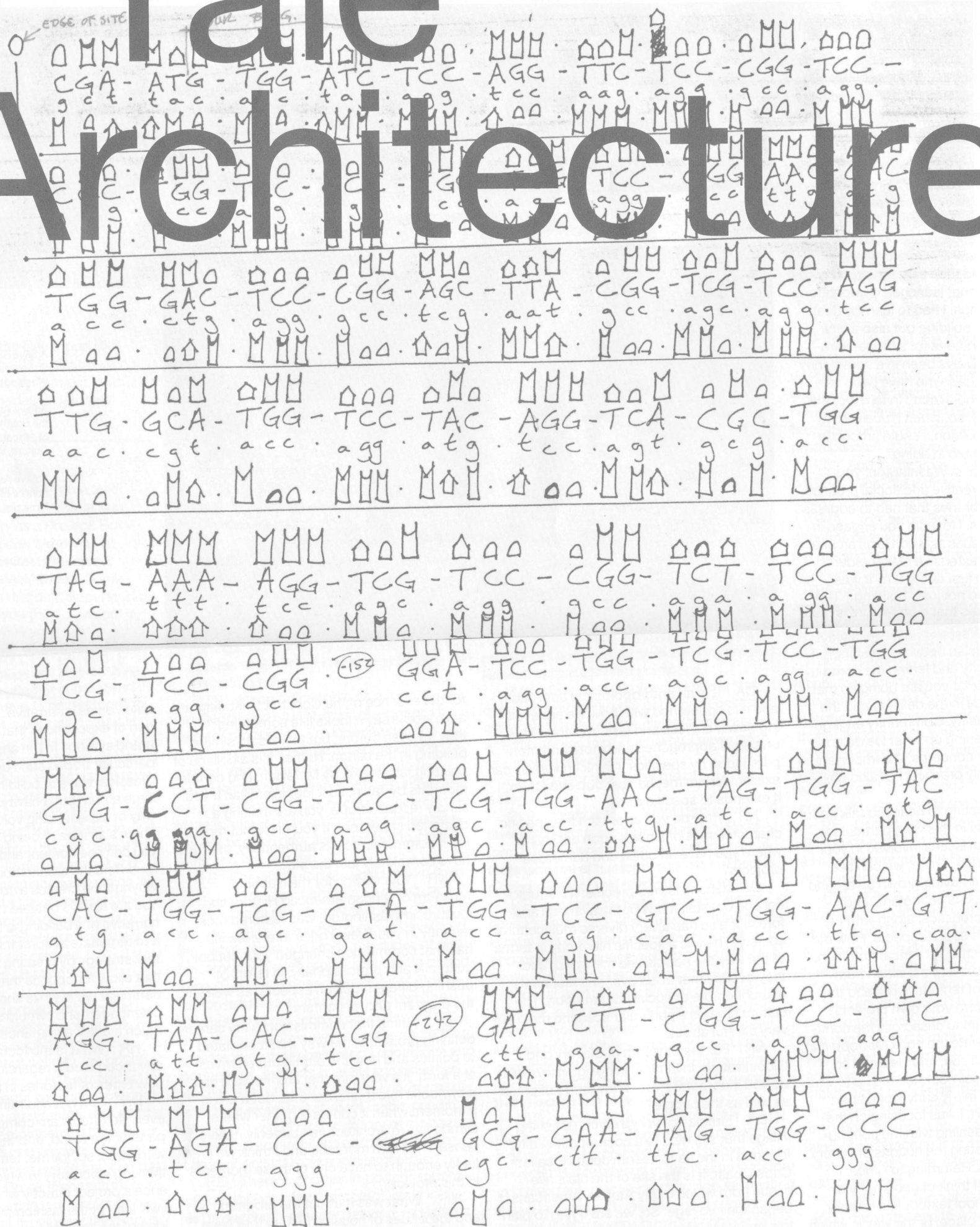


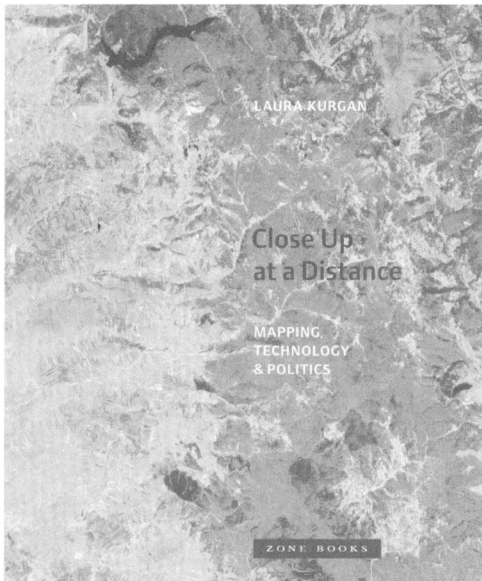
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Yale

