Through the Revolving Door

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“When we think about space, we have only looked at its containers. As if space itself is invisible, all theory for the production of space is based on an obsessive preoccupation with its opposite: substance and objects, i.e., architecture. Architects could never explain space; Junkspace is our punishment for their mystifications. OK, let’s talk about space then. The beauty of airports, especially after each upgrade. The luster of renovations. The subtlety of the shopping center. Let’s explore public space, discover casinos, spend time in theme parks.... Junkspace is the body double of space, a territory of impaired vision, limited expectation, reduced earnestness. Junkspace is a Bermuda triangle of concepts, a petri dish abandoned: it cancels distinctions, undermines resolve, confuses intention with realization. It replaces hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition. More and more, more is more.”

- Rem Koouhaus, *Junkspace*

“For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities. ”

- Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1927-1934*

Part I
The Word for World is Airport

Xinyu Liu. *Double Receptions*, 2023. Archival Inkjet Print, 27” x 22”.

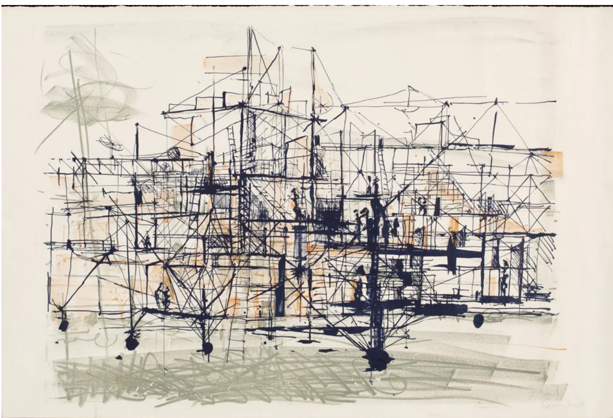
My plane landed at Terminal 5 of JFK airport at 7:33 AM on August 4th, 2023. After an overnight flight, I was desperate for a proper breakfast and a cup of coffee. As I walked out of my gate, I noticed a door with a sign that read, “Unless you are a hotel guest, please do not enter.”

I entered anyway. Behind the door was a tunnel lined with plush mid-century red carpets, leading me to what seemed like another terminal—or at least, it had been one, back in the days. This was the TWA Flight Center, a mid-century futurist marvel that once spread its wings in the optimism of the space age. That history, however, faded into the past after its closure in 2001. Today, it stands as the TWA Hotel, a luxurious airport hotel catering to travelers who want to immerse themselves in the romance of living at an airport. I’m not entirely sure I should be here. But as I looked around, I noticed other travelers like me—some napping in the sunken lounge, waiting for their connecting flights. The reception staff stood at every corner of the lobby, seemingly indifferent to my presence. Still, I ordered an eggs benedict for $30, plus tip—partially as my way of paying tribute to Eero Saarinen’s architecture, but also as a kind of bail-out fee for occupying a privatized space I hadn’t paid for in the first place.

Since reaching adulthood, I’ve spent countless days and nights at airports—international flights, layovers, delays, sleeping on the carpet, eating McDonald’s fries. None of these sound comfortable, yet there’s something oddly comforting about such experience, a strange kind of shelter that many others seem to recognize. Mehran Karimi Nasseri lived in Charles de Gaulle for 18 years; Denis Luiz de Souza has been staying in São Paulo-Guarulhos since he was 17... the list goes on. From the mundane inconvenience of delays and layovers to the stark realities of bureaucratic limbo, geopolitical asylum, or simply escaping the chaos of everyday life, the airport often begins as a temporary coping mechanism but has a way of turning semi-permanent. Despite its transitory nature, it offers a peculiar kind of spatial logic - a scale of living mapped by its infrastructural adjacency, a miniature of a modern city minus permeant personal relationships. The airport is a sanitized version of reality—an environment designed for controlled transience—yet within its rigid structures, there are grey zones of occupancy, where the boundaries between permission and persistence blur, turning a space meant for passage into an unintended, semi-public refuge.

TWA's lobby became an epiphany—not for its space-age nostalgia, but for the way it blurred boundaries. Once a terminal, now a hotel, it hovers somewhere between an airport lounge and a hotel lobby—spaces designed less for arrival than for waiting, whether for a flight or a room key. In its seamless transition from one function to another, it revealed just how similar these spaces already were. The airport begins to feel like a city; the city, in turn, adopts the logic of the airport.

