

TEMPERED GLASS

THIRTEEN WAYS TO LOOK AT A SALVAGE YARD

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When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.
—Wallace Stevens

1.

If the production of form can be understood as the consolidation of a pattern to such a degree that it separates from a less-refined ground, then what we may have here is something like form-production in reverse: a devolving or stagnating form that is separated from a more finely-articulated and active ground. In other words, the city grows increasingly complex with the systems it generates and the flows it sustains, while the salvage yard, like a dying appendage or atrophied limb, grows increasingly less differentiated. Details are diluted; functions fade; things slow down. They move at a different velocity than what circulates around it. Within the salvage yard, it's almost as if urban flows are reduced to stop-animation versions of themselves.

2.

The salvage yard's connection to the urban space that surrounds it seems, at first glance, like a one-way street. All vectors lead from the city to the salvage yard. The ones that should circulate material in the opposite direction always seem clogged. Everything in the salvage yard is for sale, but so little ever seems to go out. But the mirage of unidirectionality only marks an asymmetry of velocities. The rates at which things enter and leave the site register at opposite ends of the speedometer. In the salvage yard, things mostly pile up, settle into strata. That seems the extent of their routine--a kind of synchronized shutting-down. But of course nothing ever stops completely; the rate of flow is just different. Things do eventually go out, in one form or another. The salvage yard only seems stagnant in relation to the higher speeds at which the city around it moves.

3.

Minimal observation is enough to conclude that as a retail space the salvage yard is seemingly a failure. Factory outlet shops, street vendors, cut-rate stores that stock overflows of production and the proliferating 99-cents stores leave it in the dust. Even the ambulating ice-cream truck seems much more attuned to the way the city functions, to the methods with which to productively function in it, taking into account school hours, vacation days, weather patterns, gas prices, etc. One can almost be categorical about the salvage yard as an absolute failure as retail space, but for the customers who continue to straggle in sporadically but steadily to pick up something or other.

4.

The basic operation of the salvage yard: the collection of scattered urban and industrial remnants. It puts these collected remnants through a homogenizing process of "scabbing"--crusty layers of excretions caked over crusty layers of excretions. One can't even claim that it approximates some version of Bataillean formlessness, because it's a hardened space. It apes a geological economy of sedimentation without consolidating immense spans of time or indexing the natural forces that acted upon a terrain. But in its nearly sedimented state, as a kind of massive scab, indexing certain contemporary historical and social forces rather than natural ones, it opens up vistas on the more "refined" urban textures that shore up against its bent and rusting chain-link fence.

5.

The salvage yard simply gathers the materials that the city disposes. But not its waste. This isn't a dump. It's artifacts that mark a sudden shift in fashion or technology or code enforcement, or an error in production--what hyperactive technological development leaves in its wake. It's residue that hasn't been transfigured into rubbish;

indices of sharp turns in industrial production routines, of brusque changes in the tides of fashion and technology. Social driftwood.

6.

Hardened and sluggish, nearly comatose as a structure, perhaps, but the salvage yard isn't a completely broken down machine. These notes are, in fact, an effort to understand what it can still do with some efficiency. It hoists on those who engage with it the mandate to look at the salvage yard as a way to get a different kind of glimpse on the urban spaces beyond it. A relay point where thinking can be intensified in proportion to the slowing down of urban flows, the salvage yard is a discontinuity that casts in sharp relief the contour of all that moves about it.

7.

Unable to unload at a successful speed the products it accumulates, the salvage yard would also have trouble boasting of internal circulation. There seem to be very few active vectors through which the gathered materials can move within the space itself in order to be re-purposed or exploited in some way. No metabolic dynamic seems to exist within its walls. Sometimes a TV will be on, a fan spinning if summer has rolled in, but little else moves here. The stack of cinderblocks in the back will never be part of the walls of an office; the dust-coated speakers will never be dragged out to the curb and be made to blast slinky Caribbean music to "hook" the passerby. A logic for an incorporation of this sort doesn't seem to be there. Once in the salvage yard, things meet stillness. They find their place and settle in the vicinity of similar specimens until they fuse into a momentary topmost layer of scab that in time will be covered by new strata. But, again, one has to tread carefully and refuse one's conclusions an absolute character, as there is a kind of difficult-to-discern recuperation at work in the salvage yard. It just happens exclusively in the proximity of the people who work there. The attendants create small islands of functionality amid all the stalled layers of materials. The turned-on TV, the spinning fan, the sofa dragged in front of the TV, the old receiver and speakers plugged in to replace the TV's faltering audio, the Formica cafeteria booth used as dining table--they form a functional assemblage, almost a camouflaged stand-in for a habitat, always on the verge of dissolving. These islands orchestrate a tiny reactivated space, buzzing and blinking, like an infected patch, frenzied with contained bacterial activity, within the larger scabbed landscaped of piled-on urban remnants.

