

№ 1

SURFACE TENSION
SUPPLEMENT
No 1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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1	Ken Ehrlich & Brandon LaBelle Introduction
4	Goto Political Meanings: the Legacy of Interventionist Practice in Brazil
16	Aoife O'Brien The Art Space Imperative—A Recent Reading
20	Robin Wilson Blue Sky Thinking: A Utopia in Bristol
30	Claudine Isé Vanishing Points: On the Exhibition at the Wexner Art Center, 2005
48	Brandon Lattu Untitled: Slide Piece Edit
58	Ken Ehrlich The Architectural Sign: Los Angeles in Buildings and Words
70	Kathy Battista Let There Be Light: On Recent Light Art
78	SIMPARCH Dirty Water Initiative
86	e-Xplo Night Starring Columbus Ohio
108	Scott Berzofsky, Nicholas Petr & Nicholas Wisniewski Notes for an Oppositional Urbanism in Baltimore
130	Jennifer Gabrys Paper Mountains, Disposable Cities
140	Brandon LaBelle Experiments in Reading <i>Experiments in Architecture</i>

INTRODUCTION

Surface Tension Supplements aim to provide a site for considering the growing contemporary international culture of artistic practices related to geographies, bodies and the issues generated by encounters between spaces and subjects. Planned as an on-going series, the Supplements will engage discourses around notions of site-based practice in art, architecture and performance through documentation of works, critical and explorative essays, and projects designed specifically for each book. It is our hope that these publications can serve as a meeting place, where the inherent diversity of contemporary cultural practice can find residence, with a view toward assessing, stimulating, and representing such diversity at its most public, social, and geographically-engaged moments.

Surface Tension Supplements are an extension of an earlier anthology, *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site (2003)*, which sought to take stock of the legacy of site-specific practice, recognizing the degrees in which it has generated cultural attitudes toward artistic work. As the notion of site has itself been re-defined, shifted and adjusted within contemporary artistic practice, questions of place and displacement, sites and non-sites, and location-based and interventionist practices have multiplied and their audience has expanded. Since the initial publication, we have found ourselves continually interested and re-invested in many of its themes, works, and ideas. Coupled with our own individual and collaborative artistic work involving performative acts of research undertaken in various cities over the last few years, the decision to reactivate the *Surface Tension* project seems appropriate and increasingly relevant. Our intention to continue the work initiated in the original anthology is also based in part on our ever-growing awareness of practices around the world that, however varied,

seem to cultivate an increased awareness of spatial and locational concerns. More and more cultural practitioners are questioning currents in urban conditions and policy, spatial constructions and architectural discourses, academic structures and institutional frameworks, forms of design and media ecologies, and these currents seem both to radically explode the assumptions around what it means to work site-specifically and truly extend this category into unknown and urgent territory.

Surface Tension Supplement No. 1 was initiated and developed according to the life and formation of an idiosyncratic network: each member of a newly formed editorial board contributed an article and in turn invited or selected a further contribution, thereby creating a series of conversations that appear on and off the page. In this first publication, issues of spatial practice are explored through critical reflections by Scott Berzofsky, Nicholas Petr, and Nicholas Wisniewski on their bus tours through Baltimore; Newton Goto on the history and culture of interventionist practice taking place in Brazil; and by Claudine Isé, curator of “Vanishing Point,” an exhibition at the Wexner Center for the Arts in 2005, that questions the aesthetics of urban non-spaces through recent photography, sculpture, and film. These are complemented by reports by Robin Wilson on public art projects in Bristol developed by the working team of Sophie Warren and Jonathan Mosely; and Ken Ehrlich on the infrastructure of signage in Los Angeles as seen through the work of Brandon Lattu and Erik Göngrich, two artists working with cities and signs. In addition, documentation of public projects in Tijuana and Columbus, Ohio by the artist groups Simparch and e-Xplo are presented, which tease out the specificity of given projects and their attempts to adopt a critical yet generous relation to

community. These are complemented by Brandon LaBelle’s photographic-textual review of the recent *Experiments in Architecture*; Jennifer Gabrys’ first installment of *Refuse Reports*, digging into the issues surrounding waste as read through the geographic implications of Fresh Kills Landfill in New York; Kathy Battista’s review of recent light art exhibitions; and Aoife O’Brien’s critical reading of the legacy of the white cube and related criticism.

Site-specific work continues to operate through politicized modes, however subtle or overt, yet current versions of site-based practices reveal that the “political” is increasingly varied and complex. This has less to do with legislative issues and the theater of electoral politics—though we’re certainly aware of the impact reactionary, progressive or even downright oppressive legislation can have on bodies and cities—and more to do with changing notions of being “public.” The technological displacement of geography, and the shifting nature of political and economic borders and cultural identities related to notions of place, have all contributed to both diffusion and specialization around conceptions of site. At a time when the line between what is public and what is private is increasingly unclear, site-based practices in art, architecture and performance delineate trajectories of hope and highlight spaces of tyranny. Perhaps developing a context for discourses around geographies illuminated by artistic research might initiate subtle reconsiderations of the places we inhabit each day, and their potential transmutation.

Ken Ehrlich and Brandon LaBelle