In the early 1960s, artist-architect Constant Nieuwenhuys, briefly affiliated with the Situationist International, conceived *New Babylon*—an architectural vision for a post-capitalist city of transience and play, designed for a nomadic, creative population. While his utopian model was ultimately rejected by the Situationists for being too instrumental and technologically optimistic, Constant's provocation remains potent. He wrote, "The airport of today can be seen as the anticipatory image of the city of tomorrow, the city of man passing through." [1]



Constant Nieuwenhuys, *New Babylon*, 1961, litho.

Xinyu Liu, *The Bureau*, 2024.
Archival Inkjet Print, 27" x 22".

The airport, as Constant argued, was emblematic of a future city - there is no place, but just endless space. Constant's vision has, in many ways, materialized—yet not through creative liberation, but through infrastructural control. The modular logic of the airport has proliferated outward into the city: spaces of transit, controlled access, and constant surveillance designed to facilitate managed movement. Urban life today often unfolds in interchangeable interiors—lobbies, lounges, atriums—semi-public zones that mirror the airport's sanitized, frictionless flow.

Over the past three years, as I've wandered through cities, passing countless interchangeable facades and glass doors, I've found myself constantly drawn to liminal spaces such as lobbies and entrance halls—those ambiguous thresholds between public and private spaces.

At first, my curiosity was practical: could I slip inside and use the facilities, most likely the bathroom, without the implied transaction of buying a cup of coffee? But soon, I became more attuned to the quiet friction of these spaces—the subtle but palpable sense of exclusion at their thresholds, the uncertainty of whether I belonged. These encounters formed the foundation of my Terminal Project long before I could articulate the structures at play or the invisible forces that dictated access.

These spaces do have a name. In the 1992 book *Variations on a Theme Park*, several urbanist theorists, led by Michael Sorkin, collectively raised concerns about the diminishing presence of true public spaces and its social repercussions. In this book, Sorkin addressed the rise of "semi-public space" in replacement of the traditional "third place" where social gatherings happened. These semi-public spaces include privately owned areas such as hotel lobbies, airport lounges, shopping malls, and privately owned parks, plazas, or atriums that are open to the public but subject to certain limitations. [2]

Bob Thall. *Aurora*, 1996.

Xinyu Liu. *Through the Revolving Door*, 2024. Archival Inkjet print, 21" x 17".

Almost thirty years onwards, these spaces, like the above image captured by New Topographics photographer Bob Thall, proliferated in our built environment. This new kind of urbanism—manipulative, dispersed, and often hostile —has become entrenched. We see it at the heart and edges of cities in the form of megamalls, corporate enclaves, gentrified zones, and pseudo-historic marketplaces. These spaces sanitize urban reality, stripping it of its complexities while presenting a fictitious facade of accessibility.

In the foreword section of *The New American Village,* Bob Thall wrote an essay titled *My Place Your Place*, recounting his experience documenting the new suburbs of Chicago in the 90s, a sense of bafflement about the vague boundary between public access and privatized control:

"Many of my early days photographing the suburban landscape ended in the basement of elegant high-rise buildings, facing irritated and puzzled directors of corporate security. I soon realized that rarely is there a clearly marked public space in the suburbs. Where do the backyards end and the public parks begin? Is a small, residential street public property, or is it the restricted driveway of a private development? Ponds, parking lots, and sidewalks within shopping malls can look public, but they are usually private properties. There are virtually no places in the edge cities where a stranger has the right to walk around with a camera on his or her shoulder or set up a tripod." [3]

Like the airport, these spaces operate in a gray zone—where presence is tolerated but rarely affirmed. You can sit, browse, wait, but you're never quite certain if you're allowed to stay beyond a "reasonable duration." Increasingly, the city adopts the airport's infrastructural grammar: modular, surveilled, and subtly exclusionary. What once marked a space of transit now maps a broader urban condition. The world begins to resemble one endless terminal—no destination, just the soft hum of circulation.

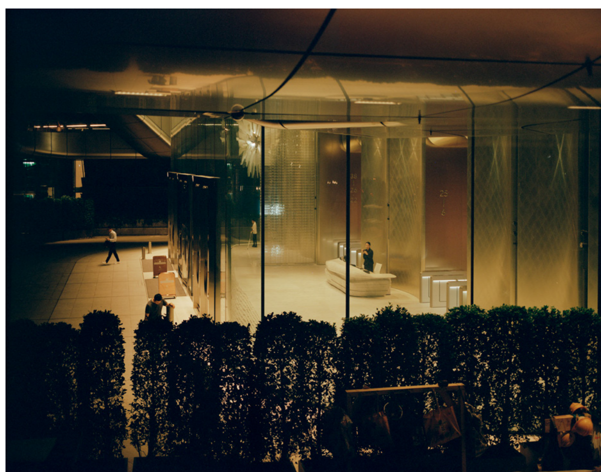
Part II
Walking in the Privatized Wonderland

