APortrait, EXTENDED

by

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A Portrait, EXTENDED

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ABSTRACT

Every day, researchers from MIT’s Materials Science Department stride past a portrait of Vannevar Bush that hangs on a curious display panel in the lobby of building 13, as they hurry to and from their laboratories.

A Portrait, Extended is an architectural and photographic intervention that aims to raise awareness and promote dialogue, to keep us conscious of the ethical issues surrounding technological production. The project raises many issues while it encourages its audience - primarily researchers in materials science - to come to terms with their involvement in the history of government funded research, and to reconsider the quintessential ethical dilemma of technological production.

To promote reflection on these issues, three ancillary displays were placed in the lobby of the Vannevar Bush Building (building 13) from May 2 to June 2 1999. These additional displays, designed to mimic the visual language of the permanent display, append the symbolic layers of the original unit and its portrayal of Vannevar Bush.

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By disrupting or destroying the comforting, repetitious patterns of conventional thought and behavior, war in effect strips away the mask of the normal, revealing an actuality that is both liberating and terrifying.¹

- Lebbeus Woods
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PREFACE

A portrait, Extended is a temporary intervention meant to be experienced dynamically in relation to it’s context, not described as permanent record. Accepting the limitations of this paper representation, I will attempt to capture the complexities of this situational project without being doctrinaire. Inevitably, text and images will fail, however I hope that this translation maintains some aspects of the actual encounter.

Due to submission as part of a thesis, it is necessary for this document to address every aspect of the project. While it is not unusual for artists to write about their production, I feel uneasy assuming the roles of art critic, historian, and audience to detail interpretations of my own work.

What follows is a discussion of various ways in which the piece can be understood. I do not intend to dictate meaning - the approach is speculative, based on subjective contextual analysis. Because A portrait, Extended can be read in many ways, these interpretations are meant as non-authoritative contributions to an open discourse.

Note:
A video documentation of A portrait, Extended has been submitted in addition to this paper. This representation may be more appropriate for translating the subtleties of this context specific project.
PROLOGUE: GENEALOGY

My artwork is inspired by personal observations and experiences in the field of lived space. Here, we routinely struggle to assert and maintain our identities as we encounter the social and institutional structures that govern daily life. I situate my projects in relation to architecture because this is the symbolic and physical manifestation of institutional power and social pressures. Architecture programs our lives to the agendas of institutions by imposing a consistent visual logic. We interpret it’s language, and adjust our behavior accordingly. We are accustomed to this subtle process, thus we are rarely conscious of it. My architectural interventions are alterations of this visual order that encourage an audience to reoccupy, re-appropriate, and reinterpret the spaces we traverse. I manipulate the built environment to reveal its underlying social and institutional structures so that an audience can recognize these systems and see themselves within them. By re inhabiting the spaces of daily life we experience the vital agency to reevaluate our relationships to social and institutional regimes, to each other, and to ourselves. My temporary installations aspire to bring the conflicts of everyday subjecthood to the forefront of our awareness, to encourage resistance to complacency, and inspire creative departures from the ordering systems into which we are indoctrinated.

1 L. Woods
Everyday War, in
The book Mortal City p. 51
I chose this passage to begin my paper because it articulates the central issues of A Portrait, Extended and seems an appropriate point of departure for developing a discourse about the work.
THE ANOMALOUS ORIGINAL

A display panel in the lobby of MIT’s material science building supports a curiously inclined portrait of Dr. Vannevar Bush. The top edge of the portrait leans nine inches forward, away from the surface of the panel. The display itself is a curious ad hoc construction. It seems to be an afterthought with no formal relationship to its setting. Nearby, a memorial etched into the side wall of the entry hall honors Bush for his “creative contributions to science, engineering and the nation.”

The result of a post-design process, enigmatic objects like this display are a common feature of many public spaces. Committees are usually responsible for the formal determination of these territories. Such delegates usually end up producing discordant elements, like the Bush display.

2 This is a quotation from the dedication inscribed on the left wall of the lobby as you enter the building. See Fig. 3 for a more detailed image.

Fig. 1
The enigmatic display and portrait that inspired this project.
because details are continuously added, each of which addresses an emergent concern, complaint, or suggestion until the given domain becomes a bricolage of incongruous elements. Public space is often constructed this way, as a collection of bureaucratic afterthoughts. In most cases this accumulation attempts to answer functional concerns like safety and convenience. However, the display panel in lobby 13 is an unusual example, it seems to have been foisted into the architectural order for symbolic enhancement, not for practical purposes. Assuming this was the intention, it fails. One cannot connect the display to the memorial text it is supposed to accompany. Ironically, the panel functions instead as an unintentional counter monument. The construction seems ridiculous, temporary and incomplete next to the sturdy concrete pillars, and official appearance of the memorial wall carving.