8.

The salvage yard lacks the kind of "intelligence" that the city demands--a willingness to overcome inertness and plug into the flows of exchange. It stratifies, instead. It seems set aside from the swath of urban activities, excluded from the routes of circulations. It is, in this way, that the salvage yard becomes a kind of sub- or parenthetical terrain, something that sinks below or is pushed to the edge of the city. It is, of course, not physically beneath or always on some literal periphery. But its internal rules of accumulation adjust to what the city releases. The city is the ecology it parasitically feeds on. This economy of dependence determines the salvage yard typology.

9.

The sheer number of repeated objects in the salvage yard is enough to make them take on new qualities--or shed old ones. Innumerable windows pressed against the wall, hundreds of toilets set out in the back and hundreds of unconnected lamps hanging from the rafters,

dozens of doors and just as many stoves, stacks of televisions, bins filled with vinyl records, drums overflowing with marble tiles. The massive accumulation of individual artifacts drains each of them of certain social and cultural values; it anonymizes or de-differentiates them in a material way. It's almost as if the imprint of the industrial process that produced them could be washed out or relegated to an insignificant secondary level. It releases information from the form, disarticulates the encoded range of tasks for which it was programmed. The abandoned vitrine, among a dozen identical versions of itself, hardly seems the optimal display structure it must have once been under a department store's even lighting and a toilet is no longer the same as the indispensable toilet we sit on. The fact that the latter is kept outside, unprotected from the elements--that is, reduced to a piece of impermeable porcelain that won't suffer outdoors--makes the toilet feel like *raw material*. Cultural or social value has been drained from it; properties bloom that were dormant in other contexts. It is no longer a commodity in some fundamental way. Its figural integrity feels somehow violated when it is set amid hundreds of copies, in a presentational situation we are unaccustomed to.

10.

This, then, is perhaps one of the traits of the yard: it's a machine that saps certain values from the artifacts it houses. It nullifies. It pushes toward a homogeneity that can be sensed just below the surface differences of the actual objects: everything is returned to the condition of raw material, to a kind of value-free blankness. But this, in turn, clears the way for potential new capacities to appear. It's probably more feasible, considering current mores and taste, that the toilet seats will be smashed and end up as tesserae in a mosaic in a children's museum than as functioning toilet seats in a condo. (Of course an entire series of forces underscore and lubricate that shift.) This erosion of social and cultural values that seem so entrenched in the object--their "de-lamination" was once inconceivable--is a kind of entropy that involves not a loss of energy from a system but a loss of value from an artifact. An axiological entropy, if we are allowed the metaphor; a process of value-drainage, a blanching-out which may unlock other trapped potentials.

11.

Rows and rows of pastel-colored toilets. It almost looks like a display of pastries, a parade of pink and blue and white birthday cakes. Like a Wayne Thiebaud painting. Here, metaphors and analogies grow wild. But we don't want to treat this as a poetic or literary space. It's the materiality that is significant. The objects themselves. Not what they suggest tropologically, but what they suggest diagrammatically, once they are plugged back into the circuit from where they came. Once, that is, we imagine them again in the single-family, suburban houses that they came from. Each toilet is a point of interface through which the house dwellers connect to the services that the city's infrastructure provides--not only to its water main and its sewage lines, but to its nutritional flows. And always, ineluctably, into other flows and constraints that also form part of this infrastructure--on the one hand, the tax brackets that determine the cost of these services, the demographic distribution that often determines the tax bracket; and on the other, the system of code enforcements and the range of tastes. Sitting on the toilet, each of the house dwellers is plugged into the city, each is a multi-pronged elbow (like a plumbing elbow) that facilitates movement through the intertwined networks of the infrastructure. The accumulation of toilet bowls here signal the number of points of

interface that a city has. It stands in not only for all the other toilet bowls out there, functioning and discarded ones, but for all the computer consoles, ATM machines, TVs, radios, telephones, Wi-Fi hotspots, Blackberries, etc. A pastry parade of toilets that invites one to redraw the *city as infrastructure*.

12.