In Jacques Tati's 1967 film *Playtime*, Monsieur Hulot arrives in a hypermodern version of Paris, a city flattened into glass boxes and gridded reflections. He wanders through sterile office buildings, exhibition halls, and apartment blocks—spaces so interchangeable that he, and we as audience, can barely tell them apart. [4] The real Paris—its historic texture, messy vitality, and social intimacy—is seen only in fleeting glimpses, refracted on revolving doors and glass walls. In Tati's world, transparency doesn't equal access. Instead, the city has become a mirror maze—legible but elusive, seemingly open yet subtly restrictive. The boundaries aren't locked doors but gestures, glances, and design cues—a choreography of implied permissions. The city has become an airport without planes: a continuous loop of entrances, exits, and waiting rooms.

Jacques Tati. *Playtime*. 1967.

Jacques Tati. *Playtime*. 1967.

What Tati depicted—at the rise of corporate architecture and controlled publicness—was that glass is never neutral. It promises clarity while enforcing separation. In modern cities, glass is often the material of surveillance and speculation: from floor-to-ceiling curtain walls to the gloss of luxury storefronts, its presence signals openness while silently reinforcing boundaries. A glass wall invites the gaze, but not necessarily the body; it says look, but don't touch. It is a membrane of power, regulating who enters and who remains outside. Like Jean Baudrillard wrote in *The System of Objects*, "Glass facilitates faster communication between inside and outside, yet at the same time it sets up an invisible but material caesura which prevents such communication from becoming a real opening onto the world." [5]



Xinyu Liu. *Transparent Gates*, 2024.
Archival Inkjet print, 21" x 17".

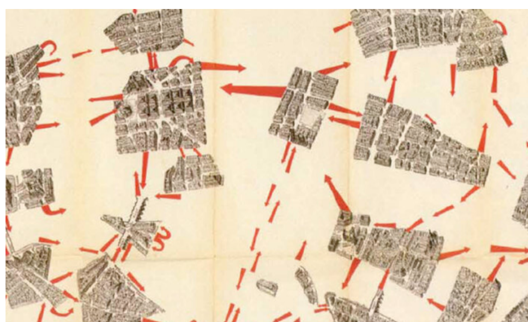
Xinyu Liu. *Instituional Sentinels*, 2023.
Archival Inkjet print, 21" x 17".

It is this interface—embodied by the glass façades and revolving doors of corporate enclaves—that forms the terrain of my thesis project, *Through the Revolving Door*. The inquiry unfolds in questions: What delineates the space between institutional control and public accessibility? Where can one walk, pause, sit, or observe without seeking permission? Could I use that bathroom? Would I need a code for the door? If I took a nap here, who would have the power to intervene?

These seemingly mundane questions reveal the quiet choreography of access and exclusion embedded in our built environment not just as logistical concerns, but as reflections of deeper power dynamics—of who is allowed to occupy space, under what conditions, and for how long. In such spaces, authority is ambient, often exercised not through confrontation but through architecture, signage, or the gaze of security. Such threshold of power also denotes the threshold of class—a spatial and social sorting mechanism that quietly governs who belongs and who is out of place. In these architectures of controlled circulation, people are encouraged to move, but only along sanctioned paths. To linger, to drift, or to be idle in these spaces is to risk exposure, suspicion, or removal.

In response to this regime of privatized urban space, photographers like Bob Thall have developed strategies to negotiate access. As he wrote: "I learned to call ahead, network, and check in with the security guards before I started to work." [6] While Thall's approach acknowledges the shifting boundaries of permission and visibility, it also reflects a kind of institutional legibility that I often cannot claim—an access granted through professional status and social capital.

In contrast, my practice insists on a more fugitive and situated approach, one informed by the tactics of the *Situationist International*, a group of radical thinkers and artists who emerged in post-war Europe during the late 1950s and 1960s. Confronting a world increasingly shaped by consumerism and spectacle, they viewed the modern city not only as a site of alienation but also of latent possibility. Guy Debord, the movement's most prominent theorist, emphasized the construction of "moving situations" to replace static forms—a call for urban life to be remade through play, disruption, and emotional experience. His concept of the *dérive*—a "technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances"—proposed a playful and intuitive navigation of the city that could reveal its hidden power structures and emotional contours. [7]



Cover of Guy Debord's 1957 *Psychogeographic guide of Paris*. The territory is fragmented and depicts only the emotional connections of different places.