Entering building 13, one notices the distinctive quality of the architecture. The concrete pillars are massive and the overhead beams, heavy. There is a sense, not of oppression, but compression, perhaps, due to the weightiness of the forms. Harsh lighting and sharp reverberant acoustics add to the sense of constriction. The lobby functions as a protracted threshold, it allows entry at one end; never permitting people to linger, it transports them to the other. It is something like entering an artillery battery, yet one does not feel sheltered, or inclined to stay. Instead, one feels rather exposed and out of place. The formal contradictions of this space are intriguing. Observing others coming and going from the building, it becomes clear that this is a lim-
inal space, a space of passage, a protracted threshold that facilitates transit from the main entrance to the elevator bank and vice versa. Unlike most lobby spaces there is no furniture here, not the benches that can be found in other MIT lobbies, nor even a desk where a security guard could be posted. There is no space for pause here, the language of the architecture makes it clear that one is not meant to linger. This space was designed to be uninhabitable; empty, except for a stream of pedestrians and the inscription on the wall dedicating the building to Vannevar Bush.

The dedication is carved into the concrete cladding of the lobby wall. Because of the uniform texture of the material, the relief is barely noticeable, especially at the accelerated pace of the passing pedestrians. One could miss the inscription on the side wall, but the centered display towards the back of the space is unavoidable. It faces you as you approach. It is as if the memorial was considered too subtle, so the portrait was added later, but this time in the center of the room to make doubly sure it would be noticed. The lobby, and for that matter, the entire building is rendered in poured concrete, and its design conforms to
a grid of heavy pillars. The glossy white enamel finish of the display stands out against the dull homogeneous concrete of the stark lobby establishing a counterpoint to the heavy atmosphere. Its incongruous position disturbs the otherwise harmonious perspective of lobby 13. The display panel seems anthropomorphic as it stands next to one of the pillars, its thin arms and legs outstretched between the ceiling and the floor. Yet, people passing through the lobby do not notice it; they never break their stride en route to the elevator or to the exit. The portrait hangs on the display above eye level at a ten degree angle so the picture leans forward at the top, hanging over its audience. The figure represented there is slightly larger than life size and gives no clue to its identity. There is no caption for the picture, no plaque explaining the significance of this gentleman. One assumes that this must be some patron of MIT- probably a significant and wealthy alumni, and, since this is the Vannevar Bush Building. . . . This must be Vannevar Bush. The uncanny formal presentation of this monument, and its seeming reluctance to disclose the identity of the figure are intriguing. Is this Vannevar Bush? Why does no one pause to investigate his identity, or connect the display with the distant text? If the embossed dedication did not draw enough attention,
why not hang the portrait of the patron next to it? Why is the display panel necessary at all? Could the portrait not have been hung on one of the existing pillars? What contributions does one make to deserve such an enigmatic monument?

Fig. 4
The original display panel and portrait. (before the Installation of the project)
VANNEVAR BUSH

An MIT graduate, former professor, and administrator, Vannevar Bush is hailed as a patron saint of modern engineering, the father of the computer, and the grandfather of interactive electronics. Dr. Bush also led a less publicized life, in which he forged a lasting partnership between the research capabilities of American universities, the resources of the industrial sector, and military sponsors.

Fig. 5
Publicity Photograph from March 1942 captioned: "[Bush has] access to every test tube in America and every man and woman capable of using one."
(AP/Wide World)

Fig. 6
Promotional shot for "March of Time" documentary inspired by his book Modern Arms and Free Men (Library of Congress, courtesy Michael Dennis)
The military-industrial-academic complex began as Bush marshalled allied resources to develop new weapons during World War II. Today, scientific research at most American universities is effected by this conglomerate.

