

DDR STATEMENT

The dissertation proposal aims to combine artistic practice and research with scientific research on the City of Los Angeles through methods of collecting data (archives), personal observations, and the re-reading of an architectural book by Reyner Banham. Regarding the methodological framework, personal observations play an important role in order to describe specific characteristics of a place. For example, the notebook, the drawing book, the Wunderkammer (objects) or the diary (text, film, etc.) acknowledge artistic interpretation and attribute fragmentary perception to personal observations.

Through the methodological lens of fragments, the Californian City will be observed in its contemporaneity with the help of a systematic search for significant traces (via text/image) in regard to exemplary urban elements (e.g. architectural and infrastructural structures/leftovers), whereby Banham's layout of the Four Ecologies serves as a starting point. In this regard, the Idea/concept of the fragment – which is well acknowledged in literary studies – will be revised in the architectural and artistic discourse and expanded onto the work with text, image and object. Through this combination, the dissertation contributes to the discourse regarding the fragment (in architecture and art) and how we (mis-)understand narratives and also interpret the experience a city differently through the means of contemporary media, as well as how we create and tell narratives of such experiences.

The architectural fragment as a carrier of significant information regarding (broken) promises and failures of the past is important to mention here as well. As a result, the aim is to create critical narratives, which highlight distinctive key moments in regard to climate urgencies, failures of modernity, its social implications and future potentials.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

*LOS ANGELES; FRAGMENT; ARTISTIC RESEARCH;
POSTMODERNISM; ECOLOGY; DYSTOPIA*

ABSTRACT

The proposal “Los Angeles: Fragments of Four Ecologies” refers to the publication “Los Angeles: Architecture of Four Ecologies” by architectural historian Reyner Banham from 1971, where he observed the area of Greater Los Angeles as a network of highways, a landscape of urban villages and an exercise in suburban life. In response to Banham's observations 50 years later, I propose to appropriate, re-evaluate and re-frame his outline through the conceptual and theoretical lens of the fragment. In particular, the concept of the fragment offers also methodologically valuable insights regarding multiplicity, simultaneity and ambiguity. Hereby, the emphasis will be set on artistic research along with personal, archival and appropriated observations by identifying the “Fragments of Four Ecologies” with distinctive attention to recent developments such as climate urgencies, failures of modernity and certain social implications – at which the city of Los Angeles is likewise especially worth revisiting.