To Debord and other Situationists, the urban environment was not a neutral grid but a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a total work of art composed of lived experiences and social relations. Their radical vision resisted the rationalization of everyday life and instead celebrated the messy, contingent, and ephemeral aspects of city living. This practice of drifting was inherently political: it subverted capitalist control over movement and space, commanding attention by reclaiming wandering as an act of agency.

Emerging in postwar France, the *Situationist International* directly responded to a rapidly transforming postwar urban landscape—one increasingly shaped by consumer capitalism, bureaucratic control, and the flattening logic of cultural spectacle. Their critique, once aimed at the commodified banality of mid-century European cities, now finds disturbing resonance in today's built environments: privatized, surveilled, and structured to discourage unsanctioned presence. It is in this spirit—and within this evolving social context—that I walk. My walking practice channels this lineage not as nostalgia, but as a living method of inquiry—testing how one might still drift, resist, and reimagine one's relationship to the city under the contemporary spatial control, revealing my positionality and illuminating how privatized control hinders, commodifies, and polices the act of observation itself.

Xinyu Liu & Jiayue Yu. From the artist book, *I am a Monument*, 2025.

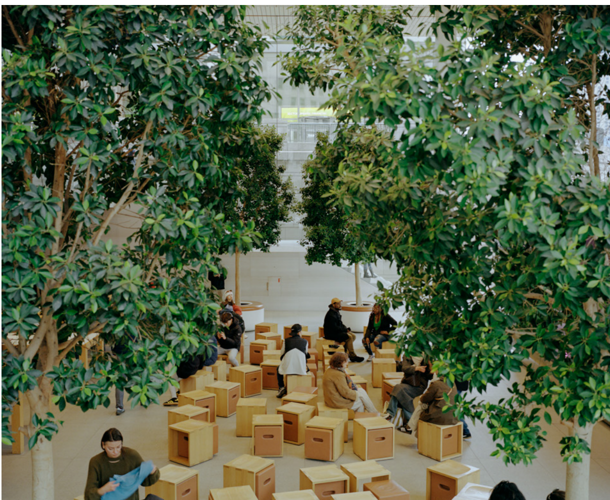
Part III
Toward a Fugitive Cartography

In Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, the protagonist K. wanders through a village perpetually estranged from the authority that governs it—a castle visible yet inaccessible, its presence looming but its power diffuse, exercised through elusive intermediaries and opaque rules. K is sent to survey the land, but is denied access to the very terrain he is meant to chart. [8] My work, by contrast, insists on tracing those boundaries—however soft, shifting, or invisible. If walking is the act of trespass, photography becomes the residue—the mark left behind.

Ricardo Bofill. *Kafka's Castle*, 1968.

In *Through the Revolving Door*, I turn to image-making not to map space in the traditional sense, but to create a fugitive cartography: one that charts soft borders, behavioral cues, and ambient authority as they surface through architecture and human posture.

Since the invention of photography, architecture has long been a focal point of cultural representation in photographic practice, with buildings captured as symbolic and metaphorical artifacts, often curated in collaboration between architects and photographers to create idealized, public-facing images. As David Campany argued, architecture photography often treats buildings as combinational sign systems—assemblages of form, function, and symbolism that communicate cultural and ideological values. [9]



Xinyu Liu. *Apple Store Michigan Ave*, 2024.

Xinyu Liu. *Labyrinthine*, 2024.

My work responds to those traditional sign systems and vantage points established by architectural photography. It acknowledges the symbolic and metaphorical meanings embedded in architectural photography as a mediated experience while subverting the viewer's expectations of a representational form that has long prioritized clarity, control, and aesthetic coherence. To frame this approach, I draw on Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad as a conceptual framework to study and analyze the representations of space as conceived, perceived, and lived. [10] While my photographs recognize the layers of "conceived space"(The abstract representation of space, encompassing maps, plans, and designs crafted by architects and planners) and "perceived space"(the experience of space based on socially constructed notions in relationship to its physical) as the premise, they further emphasize on the "lived space" as the realm of everyday life, where contested social interactions unfold and personal experiences are shaped. I see the space represented in my photographs not simply as a passive backdrop for human activities but as an actively produced environment that is subject to the influence of social practices, economic forces, and power dynamics.

Reading Architectural Photography Through Lefebvre's Spatial Triad

Post Office

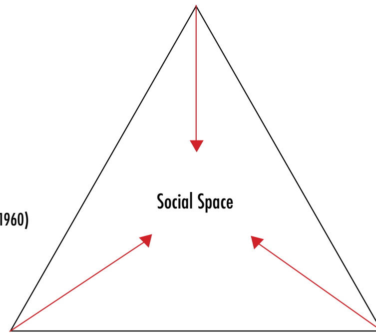
Apple Store

Bank

The experience of space based on socially-constructed notions in relationship to its physical features.

