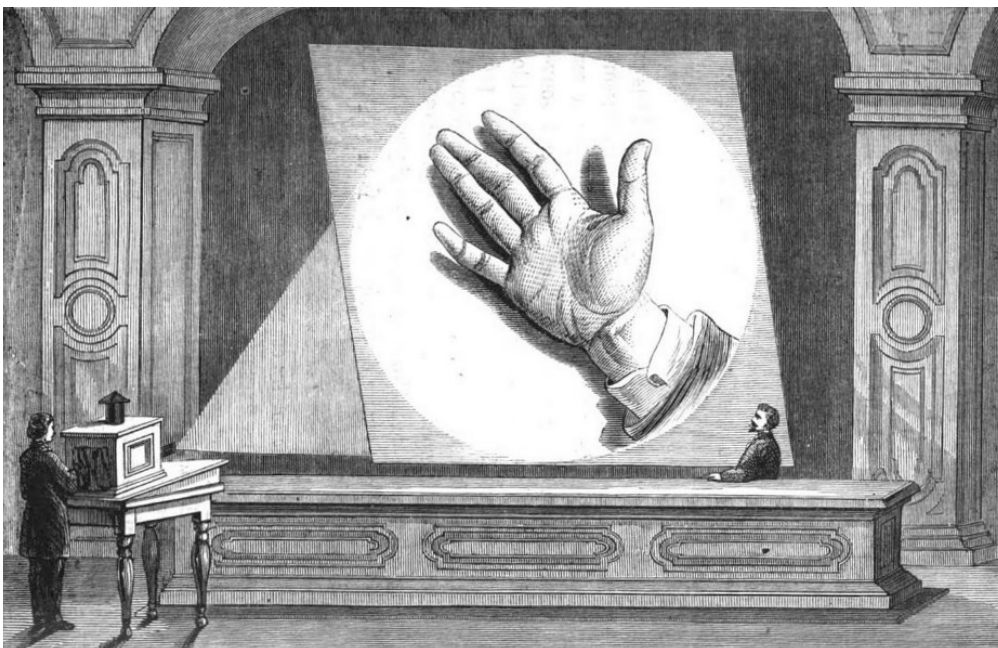


*SOURCES & INSPIRATIONS*



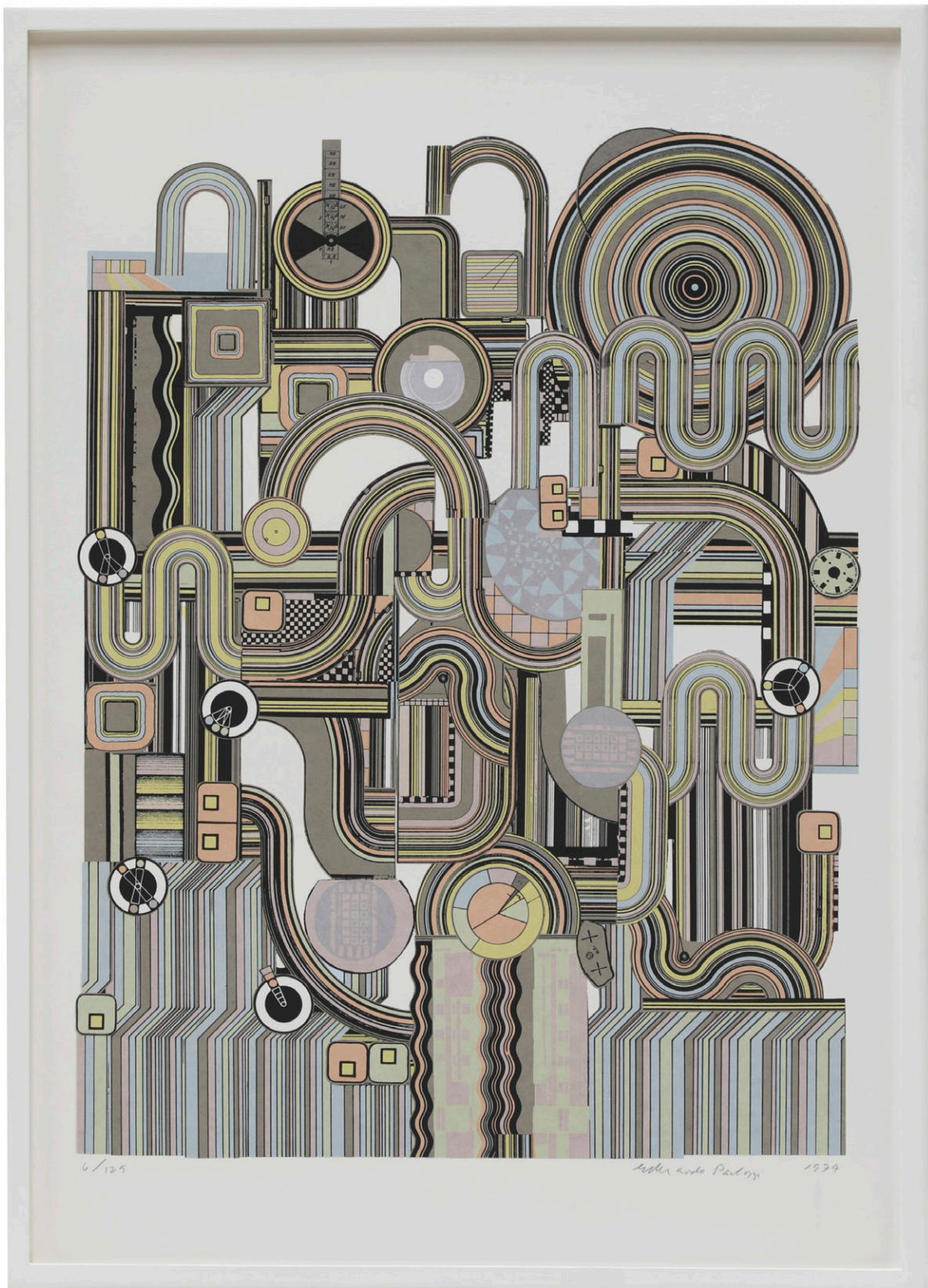
By using the epidiascope one can project physical objects onto a twodimensional plane. It was historically used to increase the perceived size of items to display them to a crowd. Eduardo Paolozzi used it to highlight his found objects and transfer them from one medium to another. This transfer of scale and mode of representation helps in abstracting the desired characteristics of an item and understanding its specific place in a newly curated collection of objects.