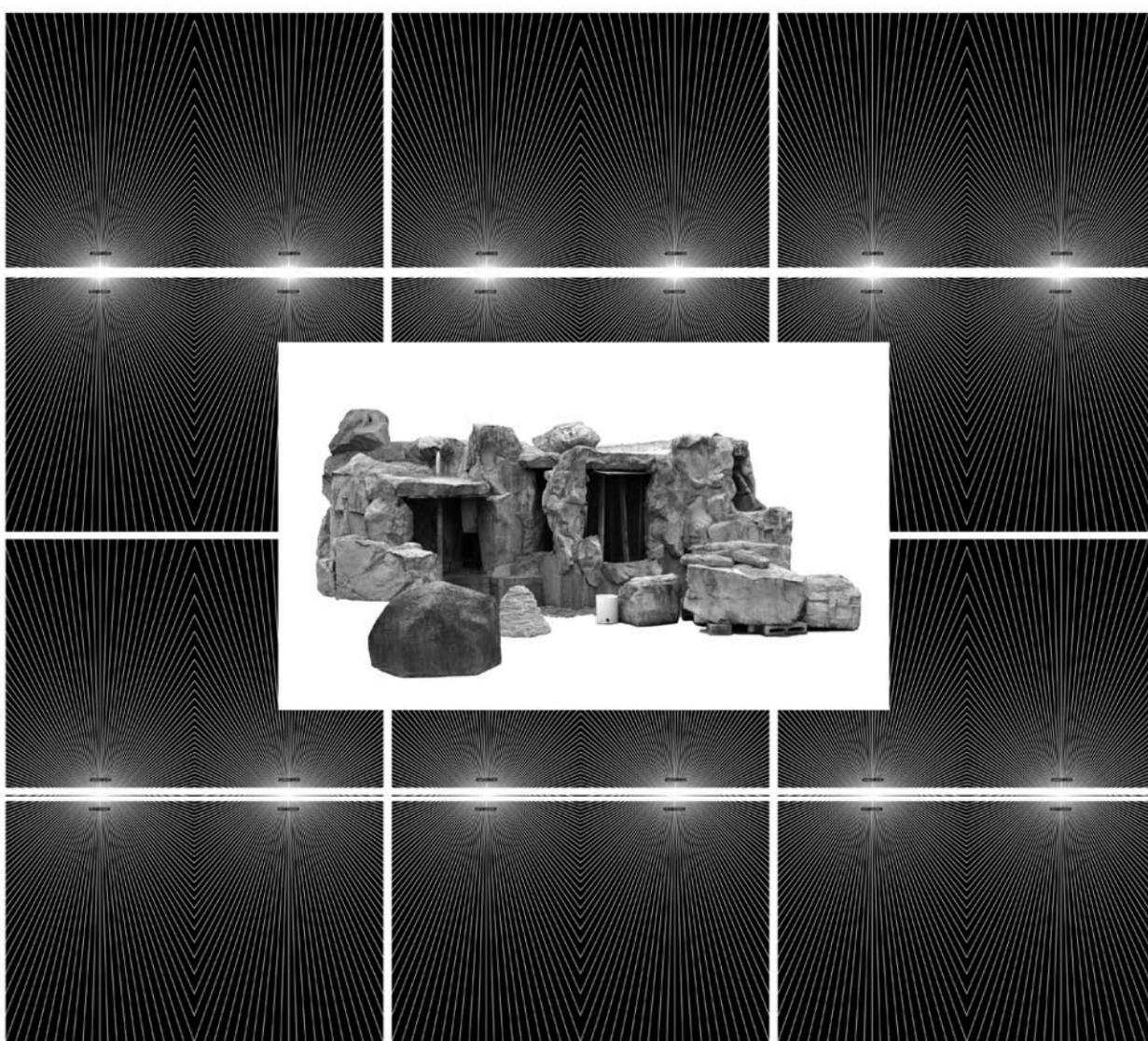
It's not only changes in technology, fashion, taste--alterations that we can locate in the space of the social--that mark the salvage yard. Dozens of front doors piled up, their shape not very different from those that are currently hinged to the endless proliferation of single-family homes and townhouses, force us to turn to things that slip beneath the threshold of obvious visibility. These doors haven't ended up in a salvage yard because taste has rendered them passé or technological advancements have replaced the hinged door. Perhaps this is a local's understanding, but it is obvious that these doors landed in the salvage yard because a change in building codes has made them "useless." And building codes change, most likely, because a natural force has recast what was produced under the previous code as insufficient and insecure, if not fatal. Earthquakes are followed by code changes as much as by aftershocks. Hurricane categories explain wind speeds as much as help predict the range of legal alterations that will happen in the storm's wake.