Fallingwater, Frank Lloyd Wright

Case Study House #22, Julius Shulman (1960)



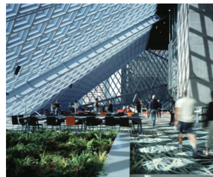
Jeff Wall, Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona (1999)

Andreas Gursky, Hong Kong Island (1994)

The Centre Pompidou, Renzo Piano Building Workshop + Richard Rogers

Thomas Struth, Art Institute of Chicago II (1990)

Unité d'habitation, Le Corbusier



Seattle Public Library, Rem Koolhaas

CCTV Headquarter, OMA

Fallingwater Under Scaffolding

Flatiron Building Under Scaffolding

The abstract representation of space, encompassing maps, plans, and designs crafted by architects and planners.

The realm of everyday life, where social interactions unfold and personal experiences are shaped.

By reapplying Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad to architectural photography, the presentation of the built environment can be analyzed not only as a material construct (*perceived space*), but also as a projection of dominant ideologies and planning logic (*conceived space*), and as a site of everyday experience and appropriation (*lived space*). Through the visual language of architectural photography, I investigate how power structures are rendered visible, how they are rationalized through the presentation of spatial form, and how they are inhabited, resisted, or reimagined by users. In many cases, a single image captures the interplay of multiple spatial layers simultaneously.

Julius Shulman's iconic photographs from the *Case Study Houses* operate between perceived and conceived spaces. Commissioned by Arts & Architecture magazine during the postwar era, *Case Study Houses* was not just a photographic commission but a publicity campaign—intended to showcase modern, efficient, and affordable living solutions to a burgeoning American middle class. Shulman's images were central to this vision. His meticulously crafted compositions presented a romanticized, highly stylized view of domestic modernism: cantilevered structures perched on hillsides, expansive glass walls, and interior lives bathed in natural light, all reflecting mid-century ideals of progress, leisure, and consumer aspiration. Yet these photographs were not neutral documents. One great example is Shulman's photographs of Stahl House (*Case Study House #22*) which were shot at twilight and deliberately darkened in post-processing to simulate the illusion of a nightfall while drawing heightened delineation around architectural forms. This aesthetic choice dramatized the interplay of light, volume, and transparency—amplifying the seductive

Julius Shulman. *Case Study House #22*, 1960.

clarity of modernist design. What results is the perceived space on the surface—a clean, aspirational image of modern domesticity. But beneath it lies the conceived space—a strategic, ideologically driven vision of mid-century suburban dwellings, promoted through visual rhetoric. Shulman's work blurs documentation and marketing, revealing how architectural photography can construct not only the look of modernism but also its mythos. [11]

Julius Shulman. *Case Study House #22*, 1960.

Meanwhile, Jeff Wall's *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* stages a quiet interplay between perceived and lived spaces. On one hand, the image presents the pristine geometry of the Miesian pavilion—an emblem of modernist purity, institutional transparency, and architectural restraint. This is a perceived space: the visual language of minimalism and control. Yet the figure of the cleaner—nearly spectral, caught mid-motion—punctures that clarity. His presence gestures toward the invisible labor that sustains such environments, a form of lived space often erased in architectural display. The tension between the institutional facade and the upkeep it demands reveals the friction between image and infrastructure, surface and support, cleanliness and class.

Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*, 1999

A more recent trend in architectural photography reveals a deliberate turn toward realism—an aesthetic strategy that presents images as unvarnished, spontaneous, and embedded within the lived environment. This photograph by architecture firm OMA, depicting the CCTV Headquarters in Beijing, exemplifies such a shift. The image captures the tower from a ground-level vantage point in a transitional, post-industrial neighborhood, complete with tangled wires, aging low-rises, and construction debris. On the surface, it appears raw and unstaged, yet this veneer of imperfection is carefully curated to perfect the illusion of authenticity. By embedding the hyper-designed structure within the grit of everyday surroundings, the photograph heightens the symbolic contrast: the CCTV tower emerges as a triumphant gateway to urban transformation, towering over the residue of a disappearing city.

Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA).
CCTV Headquarter Tower, 2002-2012.

This visual strategy allows the image to operate between the conceived space and lived space, combining the textured, everyday environment shaped by human activity and material contingency with the abstract, ideologically driven visions of architects and institutions. The monumental backdrop of the tower enacts the logic of planned, top-down design, while the foreground centers that vision in the social realities it aims to displace. In staging this tension rather than erasing it, the photograph doesn't just document a moment of urban change—it dramatizes the uneven relationship between ambition and actuality. The aesthetic of realism is thus deployed not to neutralize ideology, but to recalibrate it—to dramatize the building's role as a catalyst within the narrative of urban progress.