Architecture



- | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|----|---|----|---|----|---|
| 2 | Conversation with David Adjaye | 10 | Stage Designs of Ming Cho Lee
exhibition review by Richard Hayes | 17 | 2013 Building Project
<i>Perspecta 46: Error</i> reviewed by
Stephanie Tuerk | 24 | Faculty News
Tribute to Alvin Eisenman |
| 3 | Conversation between Pier Vittorio
Aureli and Peter Eisenman | 11 | High Performance Wood by
Alan Organschi | 18 | Book Reviews
<i>Corrections and Collections</i> by Joe Day
<i>Close Up at a Distance</i> by Laura Kurgan
<i>Paradise Planned</i> by Stern, Fishman
and Tilove
<i>Pedestrian Modern</i> by David Smiley | 26 | Alumni News
Yale School of Architecture Books
Yale at ARCAM, Amsterdam
Norman Foster's Yale building |
| 4 | Conversation with Dan Wood | 12 | Architectural Forum by Brent Sturlaugson
Architecture Dialogues by Surry Schlabs | 20 | Fall 2013 Lectures | 28 | Spring 2014 Calendar |
| 5 | Conversation between Craig Buckley
and Marta Caldeira | 13 | Representing Urban Decay by Elihu Rubin
Yale Women in Architecture | 22 | Fall 2013 Advanced Studios | | |
| 6 | "Exhibiting Architecture: A Paradox"
symposium review by Kevin Repp | 16 | Spring 2014 Events
Exhibition: <i>Archaeology of the Digital</i>
Symposium: "Digital Post-Modernities:
From Calculus to Computation" | | | | |
| 9 | <i>Everything Loose Will Land in
Los Angeles</i> exhibition review by
Joseph Giovannini | | | | | | |



Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology, and Politics

By Laura Kurgan
Zone Books, 2013, 228 pp.

In recent architectural discussions interdisciplinary engagement has come to the fore. These investigations have expanded the limits of architectural knowledge in relation to the changing demands of the globalizing world and its accompanying social and environmental challenges. Ideas regarding geographic scale, infrastructure, landscape, and territory have provided a framework for analysis: for instance, explorations of landscape-ecological urbanism; a renewed interest in the politics of territory, infrastructure, and transnational systems; and the pervasive “design as research” or mapping phenomenon.

It is within this framework that Laura Kurgan’s book *Close Up at a Distance: Mapping, Technology, and Politics* is essential. A professor at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, the author has depicted nine speculative mapping projects she has produced since the early 1990s. The book contains a section titled “Lexicon,” which presents and contextualizes the imaging technologies she has employed—such as global positioning systems (GPS), remote sensing satellites, and geographic information systems (GIS)—as well as the political implications of her work. In addition, the introductory chapter includes two short essays describing the theoretical implications of her work.

The introduction and “Lexicon” provide a context for the general premise of Kurgan’s larger project, and their content is crucial in terms of the book’s contribution to the above mentioned geographic tendencies. Indeed one of Kurgan’s most important contributions to the field is the problematization of the idea of data in relation to recent mapping practices. While the ability to access and visualize data (such as environmental and global flows, infrastructures, and related systems) has inspired fascination within contemporary architectural discussions,

the terms *mapping*, *resource management*, and *design research* have been used interchangeably in both academia and practice. Be it for a contaminated waterfront, an obsolete landfill, or a new urban development located in an extreme climate, “data visualization” is sometimes a tool for justifying projects through problem solving. Within the pervasive topic of sustainability, this limited interpretation of data presents the risk of pure pragmatism and neo-environmentalist do-goodism. In that context, Kurgan’s caveat regarding the redundancy of the term *data visualization* is vital. Not a mere polemic, this warning lies at the base of all her projects. Kurgan writes: “The word *data* in this book means nothing more or less than representations, delegates or emissaries of reality, to be sure, but only that: not presentations of the things themselves, but representations, figures, mediations—subject, then, to all the conventions and aesthetics and rhetorics that we have come to expect of our images and narratives. All data, then, are not empirical, not irreducible facts about the world, but exist as not quite or almost alongside the world, they are para-empirical. To put it another way, there is no such thing as raw data.”

As shown in Kurgan’s book, since global imaging technologies were originally designed for governmental and military use, the data they contain present various contradictions when they become available for public use. Kurgan’s first project, the installation *You Are Here: Information Drift*, skillfully depicts the dilemma of military versus civilian use of GPS mapping technology, a network of location satellites developed for the U.S. military that became fully operational at the beginning of the first Gulf War. Designed for display in 1994 at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, in New York City, *You Are Here* portrays attributes of the disorientation and confusion inherent in the location data produced by this technology despite

its ideology of accuracy. Another example is the aesthetic abstraction portrayed via the contested territories in the project *Monochrome Landscapes*, which comprises four satellite images, each characterized by a color depicting a five-by-five-mile surface of the Earth: green (trees), blue (water), yellow (sand), and white (snow). Here the contradiction lies between the aesthetic purity of the four monochrome images and the discord characterizing the geopolitical realities those monochrome images represent, distort, and occlude: Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, in Alaska (white); the “zero-zero” point of latitude and longitude in the Atlantic Ocean (blue); the illegally logged Cameroonain forest (green); the Iraqi desert (yellow); where two U.S. helicopters flew during the second week of Operation Iraqi Freedom of 2003.

If the 1972 image of the Earth transmitted by the NASA orbiter, and its visualization of the world at this grand scale, can be taken as a driving force of environmentalism in the U.S., it also marks the beginnings of a positivist and technocratic understanding of the environment. Kurgan’s book fastidiously contradicts these typical tendencies in relation to global imaging technologies by shedding light on the intricate politics behind them and the questions they evoke regarding certainty versus ambiguity, surveillance versus transparency, the political versus the aesthetic, and the virtual versus the physical.

Situated between art, architecture, and geography, Kurgan illustrates that actual research through practice can be as radically critical as it is projective.

—Neyran Turan (MED ’03)
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