

Urban maps: instruments of narrative and interpretation in the city by R Brook, N Dunn; Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey, 2011. 264 pages, £50.00 cloth, ISBN 978075467577

Hey, Richard Brook and Nick Dunn have read everything! I'm not kidding. Here, I just opened their book at random and on this page they name-check Stephen Graham, Simon Marven, Manuel Castells, Diller+Scofidio, Greg Lynn, Reiser Umemoto, NOX, MVRDV, Q S Serafijn, and Lars Spuybroek (page 93). I just did it again, and this time I caught Jane Jacobs, Kevin Lynch, Reyner Banham, Peter Hall, Cedric Price, Paul Baker, David Grahame Shane, and Italo Calvino (page 9); and, okay, the Calvino was in text quoted from Shane, but they quote Calvino directly too (on page 100). Situationists, Naomi Klein, Bruno Latour, Edith Piaf, Manuel Castells, Mike Davis, Denis Cosgrove, Peter Greenaway, Zephyr, J B Harley, Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Taki, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, André Breton, Marshall McLuhan, Spike Lee, Henri Lefebvre, Paul Virilio, Space Invader, and KRS1 among *many, many, many* others mix it up in *Urban Maps*, like water molecules in the froth of a fountain.

And don't get me wrong. I first heard KRS1—live!—in Central Park back in the early 1990s, and I've crawled Los Angeles—and São Paulo!—in search of Space Invader's sublime mosaics. I own my own Marcel Duchamp (a set of Rotoreliefs but with a fabulous provenance), and I've published a paper comparing Kevin Lynch and Guy Debord. *Et Cetera*. It's not like I'm not *totally* interested in the same things these guys are, so ... why am I so utterly turned off by this book?

Why? Because Brook and Dunn smother—and I mean *smother*—their endlessly engaging subjects under such a thick blanket of turgid academese as to literally suffocate them. Take this sentence: "Chapter 2 will reinforce the idea of the spatially confused city as overrun by a flickering kaleidoscope of imagery that is produced by desires rather than need and that the meta-physical presence of certain pervasive brands further complicates a reading of the city, yet perversely affords context in a generic physical landscape devoid of such" (page 37). They go on ... but we don't have to.

Was this book even edited? I pick up Ashgate's books with an increasing trepidation because each has been less readable than the last, but it's hard to believe an editor so much as looked at this one. It reads like Brook and Dunn pitched the book—"You know, the *city*, Nike and IKEA, graffiti writers and the street, modern architecture, you know, representation, brands, but as *mapped* by theory ..."—and Ashgate published it in the same spirit: that is, without thinking twice. How could it fail to succeed? It's *so* trendy.

Starting with the use of 'maps' in the title. Undoubtedly this is the Age of the Map. Maps are the trendiest things going (signal mark of the 'spatial turn' that everyone's taking). Maps are *everywhere*. And one reason is because the word means anything these days. And *nothing*. In this book called *Urban Maps* there are, using a very broad definition of map, thirteen of them, all but lost among the remaining 115 illustrations of buildings, film stills, diagrams, street scenes, signage, and so forth and so on. *Urban Maps, Instruments of Narrative and Interpretation in the City*: it could mean anything. So could the chapter titles: "Brand, image and identity", "Networks", "Films", "Marks", "Object". Given these it's not surprising that, "A description of Space Invader and his practice could have fallen within several chapters of this book" (page 216), but—duh!—what couldn't? It's all so ... breathlessly exciting, vibrantly tomorrow, so hip, so sweet, so, so ... kul!! No, it's cooler than kul, more knowing than merely in the know, and ... so incredibly dull. It's hard to believe a book could render so many exciting theories so opaque, that it could so drain the life out of so much interesting stuff.

Brook and Dunn seem like really interesting people, and somewhere in here, there's an interesting book about the potential for architecture in the evolving city. This is not it, certainly not for \$100. For \$100 a real publisher—Taschen would make a perfect fit—could have helped Brook and Dunn turn out something truly spectacular. Maybe next time!

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