These distinct modes of architectural representation—Shulman's orchestrated idealization, Wall's interrogation of the invisible labor sustaining institutional spaces, and OMA's deliberate invocation of imperfect realism—collectively underscore the layered complexity inherent in photographic engagements with the built environment. Each photograph navigates the tensions between conceived, perceived, and lived space in ways that reveal architectural photography as an active participant in the construction and mediation of spatial meaning, rather than a neutral record. Building on this lineage, my photographic approach seeks to disrupt conventions of architectural photography by foregrounding the ephemeral, contingent, and unpolished aspects of spatial experience often overlooked. Jeff Wall's photograph, which restages a moment of institutional neglect, offers a useful precedent—yet it remains a highly constructed image, one made possible by granted access, arranged logistics, and the legitimizing apparatus of the art world. My practice, by contrast, unfolds in spaces where such access is neither assumed nor assured. Rather than calling ahead, I often move quietly through thresholds—waiting, watching, intuiting when the shutter can be pressed. This methodological departure is not merely an aesthetic strategy, but a structural one. I photograph with a handheld medium format film camera, often in interior spaces marked by subdued light and heightened surveillance, conditions under which the presence of tripods or overt professional equipment would not only

be impractical but also risk immediate expulsion. The resulting visual artifacts—motion blurs, soft focus, unstable exposures—are not accidents but inscriptions of constraint. In this sense, the photographs enact a kind of embodied subterfuge. The instability of the image becomes a formal index of my position within the space, registering the tension between surveillance and discretion, authority, and evasion. This fugitive approach resists the totalizing clarity so often associated with architectural photography and instead opens a space for hesitation, friction, and partial view—qualities that echo the lived ambiguities of spatial experience itself.

Xinyu Liu. *Receptions I*, 2024.
Archival Inkjet print, 21" x 17".

Xinyu Liu. *Receptions II*, 2024.
Archival Inkjet print, 21" x 17".

Part IV
The Gestural Conclusion

If architecture governs space, gesture organizes behaviors around it. In privatized environments, bodily cues—hesitations, detours, glances over the shoulder— often become silent negotiations of power. These minor gestures are not mere background textures; they are spatial indexes—records of friction, adaptation, and constraint. They reveal how the body absorbs and performs the invisible scripts of a place, often without conscious acknowledgment. As Jeff Wall writes in his photographic essay *Gestus*, "My work is based on the representation of the body. In the medium of photography, this representation depends upon the construction of expressive gestures which can function as emblems. 'Essence must appear,' says Hegel, and in the represented body it appears as a gesture which knows itself to be appearance." [12] For Wall, gesture operates not merely as a record of movement, but as a self-aware signifier—an emblem through which presence, intention, and theatricality are made legible.

Wall's approach draws implicitly from Bertolt Brecht's theory of *Gestus*, a theatrical technique in which physical actions or postures reveal social relationships and ideological tensions, not through naturalistic immersion, but through estrangement. A gesture, for Brecht, is legible not because it feels "real," but because it is marked by an intentional awkwardness—a rupture that invites interpretation. This theatricality is central to my photographs, where bodies often perform within frames as if paused mid-thought, mid-act, neither fully natural nor fully artificial. Like Jeff Wall, I'm drawn to such narrative suspension: images that resist closure, instead creating a charged stillness in which social dynamics simmer just beneath the surface. In my work, this takes the form of a spatial *distancing effect*—borrowed from Brecht—where the viewer is not asked to identify with the scene, but to observe it with a critical attentiveness. Bodies become indicators not of individual identity, but of relational tensions, silently negotiating the invisible scripts and frictions embedded in privatized, surveilled environments. [13]

Xinyu Liu. *Venetian Dreams*, 2024. Archival Inkjet Print, 21" x 17".

While Wall constructs these emblematic moments with deliberate theatricality, my interest lies more in the unremarkable gesture—the bodily deferral or micro-adjustment that emerges under surveillance, in proximity to thresholds, or reaction to ambiguity. These are not declarative emblems, but minor postures of uncertainty—gestures that don't quite know themselves, and for that reason, feel true to the spaces they inhabit. To render these gestures photographically requires a structure attuned to their contingency: a framing that mirrors their instability rather than containing it.

