





## MODELS OF DISPERSAL: Notes on the *Tabloid* project

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Some old women use newspaper to dye their gray hair. They rub the pages insistently on strands of hair until the ink dust released seeps all the way down to their follicles. Afterward, the new blackness, so deeply entrenched at first, slowly abandons their heads and stains the pillow cases. In the washer, these pillow cases stain the rest of the clothes that they're spinning with. A dark color starts spreading inside the house. Ink that not a week ago had been employed to convey timely information is reconfigured

as vague spots on the grandchildren's uniform shirts and as a new shade on the son's once-white work pullovers. But the inked water, as this is happening, has already left behind the domestic space. Through the foam expelled by the washer, and running down the different drainage systems, it expands infinitely. A river of inked water roars through the plumbing, and eventually escapes through corroded pipes, faulty unions, and cracked elbows, and invades the city.

Each washer is just a single source of this inked water, but



there are thousands of them in the city. Imagine them synchronized, erupting simultaneously from the penthouses on Brickell Avenue, from the backyards in Hialeah and the hospitals in Allapatah, from the women's prison on Krome Avenue, from the shotgun houses in Overtown and the pseudo-Moroccan single-family homes in Opa-Locka, from kitchens in Little Havana duplexes. Suddenly, there would be innumerable tributaries, feeding on one another. The entire city, in this situation, is recast as a tidal basin. Currents would constantly gain strength. Eventually, they overflow the streets and other existing axes that channel

them. Tributaries merge. The inked water and the foam begin to slip under doors, seep through the crevices in solid walls, run off into sewers and canals until they overflow these too and continue to move.

Puddles remain in the wake of the foam and impure liquid. Their waters fill the grooves in truck tires and are pulled all the way to the port and onto ships running cargo across the sea. They also splash when messengers and food delivery folks race over them with their bikes and scooters. The packages they are carrying are soaked. This is how the inked water climbs through the hollow shaft

of the elevator into office towers and stains the curtains in the conference rooms, the carpet, the linoleum tiles in the break rooms.

As the puddles grow shallow, dispersed, the wet asphalt still manages to blacken the soles of students' shoes as they, wearing shirts their grandmothers stained in the wash, cut across empty lots and fenced properties, carving new paths through the city, in order to get to schools and vocational centers on time and avoid afternoon detentions.

As the water finally evaporates completely, it leaves behind an ink residue, a black powder like the one that

some old ladies tease out of newspapers to dye their gray hair. This black powder--the routes it marks--draws a new map of the city. These currents of inked water are real of course; they spread across the memories and imaginations of any child that has seen grandma dye her hair with newspaper, that has seen the smudgy stains on her pillow case, the stains on his/her own uniform shirts. But they are also virtual. These are currents that mark a physical passage as much as they mark the movement of a series of habits, of traditions, of vernacular and familial practices, of knowledge that has been handed down from one generation to an-



other, taken from one geographical context to another. They are channels of information. Just as the lines that mark the large systems of distribution that tabloids employ are also channels of this sort. These, too, are real; they're there, even if they have no continuous physical manifestation. They are one of the city's invisible materialities, a virtual channel for one of its flows. They are plotted only by the spots where users pick up their tabloids, by the habits that drive these users to go every week to the same place, expecting new stories but always within a series of specific and familiar graphic parameters. These systems of distribution draw a new

city over the grid that we find on the dusty maps and diagrams employed in architecture and urbanism schools.

Employing a standardized typology, our tabloids slip into the systems of production and distribution in which this typology is a central component. Or rather, they emerge--as a kind of altered offspring, a teratological experiment--from these systems. For a project in Quebec City last spring, for instance, our tabloid was inserted (dissolved) in the city's free weekly, *VOIR*. It existed in a run of 15,000 copies, spread through a series of delivery routes that covered a significant portion of the city. Our tabloid--no

longer an autonomous artifact, but grafted like a parasite to a temporary host--exploited a massive system of efficient distribution which, on the one hand, dispersed it throughout the city and, on the other, tapped into habitual behaviors of the local population to further enlarge the territory

through which the tabloid travelled.

But, as a parasite, the tabloid may burrow deeper than these distributive systems. It may tunnel down into the substructures of the standard tabloid, into the very codes that organize it as both a cultural/social artifact or sign and a





cannot avoid marking the parasitical "material." Knowing this, one has to consider how this multiplicative or serial element may be employed fruitfully. One works with it. And what products can better exploit processes of multiplication than those with the capacity to organize themselves

modularly, in potentially infinite spreads; objects that can couple into larger continuums that themselves become new and different objects? A modular pattern printed on a tabloid page is pregnant with inexhaustible potential. The pattern favors and can participate in the configuration of



unit within a productive system.

The newspaper printer is, above all, a distributor of multiples, of identicals, in the same way that a machine for injecting plastic or one for stamping metal can be this. Reconsidering such a system in its pre-cultural moment, that is, suspended before

the usual social function of its products has been enabled, allows us to insert an altered product with an altered social function. With this alteration, the system multiplies an object that is different from the one it usually produces. But the multiplicative and serial mode of production is essential here. Its logic



species are prone to themselves, due to the very nature of the system they have taken as host, take on a generic character; they, too, like any generic object, will be optimized to the point of abstraction, to where they take on the condition of something inevitable in the city, like linoleum tiles, drop ceiling tiles, and sheetrock panels.