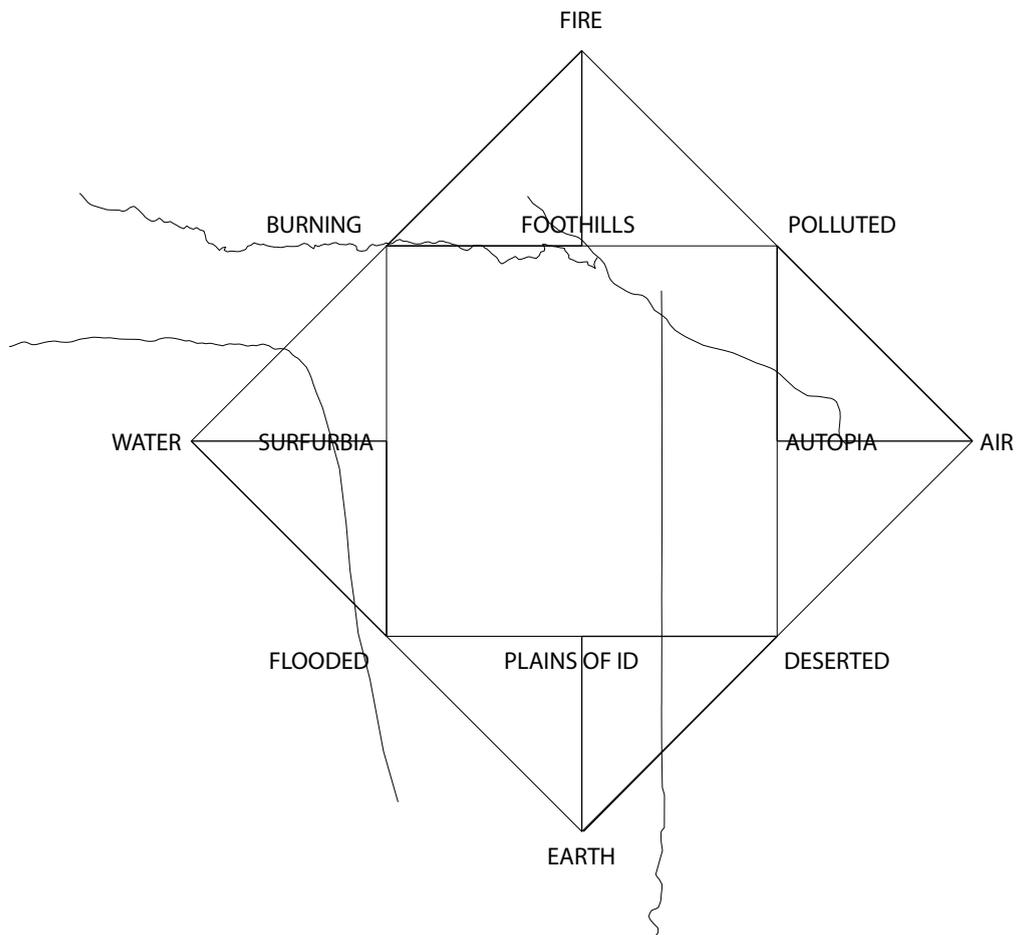


Fig 1: Diagram „4 Ecologies; 4 Elements , 4 Streets; 4 Collapses“

The proposal “Los Angeles: Fragments of Four Ecologies” refers to a publication by architectural historian Reyner Banham from 1971, where he observed the area of Greater Los Angeles as a network of highways, a landscape of urban villages and an exercise in suburban life. In his “Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies”, he identified four ecologies – Surfurbia, Foothills, The Plains of Id and Autopia – in order to structure his research. In contrast to contemporary urbanists at the time, he further praised the Californian city along with its freeway system, for which he said to have “learned to drive in order to read the city in the original.” (1) Within my doctoral thesis, Banham’s approach and structure serves mainly as a starting point which provides raw material to expand on and artistically engage with through the means of various media (fig.1; fig.3). Through this engagement, the conceptual and methodological framework of the fragment (as in the dissertation title) will be tested and further explored in order to identify (architectural) leftovers and to project the experience of a post-modern city. This will then not necessarily serve as a historical observation, but rather as a performative and speculative extrapolation into potential futures, because the voids between fragments leave space for interpretation and rewriting. As the curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud demands for 21st Century artistic production as follows: “To rewrite modernity is the historical task of this early twenty-first century: not to start at zero or find oneself encumbered by the storehouse of history, but to inventory and select, to use and download.” (2)

Numerous authors have already highlighted a seemingly fragmented experience in Los Angeles, which correlates generally to the notion of fragmentation within the discourse of postmodernity since the 1980s (cf. Soja, Jameson). The American writer Frederic Jameson describes the layout and buildings of a postmodern city through identifying a “heterogeneous fabric of the commercial strip and the motel and fast-food landscape of the post-superhighway American city.” (3) According to his description, one can think of few prototypical cities in the US with similar facets, and Los Angeles could be surely considered as one of them. In a more radical manner, Jean Baudrillard presents his vision of Los Angeles as an extensive structure, which is merely an inhabited fragment of the desert (cf. Baudrillard, 2010). Here, Baudrillard proposes a perspective from a bigger picture in which the city receives simply the consideration of a “fragment” itself – meaning that the notion of a fragment depends often on framing and viewpoint.