Through the assemblage of mostly graphical references stemming from a variety of sources the artist creates new interrelations of what used to be unaffiliated. Paolozzi's resulting collages often display his personal affinity for an industrial aesthetic, constructed of found material from popular culture.



François Moigno (1872)

*L'art des projections*



Eduardo Paolozzi (1975)  
*Catalogue for Harmony*



Richard Hamilton was a graphic designer and visual artist and is regarded as one of the founding members of the pop-art movement. He often worked with extracting visual media from different sources and creating new compositions by way of assemblage. The resulting images are characterized by a strong spatial quality, which does not necessarily resemble the conditions encountered during collection of individual components forming the final composition.

The 1979 work *Berlin Interior* is comprised of multiple photos taken in a single apartment, merged by way of photogravure and supplemented by manual etching. Through repetition and joining previously separated images together, Hamilton creates an image of a space that never was. Thus the highly referential work distances itself from the original reference through graphical reimagination of a found situation.



Richard Hamilton (1979)  
*Berlin Interior*



Richard Hamilton (1964-65)  
*Interior*



R Hamilton 75/100



In Hannes Stöhrs 2008 feature film „Berlin Calling“, DJ Paul Kalkbrenner takes the lead role of an up and coming artist in the vibrant city of early 2000s Berlin. Kalkbrenner recreates the song „Train“ in character during the movie and the original features on the accompanying soundtrack. It is entirely assembled from snippets of sounds he records in local public transport. The composition of familiar sounds extracted from the urban landscape leads to associations with past moments when the listener experienced the soundscape of the train before. The mundane acoustic backdrop of public transport is through conscious reconfiguration turned into music.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvSoPbhQ9Nc>





Hannes Stöhr (2008)  
*Berlin Calling* (film stills)





The German Pavillon at La Biennale di Venezia 2023 stood under the theme of „Open For Maintenance“. It was conceived as an ongoing transformational process of what was left over from earlier renditions of the biannual arts and architecture festival. Objects representing memories from earlier usage were tagged with a QR code enabling visitors to research their past while perceiving them as part of the everchanging assemblage that occupied the inside of the pavillon for about one year. Projects created from the stock of material left the grounds of the giardini and still stand in Venice today, preserving the identity of the ideas presented in 2023.





Author (2023)  
*Assemblage of material at the pavillon*



no. 108

**Nigel Henderson (1953)**

*Screenprint of Eduardo Paolozzi's „Plaster Blocks” (1952)*