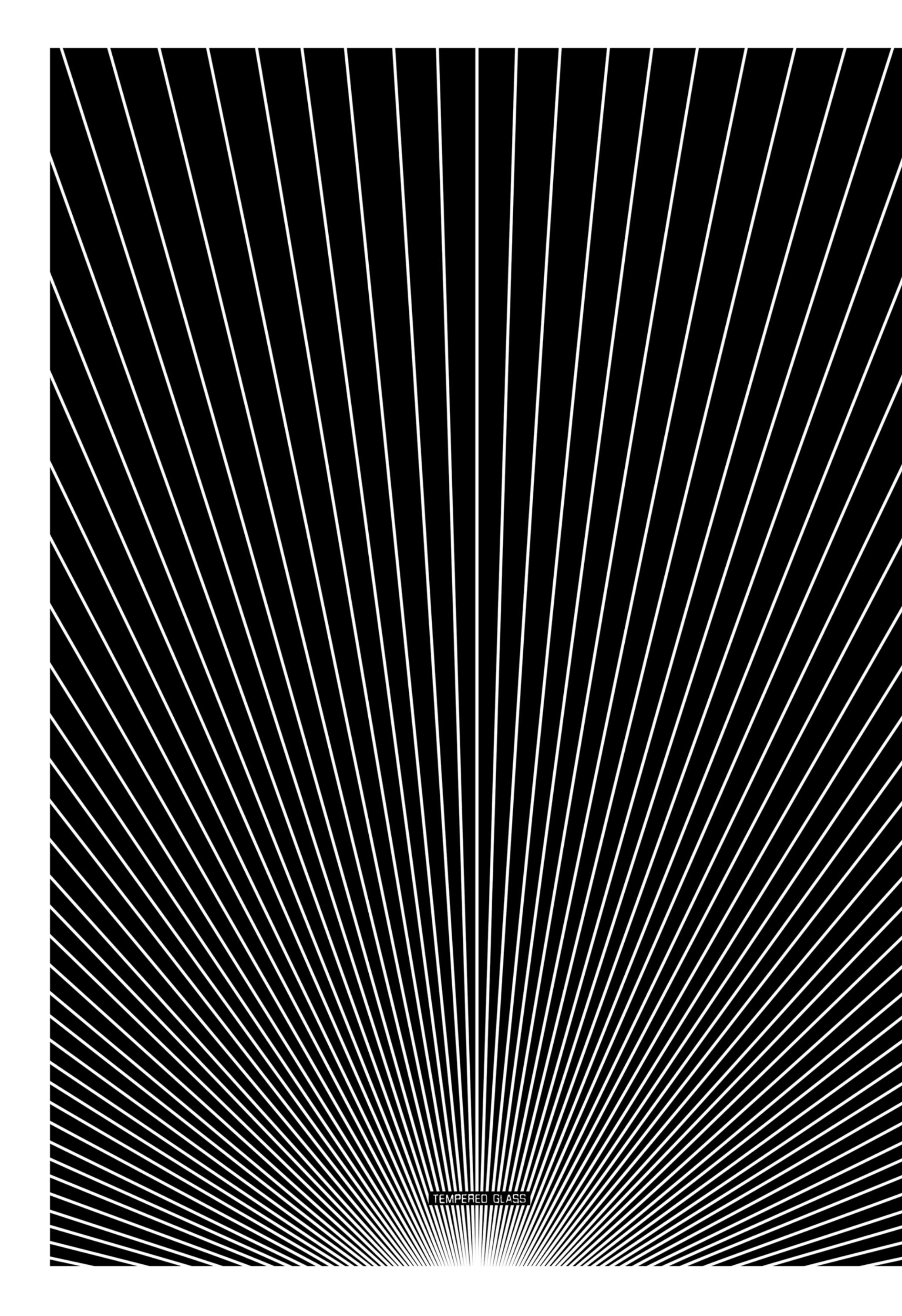
13.

The pile of doors has a second effect: it invites one to imagine an entire suburb folded like an accordion, like stage scenery closed in order to be put away. It's almost as if the houses these doors were attached to are tucked between them. Single-family homes like collapsible tents. The suburb as a kind of tent city that, rather than following, anticipates devastating natural disasters. The suburb built to wait for the hurricane that will drag it away. It is *always* hurricane season. It's the city not as a series of architectural statements but as a pliable territory attempting to anticipate and absorb the upheavals that are coming at it from the future. The salvage yard becomes part of this economy of absorption. ■

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This tabloid was produced by Gean Moreno and Ernesto Oroza as the October 2010 edition of the Artist of the Month Club, hosted by Invisible-Exports, New York, and at the invitation of curator Rene Morales.



The image features a black and white optical illusion pattern. It consists of numerous thin, white lines that radiate from a central point at the bottom of the frame. The lines are arranged in a fan-like shape, spreading outwards and upwards. The spacing between the lines is not uniform; it is much closer together in the center and becomes progressively wider as they move towards the edges. This creates a strong sense of depth and movement, making the lines appear to curve and warp. The overall effect is a dynamic, three-dimensional-looking structure that changes as the viewer's perspective shifts.

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