Vannevar Bush was personal advisor to President Roosevelt on science, technology and weapons during World War II. He organized the Manhattan Project (the effort to build the first atomic bomb), and cofounded Raytheon, one of the largest weapons contractors in the world. 3 Bush's non-academic titles included:

- Chairman of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics
- Chairman of the National Defense Research Committee
- Director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development
- Chairman of the Joint New Weapons Committee of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
- Chairman of the Joint Research and Development Board of the War and Navy Departments
- Head of the uranium committee of the N.D.R.C.
- Member of the Navy's New Communications Security Group
- Advisor to the Office of Strategic Services (a secret WWII espionage and propaganda agency) 4

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3 Most of the information in this section was gathered from G. Pascal Zachary's biography of Vannevar Bush, Endless Frontier.

Additional information was obtained from Irvin Stewart's Organizing Scientific Research for War, Bush's own publications, and from the world wide web.

4 Ibid.
Fig. 7 Bush (at right) with James Conant reenacting their witnessing of the first atomic blast in the New Mexico desert. Photo credit MIT, reproduced from Zachary, *Endless Frontier*. 
Fig 8  Monument to the first nuclear test in the White Sands Desert.
Photo credit: *After the Battle*
Reproduced from Virilio, War and Cinema.
Social life, then, even its apparently quietest moments, is characteristically 'pregnant' with social dramas. It is as though each of us has a 'peace' face and a 'war' face, that we are programmed for cooperation, but prepared for conflict.\textsuperscript{5}

-Victor Turner
This work aims to temporarily re-direct the attention of its audience. The operation of the piece depends on the willingness of the viewer to consider the issues raised by three ancillary displays. By extending the original display panel into a series, a plurality of readings are suggested. Hence the scope of the familiar portrait is extended in several ways:

The display has been literally multiplied. Three extra units of the same size, shape, and materials have been added to the original. As one image among several symbolic lamina, the portrait loses its interpretative dominance. No longer the principal image, it is now an image amongst others in space. The additional units match the formal characteristics of the original in every detail: the curious angle...
of the picture frame, the scale, the color, the materials, the finish, and the placement of the units are all identical. The portrait no longer holds a privileged position. Formally, it has no greater or lesser significance than the images that accompany it. It must be re-read within the context of the series.

The shift of emphasis is the result of displacement, which is a common tactic of contemporary art practice since Duchamp. Artists displace objects physically in order to alter their significance; an object is moved to another situation and its meaning is altered by this repositioning. Displacement functions in a slightly different way in this project, it is an additive displacement. The original object is not touched. Instead, displacement is effected by an additive process effecting its surroundings. What is displaced is not the object itself, but rather, its meaning. The significance of the portrait is affected by the multiplication of its form and the corresponding presentation of additional images. Unlike the displacement of the Duchampian readymade, where a non art object is placed in an art context and so loses its original function, this display is not moved at all. Instead, it is repeated within the same set of conditions. The function of the extruded display remains the same - to support symbolic imagery.

My additive approach to displacement is similar to an other brand of repetition, which many artists have historically employed to alter images. As Richard Sennett observes, "Warhol's is the simplest way repetition in art can begin to
do the work of mutation. What was unnoticed before now becomes worth studying; the image seems to change in value as one sees it all at once multiplied. . .this repetition summoned visual interest: the meaning of the image became less certain." 6 The meaning of the portrait in lobby 13 is similarly destabilized by the repetition of the display apparatus.

In a physical sense, the display has been extended in time and space, matching the rhythm of the architecture. It's range has been expanded throughout the lobby, it even reaches to the exterior of the building. This telescopic repetition opens spaces for an audience to occupy, and solicits the visual interest of people outside. From between the units one can reexamine the original display (which is usually overlooked despite its incongruity.)

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Fig. 10 View from the street during the day.
The photographic images on the rear of the three auxiliary display panels are framed in such a way that it is not immediately apparent what they depict. What is clear is that they convey violence; where, when, and against whom that violence was leveled is not clear. The images could just as well have been captured in Kosovo last week, Vietnam 1968, Dresden or Hiroshima in 1945. The historical and geographical ambiguity of the pictures indicates an unnamed war, but upon closer examination it becomes clear from the details that this apparent destruction is right next door where MIT is demolishing building 20. Victor Turner made an etymological investigation of the term ambiguity, he found, "The very word ‘ambiguity’ is derived from the Latin agere to ‘act’ for it comes from the verb ambigere, to ‘wander,’ ambi-, ‘about, around’ + agere, ‘to do,’ resulting in the sense of having two or more possible meanings, ‘moving from side to side,’ ‘of doubtful nature.”7 The photographic series Proceeds forward from the original display panel creating new spaces “between” the images where the audience can actively wander and wonder.