Formally, this is where my work draws from the New Topographics movement, particularly Stephen Shore's notion of being "consciously casual." His photographs reject the compositional hierarchy of traditional landscape or architecture photography, instead allowing the photographic structure to emerge from the spontaneous act of seeing rather than from the synesthetic painterly design. [14] Similarly, I frame my photographs not to monumentalize space, but to let its layered textures and indexes surface, making room for complex, often contradictory meanings embedded in seemingly ordinary scenes. By keeping the compositions open, decentralized, and structurally "unpolished," I emphasize the image's role as an indexical container—an imprint of a moment and place not easily reduced to a single narrative or interpretation. It is this openness that parallels my broader inquiry: how the visual document can bear the traces of movement, friction, and power within the architecture of everyday life. In this sense, my photographs function less as objects and more as windows—portals into layered spatial narratives that refuse resolution. Such perspective informs not only my framing in-camera, but also my physical framing in exhibition. I choose metal frames without matting to maintain a direct, uninterrupted visual threshold. The absence of a mat removes the buffer between viewer and image, inviting the gaze to cross over rather than pause at the boundary.

Xinyu Liu. *I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Hall*s 2024. Archival Inkjet Print, 27" x 22".

This photographic structure—rooted in the consciously casual, the observational rather than monumental—finds articulation in *A Moment of Solitude*, taken at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. The image depicts a lone individual seated near an automatic ticket kiosk. The subject's posture—a slight forward lean, head tilted down—registers less as drama than as depletion. This isn't a moment of narrative climax, but of ambient unease. The subject's posture resists legibility: are they pausing, waiting, recoiling? Their gesture is suspended, uncertain, barely performative. In the absence of dramatic action, the spatial politics emerge more acutely. The clean, luminous surfaces of the museum's lobby, its algorithmic infrastructure, the semi-transparent windows, a half-open exit door, and the figure's isolation build a tension that feels at once spatial and emotional. The ticket kiosk glows faintly beside them, a quiet emblem of automated access.

Xinyu Liu. *A Moment of Solitude*, 2022. Archival Inkjet Print, 27" x 22".

This is a gesture that doesn't demand to be read. It hovers instead. Like Shore, I avoid compositional closure or direct theatricality; instead, architectural lines and ambient light subtly direct the eye, allowing the scene's emotional atmosphere to accumulate rather than declare itself. It recalls Brecht's notion of *Gestus*: not simply a physical act, but a socially coded posture that reveals tension without resolving it. The image lingers in a state of narrative suspension - minor twist, tiny drama, little solitude. It is exactly this minor negotiation of space that interests me: the micro-adjustment of the body under institutional watch, near a transactional threshold, in a site meant for cultural engagement. Nothing explicitly happens, and yet everything in the photograph points toward the quiet negotiation of space.

Xinyu Liu. *A Conversation*, 2024.
Archival Inkjet print, 27" x 22".

Xinyu Liu. *Cascade Office*, 2024.
Archival Inkjet print, 27" x 22".

This visual strategy of isolating moments that refuse resolution—extends across my photographic practice. Formally, my photographs often counterpose transient human presences against concrete urban landscapes, creating a narrative tension that remains intentionally unresolved, evoking the layered ambiguity inherent in semi-public spaces with the narrative suspension. Here we see a moment, a moment that can never happen again. And yet, because we remain uncertain about what this moment is about, our gaze drifts back and forward, suspended in time. Between these images, slippages constantly happen between the human presences as visual registers, further emphasizing my photographic surface as a transparent window structure to be seen through rather than a painterly synthesized composition.

All these visual strategies—narrative suspension, structural complexity, slippage of human presence—accumulate across the project not to provide resolution, but to insist on looking again. And perhaps the ultimate gesture—one that underlies this entire project—is the gesture of walking itself, not as drifting for drifting's sake, but as a method of observing, participating, and intervening. It is through walking that I first began noticing how bodies behave in space—how they hesitate, recalibrate, or move with quiet defiance through environments shaped by control. Thus, walking is the ultimate gesture, an act of insurgency that critically transforms my journeys into a voluntary and strategic institutional critique of privatized public space, mapping the friction and opacity of the privatized city. Through the activation of walking, photography becomes a site of inquiry—a way of decoding the spatial and ideological scaffolding of contemporary urban life.

At last, reflecting on my journeys wandering in the urban space, looking through the revolving doors, there is always this fear mixed with obscure pleasure. But it's the pleasure I want to emphasize: the quiet thrill of walking past those invisible barriers, counteracting the alienation of capitalist urban life, and reclaiming a sense of agency in a hyper-mediated world. In doing so, I begin to unravel moments of real vulnerability—moments where the polished facades of hygiene, transparency, and efficiency briefly falter, and something more human seeps through.