In Quebec City, we employed a schematic version of a vernacular decorative pattern that we found on the facade of a house in Little Haiti--a spread of banal faux stones. A question quickly emerged: How can this pattern overcome its suspicious quality as a parasite? How does it slip into a kind of normality, of "genericity"? It has to exploit

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[www.thetabloid.org](http://www.thetabloid.org)

ambiguity, reappropriate familiar codes. The insertion of a foreign sign (say, the reproduction of false stones) needs to be associated to a text or some other common element in the language of the newspaper. It needs to activate other functions, be they indicative, illustrative, com-



a plane or a structure. It compels all the identical units spit out by the printing press to produce a condition--emergent in the relationship *between* them--that is greater than the individual object and that exists at a distance from the individual object's usual moment and form of consumption.

Methodologically, the project may deal less with the alteration of a generic product than with a "genetic" intervention in its productive substrate, with planting an invasive cultural sign in the optimized space of generic production. With an awareness that the qualities of this invasive

mercial, or documentary. The pattern, as foreign or intrusive element, remains exceptional but within a very familiar and schematic structure. It can't obviate the defining qualities of the typology it has invaded. One imagines that a tabloid that is all patterns or that is highly idiosyncratic in some other way always risks becoming the sort of graphic project that is

produced for the protected space of galleries and museums--its meaning and autonomy upheld at the expense of the social function and mobility of the typology it appropriates. Something vital, the way the tabloid moves through the city, simultaneously unseen and ubiquitous, organically woven into the urban flows, would be irrevocably lost from



such an iteration of the tabloid. Its condition as a vector of information, as a familiar structure, as a natural inhabitant of an urban ecology, as an artifact that is embedded within the

larger economic forces of the city--in short, all that is interesting about the tabloid--would be smeared out of the picture or diluted to a sad and unimportant state. In the text that

accompanied the pattern inserted in the Quebec City weekly, which sought to mimic (in structure, if not in content) any run-of-the-mill tabloid article with its geometry of columns and requisite accompanying photos, we spoke of a running surface of plywood sheets that was covering

certain sections of Miami in the wake of a massive wave of home foreclosures. Banks seal empty houses with plywood sheets over the doors and windows to keep squatters, junkies and thieves out. Many people in Quebec associated, strangely to our ears, the rock pattern produced by



Haitian immigrants (as a microscopic version) to the multiplying plywood plane. One, the rock pattern, we thought, was an effort to claim at the level of the home and the family, and by deploying a decorative structure, space for a particular value system. The other,

the plywood sheets, we thought as potentially endless urban wallpaper that spoke of the massive force of an economic crisis. In fact, we propose in the text that the knots and the grain of the plywood added up to the repeating "decorative" pattern of a catastrophe

that no one could figure out how to avert. The goal in bringing these two very different patterns (and worlds) together was to highlight different patterns of expansion-patterns that, in their forceful multiplication, in the ineluctable character that their growth assumed, served as metaphors for the way we imagined our tabloid--and tabloids in general--spreading through the city.

There is a virtual or abstract plane, after all, on which the 15,000 modules distributed in Quebec City can be collected. On it, they produces an enormous alien surface that threatens to blanket the entire city. Like the snow that covers its streets every winter, but climbing the city's vertical surfaces instead. There is also a map--perhaps not yet drawn by real--of the truck routes through



which *VOIR* is delivered. There is a potential drawing that documents the distribution points where the stacks of weeklies are dropped off. It would be made up of the doorways and stoops in front of bars, record shops, bookstores, cafes, stores, fast food restaurants, cultural institutions, and student centers. Maybe it's just a set of coordinates or address numbers. Each of the metal stands and bins in which *VOIR* is kept inside these spaces, in turn, is a node in yet another possible sketch of tangled trajectories.

There is, finally, an imaginable theoretical plane, a narrative space, on which the final consumption and use of the pattern can be documented. One imagines the Little Haiti rocks, having migrated north, further north that is, used as wallpaper in a record store, in a dorm, in the bathroom of a

bar; or used as a doile or as a book cover. As a picture frame. The pattern can be used to wrap beer bottles outside the bodegas where it is illegal to loiter and drink. It can be employed to cover and replace dislikable or outdated posters, to run over bare city walls, and to wrap around telephone poles lined with unpalatable concert flyers and record release party announcements. It can be used as a decorative layer over the glass of all the empty storefronts in a faltering mall. It would certainly brighten the mood of the place. It can cover the plywood sheets that seal homes that have been foreclosed on or the rotting wooden fences around abandoned construction sites. It can be used by some old ladies to dye their gray hair.

Once the information vectors of Quebec City were contaminated, the expansion of the Little Haiti rock pattern threatened to be endless, to dissolve into the city. ■