7. Turner, From Ritual to Theatre, p. 102
Recontextualized amongst these images: 1. The portrait can be reconnected to the isolated inscription of the Bush building’s dedication. Dr. Bush can be connected to his historical role establishing military sponsorship for MIT researchers. 3. The portrait can be connected to the present demolition of building 20, a monument that owes its existence to Bush (building 20 was specifically built to accommodate wartime research efforts under his direction).

Fig. 12 The back of the first display encountered as one moves away from the original. The portrait faces this image.
fig. 13 The second image encountered as one moves away from the original and towards the front entrance of the building.

fig. 14 The third and final image of the series. This panel is outside the lobby on the street.
Mounted on the front of each supplementary display panel is an inclined frame exactly the same as the one containing the portrait on the original unit. However, these frames are blanks, there is no photograph, only the painted wood backing structure is visible beyond the glass. Hence, the rectangular space of the portrait itself is extended to accommodate the reflection of the audience. Here, one confronts one’s own image. Including the reflection of the audience with Dr. Bush in a non-hierarchical series suggests that we are all equally responsible for the ethical implications of our research.

The additional display panels are metonymic, they refer to what is absent, the invisible structure of the Institute, forgotten, overlooked, intangible. Representations of the demolition of building 20 presented on the back side of the three added display panels constitute an “abstract collective representation.” The series is open to various secondary interpretations, while a common symbolic reading suggesting the damaging effects of war on architecture is foregrounded. The images ironically conflate the demise of this symbolic edifice with the effects of the military technologies that were developed therein. The photos seem at first glance to be documents of war related destruction. Upon further examination, one recognizes details that return the images to the present, and to the realization that this is just one of the neighboring buildings being razed.

Fig. 15 The front of one of the additional display panels with the empty frame.
This project is context specific, it is not just site determined, the timing of the intervention is also relevant to the historical present. The demolition of building 20 is a symbolic moment. It marks the end of the era of mechanical technology and the beginning of a new era of electronics and digital media. At this hour, CNN is broadcasting satellite images of NATO’s so called “smart bombs” being delivered to strategic industrial targets in Serbia and Kosovo. The Cyclotron has been abandoned for satellite technology, and soon a new edifice will stand in the place of building 20 where “smart” weapons will be developed for the new military/media market. Paul Virilio anticipated this shift, in 1984 he wrote, “A war of pictures and sounds is replacing the war of objects (projectiles and missiles). In a technicians’ version of an all-seeing Divinity, ever ruling out accident and surprise, the drive is on for a general system of illumination that will allow everything to be seen and known, at every moment and in every place.”

The war continues on many fronts; as the media directs our attention to the conflict overseas, wrecking machines like the ones leveling building 20, advance, clearing away old monuments and neighborhoods, to make room for new real estate investments. Lebbeus Woods observes that, “The building of architecture is essentially political and, even though it is rarely presented as such, ideological. It is by nature warlike in the violence of its clearing of a site, the sheer energy of its construction, and the

9 P. Virilio, War and Cinema, p. 4
naked exercise of its power to change social and environmental conditions."\textsuperscript{10} The market fluctuation behind the Institute’s real estate speculation reflects the obsolescence of the mechanical age as the rubble of building 20 is cleared to make way for Frank Ghery’s “William Gates Building.”\textsuperscript{11} It is clear that MIT is investing in the future. Relocating the Laboratory for Computer Science to a building digitally designed by an architectural superstar is an efficient way to spell it out while doubling the value of the property.

The installation of A Portrait, Extended is also timely if we consider it’s proximity to commencement. “Graduation” is a symbolic ritual that punctuates the passage of individuals from one state, that of the pupil, apprentice or student, to another; that of the professional. A new social status will soon be conferred upon a significant portion of the community; as of now, they are neither one nor the other. The situation is strikingly similar to Victor Turner’s anthropological account of rites of passage “from one social state and status to another. Characteristic of this liminal period is the appearance of marked ambiguity and inconsistency of meaning, and the emergence of liminal demonic and monstrous figures who represent within themselves ambiguities and inconsistencies.”\textsuperscript{12} An anthropological reading of is possible paralleling Turners observations. The meaning of the portrait of Vannevar bush is destabilized as former students prepare to enter the world as professionals responsible for the ethical implications of their research.

\textsuperscript{10} L. Woods, Mortal City, p. 51 This quote is taken from the article entitled Everyday War

\textsuperscript{11} Bill Gates announced his donation of $23 million recently as he visited MIT to celebrate the anniversary of L. C. S.