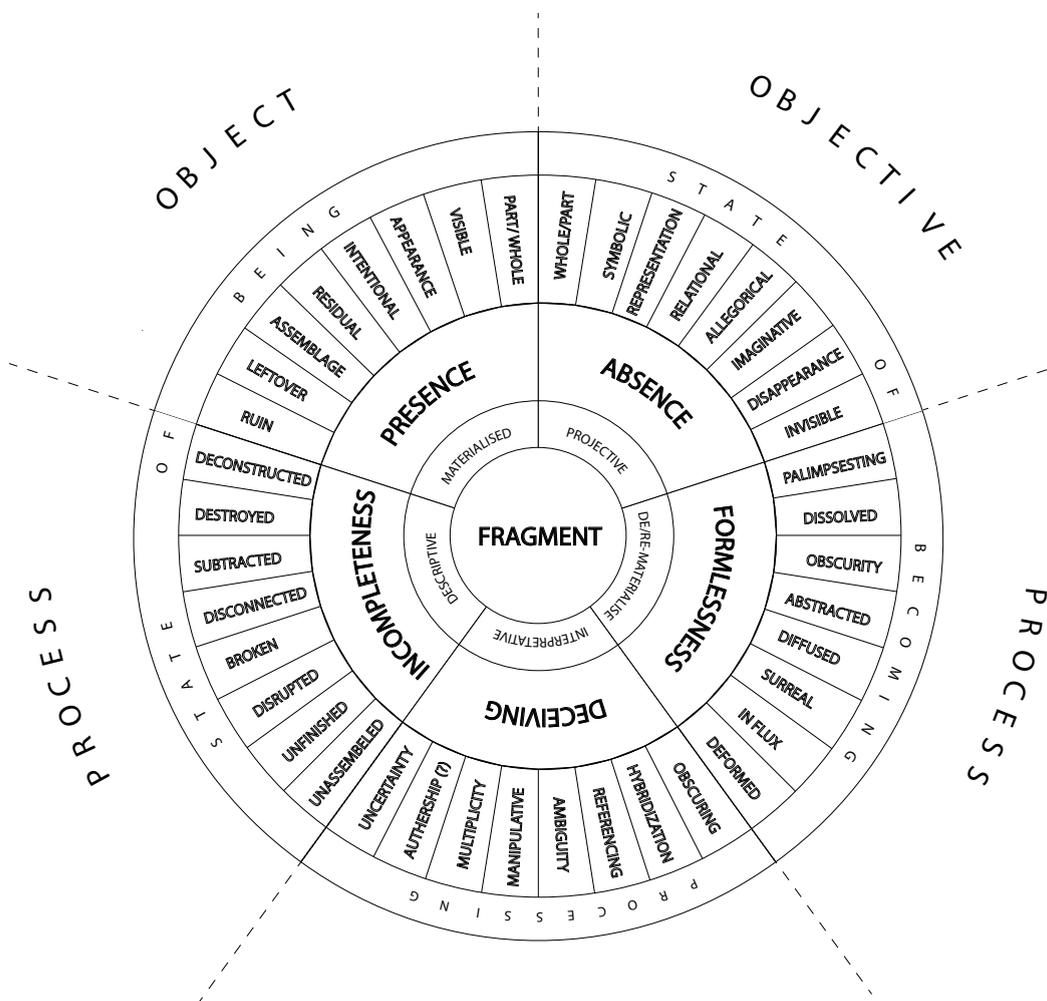


Fig 2: Diagram „Theoretical contextualization: Fragment“

Against the backdrop of certain postmodern perspectives and their distinctive attention on fragmentation and rupture, the study of the fragment plays a central role in the dissertation – not only due to its rich historical references and theoretical background, but also due to its ambiguity and implicit artistic potential. (fig.2) Especially in the 18th Century when the modern understanding of the fragment emerged, Italy and Greece were the point of reference while searching for classical order in architecture as well as literature. At the time, German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel cultivated this fascination for ancient ideals and started to publish his own journal together with his brother August W. Schlegel under the name “Athenaeum”. The journal’s title indicates a place for literary and scientific studies by referring to Athens and the city’s high standing in intellectual reputation. In his Journal, Schlegel published treatises of philosophical aphorisms which were then labeled as the “Athenaeum Fragments”.

By highlighting the historical reference to the Athenaeum Fragments, the strong connection of Schlegel’s notion of the fragment in relation to ancient ideals (e.g. Athens) falls into place. In this regard, his understanding of the fragment is identified with an appreciation of a lost place and past. Los Angeles in turn could be considered as the equivalent of such a place regarding the 20th Century in retrospective. Prototypically, Hollywood is considered as its image or dream factory par excellence. American art critic and writer Rosalind E. Krauss calls “Hollywood, the beehive of the media at the center of Los Angeles,” (4) while science-fiction author J.G. Ballard acknowledges the “real ‘America’ lies not in the streets of Manhattan and Chicago, or the farm towns of the mid-west, but in the imaginary America created by Hollywood and the media landscape.” (5) In this regard, Los Angeles gets stigmatized as the center of constant media production from where potential realities seem to be perpetually (re-)produced, evaluated and distributed.

Additionally, it has been stated that the 20th century was dominated in general by the distribution of the image through the invention of photography and the moving image by the late 19th century (cf. Benjamin, 1935). Since then and until today, the image and the moving image seem to have gradually overtaken the form of knowledge production and opinion making. There are even claims that foresee a post-text future in the 21st century: the New York Times provocatively tackled this issue in various articles under the title “Welcome to the Post-Text Future.” In his essay “The Rise of