Thus, I want to end with this quote from Walter Benjamin:

"For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities." [15]

I hope everyone takes wonderful walks.

The Word for World is Airport

The Word for World is Shopping Mall

The Word for World is Aquarium

See You In Disneyland

See You In Las Vegas

See You in Our Walks

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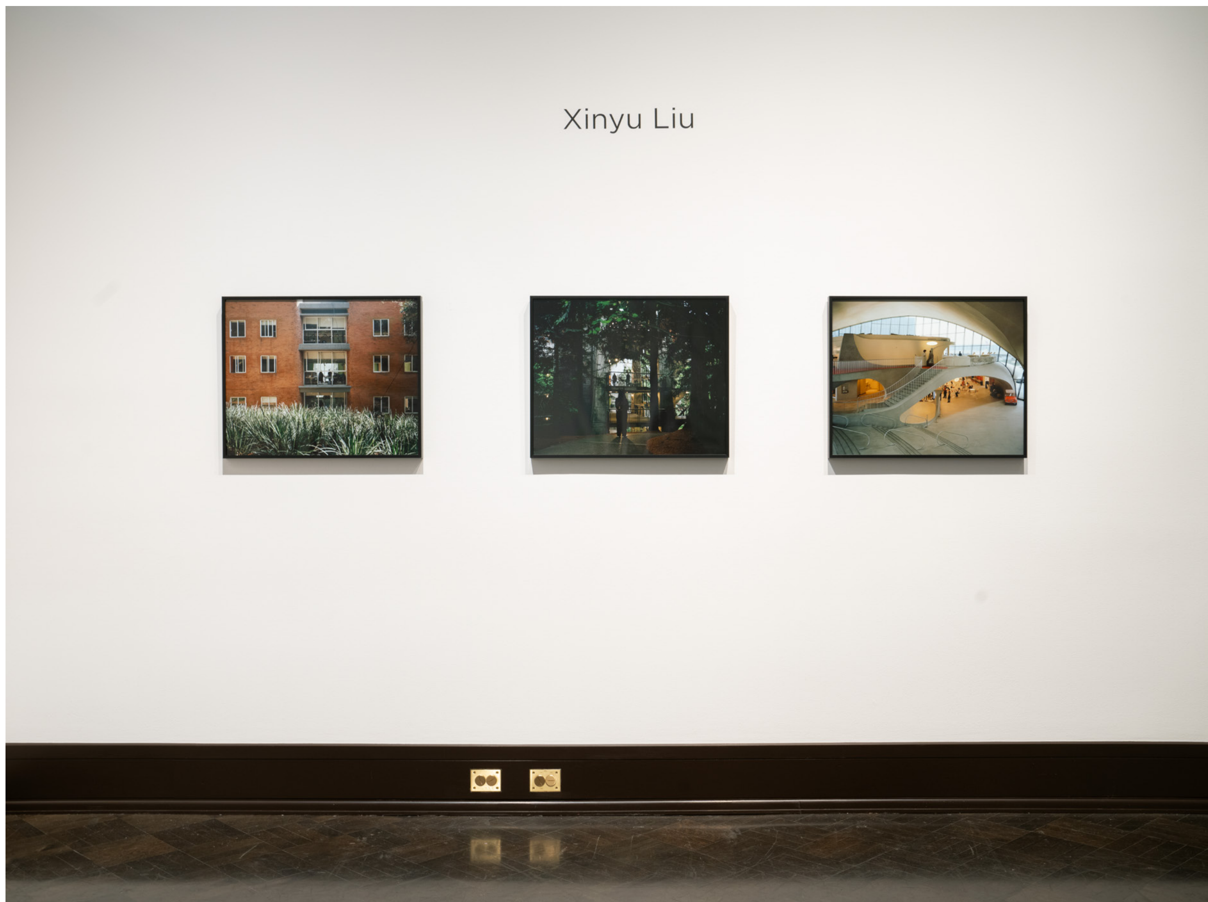
Installation Images



Xinyu Liu

RECEPTION
CASHIER

Xinyu Liu
Right to left:
Through the Revolving Door, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025.47.1
Venetian Dreams, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025.47.2
Reception I, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025.47.3
Reception II, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025.47.4
Institutional Sentinels, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025.47.5

Xinyu Liu
Left to right
A Conversation, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.6
Cascade Office, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.7
The Bureau, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.8
Double Receptions, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.9

Xinyu Liu
Left to right
I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.11
A Moment of Solitude, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.10

Xinyu Liu
Left to right
A Conversation, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.6
Cascade Office, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.7
The Bureau, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.8
Double Receptions, 2025
Archival inkjet print
L2025:47.9

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