\textsuperscript{12} V. Turner, From Ritual to Theatre, p. 113
We are comfortable with the familiar conventions of cinema. When we encounter cinematic analogons we expect to be involved in a narrative. Images presented together on the display panels of A Portrait, Extended can function as film stills, experienced in series; unlike the portrait which must be viewed as a singular object. Bodies can move between and behind the images that make up the cinematic time/space of the extended portrait. The act of walking is essential to the experience of the series. Once it is animated in this way, the audience is placed into the narrative as performers within in a series of cinematic scenes. Individuals can imagine how they relate to other characters and to the theatrical metanarrative in which they are involved. As Victor Turner observes, “Such an experience is incomplete, though, unless one of its ‘moments’ is ‘performance,’ an act of creative retrospection in which ‘meaning’ is ascribed to the events and parts of experience - even if the meaning is that ‘there is no meaning.’ Thus experience is both ‘living through’ and ‘thinking back.’ It is also willing or wishing forward,’ i.e., establishing goals and models for future experience in which, hopefully, the errors and perils of past experience will be avoided and eliminated.”

A Portrait, Extended cannot be seen from a single point of view. It can only be experienced as the viewers body actively negotiates the space of the lobby. The operation

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13 meaning images, signs and symbols, per Lefebvre. The Production of Space, p. 98

14 V. Turner, Ritual to Theatre, p. 18
of additive displacement disburses the units along the path of the audience. The position of the displays both determines, and is determined by, the trajectory of the pedestrians. As one passes through the displays, one encounters a series of images that can be read individually, together or in relation to the viewer. The limited significance that the Institute ascribes to the portrait is altered and appended as it becomes either the initial or the final frame in a sequence of images (depending on the direction from which one approaches). The sequence of frames suggests an abstract narrative, soliciting speculation and thought from the passing individual. The act of procession animates both the series of images, and the creative imagination of the audience.

All of the ways in which this extended portrait of Vannevar Bush is understood are valid. How the project is interpreted does not matter, it will generate discourse and articulate the limitations of prescribed institutional significance by virtue of it's visibility and presence.
RE-FACEDMENT

As long as there have been monuments there have been tactics of defacement both of which are of symbolic significance to the public sphere. Defacement is always active, it can be divided into two approaches, additive and subtractive, and can range from anarchistic to officially sanctioned actions. Graffiti, the most common form of additive defacement, can be seen on just about any publicly visible surface. When political revolution occurs it is common for the newly empowered to efface the previous regime’s official monuments. This subtractive process has taken place extensively in Germany, The former Soviet Union, The Balkan States, and many other places that have endured extreme political change. The tactic of displacement asso-

Fig. 17 View from the entrance of the lobby. Original at left.
ciated with the critical practice of contemporary artists such as Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, Dennis Adams, Daniel Buren and Dan Graham is not so easy to categorize; it is neither additive nor subtractive. Regardless of the circumstances, defacement is always linked to a critical commentary of some kind.

A Portrait, Extended does not deface the monument, but rather attempts to re-face it. Re-facement is similar to defacement, the difference being that the original is not moved, and nothing is added, or subtracted. The monument is extended by multiplication, and the original display panel is never disturbed. Instead, it’s context is modified, in this case, by additive displacement. The monument itself is re-framed, and it’s meaning thus, altered. The original display panel retains its sacred identity, and its integrity as an object. A respectful distance from the original is kept, both physically and metaphorically. New terri-

![Image of a monument with a display panel]

Fig. 18 The dark rectangular silhouette of the outdoor display panel reveals the presence of the next layer of the series beyond the glass in its absent reflection.
tory is staked out between the displays; a liberated space. From here, viewers can actively participate in the dialog that develops between the original and the three added display panels. The emergent discourse, as well as the physical space of the extrusion are animated as the audience inhabits them.

Fig. 19 A busy researcher pauses for a moment to contemplate the image on the back of one of the display panels.
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PHOTO CREDITS

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APPENDIX

Figures 20 to 23 are two sided scale models of a sort. Conforming to the format of this thesis, these paper maquettes illustrate the manner in which the series of images used for the installation of A Portrait, Extended were positioned on the corresponding display panels opposite the frames. Page 38 represents the rear of the original panel; 39, 40, and 41 represent the additional displays. The images occur in the order which one would experience them if they were walking from the elevator toward Vassar street.