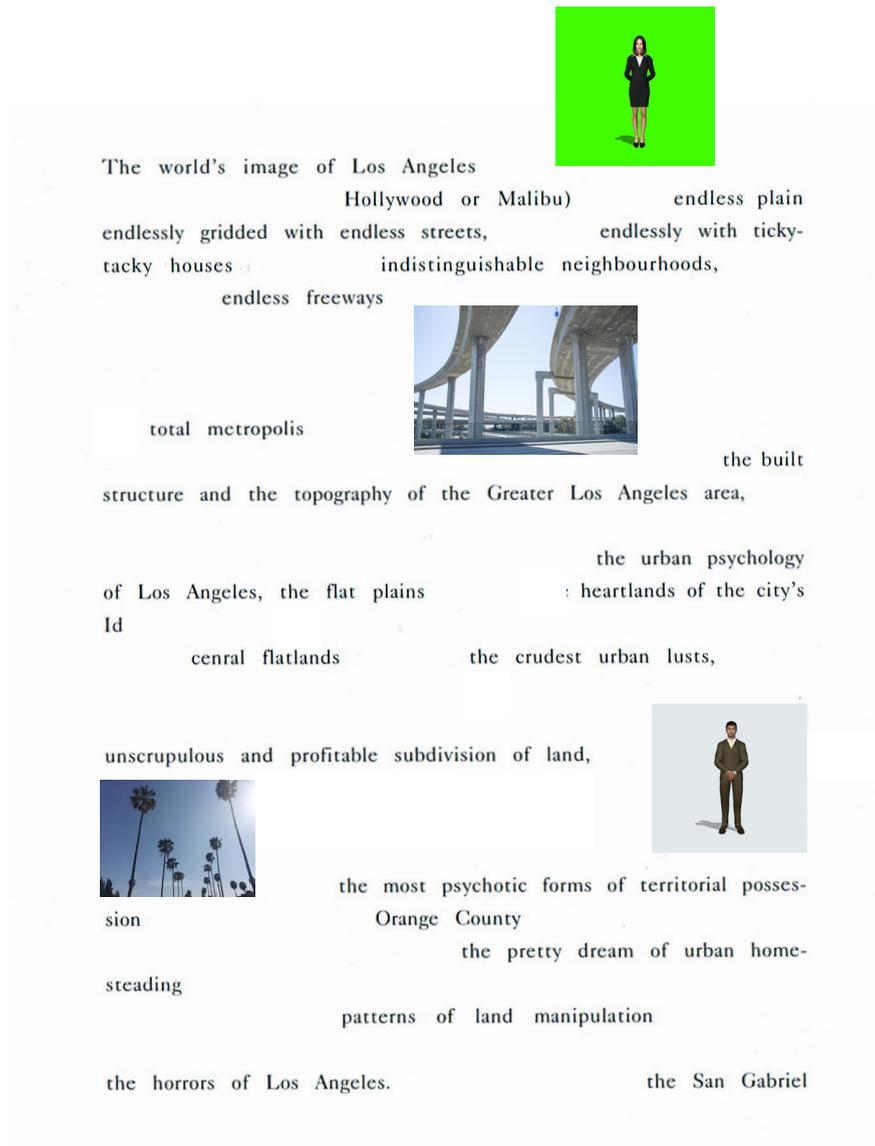


Fig.3: Testings.

a Visual Internet”, the editor Farhad Manjoo starts with the claim, that “[t]he thing you’re doing now, reading prose on a screen, is going out of fashion.” This is followed by the argument that “[t]he defining narrative of our online moment concerns the decline of text, and the exploding reach and power of audio and video.” (both 6)

The resulting dystopic tone is one potential direction within the practice-based part of the dissertation as it relates characteristically to the fragment through its distinctive attributes such as obscurity and ambiguity, but also to the city of Los Angeles regarding gloomy future predictions in relation to current climate change realities. Furthermore, the city presents here already a rich source and long tradition of literary destruction due to its delicate location and expansive city layout (cf. Scott’s „Blade Runner“, 1982; Davis, 1996). While Banham still praised the city layout by acknowledging the domination of its four ecologies in 1971, one year later the publication of “Limits of Growth” by the Club of Rome already projected a grim future and as a result demanded higher ecological aspirations.

In response to Banham’s observations and aligned with the theoretical contextualization of the fragment, the dissertation is on the one hand meant to be an recontextualization and appropriation of his outlines and on the other hand a proposal to re-evaluate and re-frame – through the lens of Los Angeles – the concept of the fragment at the intersection of today’s physical, imaginary and digital sphere. Methodological emphasis will be hereby set on artistic research along with personal, archival and appropriated observations by identifying the “The Fragments of Four Ecologies” as a collection of (moving) images, (architectural) objects, and (fragmentary) writings. (fig.3) Because as Camelia Elias theorizes on the fragment: “[it] proves its universality insofar as it proposes new perspectives. The fragment’s poetics is the poetics of perspective [...]” (7)

(1) Banham, Reyner: Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies, London: Allen Lane.

(2) Bourriaud, Nicolas: Postproduction, New York: Lukas & Sternberg.

(3) Jameson, Fredric: Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, London: Verso.

(4) Bois, Yve-Alain & Krauss, Rosalind E.: Formless: A User’s Guide, New York: Zone Books.

(5) Ballard, J. G.: Hello America, New York: Liveright Publishing.

(6) Manjoo, Farhad: Welcome to the Post-Text Future. New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/09/technology/the-rise-of-a-visual-internet.html> from February 14th, 2018.

(7) Elias, Camelia: Fragment–Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre. Bern: Peter Lang