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Nicolas Grenier, *Communautés unies / United Communities*, Galerie Art Mur, Montreal. April 30 – June 18, 2011

par James D. Campbell  
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## MONTREAL

Nicolas Grenier, *Communautés unies / United Communities*, Galerie Art Mur, Montreal.  
April 30 – June 18, 2011

Nicolas Grenier births the architectural Uncanny with extraordinary thematic consistency and finesse in the works exhibited here—and succeeds in a stellar haunting of the built world, with inbuilt lessons for the future. His *United Communities* proposes a pristine and radiant—say better, radioactive—architecture situated somewhere between utopia and dystopia, between abodes of outrageous affluence and the taxonomy of ‘perfect’ slum dwellings and housing for the poor. *Migrant Workers Are Accommodated Directly in the Fields and Share Communal Apartments Designed in a Spirit of Social Equality* is like a isometric diagram of George Lucas’ cinematic dystopia *THX 1138* (1971), with the presiding architect Le Corbusier co-opted as robotic flic or Big Brother on the design side. Or consider *Vertically Integrated Socialism*, with its brilliantly rendered belowground “inclusivity apartments” for impoverished subjects, which speaks so much of an asphyxi-

ating order of control, a totalitarian universe undreamt of by Stalin.

The idea of an “architectural uncanny” was developed by architectural historian Anthony Vidler in his attempt to relate how our understanding of architecture is often pervaded by and implicit in complex, unfathomable and even threatening personal existential experiences. His concepts build upon Sigmund Freud’s classic 1919 essay on the uncanny, explaining how the German word *unheimlich*, of “un-homely,” effectively embodies the sensation of the uncanny as being estranged from the comforts of home. Grenier gives us homes, the putative comforts of which are themselves uncanny and imaginatively grounds us within them.<sup>1</sup> The radioactive palette heightens our sense of exposure.

Alongside Vidler’s uncanny, Grenier’s work can be fruitfully explored in terms of Marc Augé’s notion of non-place and the central tenets of the totalitarian state in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s dystopian—and visionary—novel *We*. Indeed, within the points of the triangle marked out by these commentators, we have

the proverbial nub of Grenier’s paintings: their implicit *thema*.

It is, of course, consummately strange that Grenier’s ‘architectures for work and inhabitation’ remind us of the non-places that the French anthropologist and theorist Marc Augé developed in his seminal book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*,<sup>2</sup>—after all, these are places for human dwelling rather than the vast portable parentheses of the airport or ATM machine precincts. Not so strange if we understand that it is precisely because they register a potent thematic of estrangement built up from bifurcated tropes of the built world and nature that requires deconstruction on our part as viewers complicit in the making of meaning. And all the windows and doors are closed. We are looking at blueprints ostensibly built upon utopian signifiers that are in fact harbingers of the apocalypse: humans under total control. Architectural eugenics. But while human agents are conspicuous by their absence in many of these paintings, we project them—ourselves—in there, and with



Nicolas Grenier, *Inclusive Gated Community*.

unsettling results. They possess ontological as well as epistemological implications that stem not from theory but from visual perception itself and our own emplacement in the built world.

The idea of Supermodernity and non-place has its necessary complement in Anthony Vidler's notion of warped space.<sup>3</sup> He says: "Fear, anxiety, estrangement, and their psychological counterparts, anxiety neuroses and phobias, have been intimately linked to the aesthetics of space throughout the modern period."<sup>4</sup> Well, it is impossible to avoid the frisson as we project into Grenier's unsettling paintings. The aesthetics of space here and the uncanny architectural problematic conspire to generate a low-lying but pervasive sense of *unease*.

Vidler posits a dualistic idiom of warped space. There is a wholly psychological space, an inventory of sundry neuroses and phobias that reaches within and beyond subjectivity *per se* and inhabits the postmodern landscape hand-in-glove. This space, which is not void but disquieting experiential plenum, is fraught with features that ensure angst and uncertainty. The other order of warping, according to Vidler, is produced when artists rupture and transgress the borders of genre orthodoxies with different media to treat space in new and unforeseen ways.

Vidler argues persuasively that the affinity between these two orders of warping draws its radius across all artistic and architectural practices in modernity, inside the space of the inner city. He brilliantly identifies and tracks the trajectory of a psychological idea of space from thinkers like Pascal and Freud to the clinical identification of agoraphobia and claustrophobia in the nineteenth century and from thence to twentieth-century theories of spatial estrangement, and associated feelings of angst and estrangement. He cites seminal figures like Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin in developing his argument. In naming contemporary conditions of displacement and placelessness, in the development of his thesis, as the necessary consequence of inhabiting the built world, he examines ways in which contemporary artists and architects have produced innovative forms of spatial warping. He looks at how they have radically transformed both the experience and the subject of contemporary architecture.

Grenier plays with the hectic tropes of non-place as integers of alienation—and defining aspects of the built world.

This segues with Yevgany Zamyatin's *We*, which, like George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, is a brilliant evocation of a dystopian future for the human race.<sup>5</sup>

The narrator of this remarkable novel is both number and address D-503, and is chief architect of the One State's construction of an instellar spaceship, the Integral. Zamyatin describes the buildings where his subjects live as being futuristic glass houses undreamt of by Le Corbusier and Mies Van Der Rohe. This segues beautifully with Grenier's dystopian housing projects.

If Zamyatin's unsettling fiction pits the individual subject against the social order, Grenier does the same, by extension and implication. It is in this context that his work also pivots again towards the writings of Augé, which are important for identifying the nomenclature of non-place in the human milieu. Augé brilliantly assays the topological and psychological particularities of site, both local and exotic, which are at one and the same time everywhere and nowhere today.<sup>6</sup>

He argues that supermodernity is a new tense that effectively generates non-places, quite like those depicted in the paintings of Grenier, phenomenological bracketing-outs of the natural environment in which humans are emplaced—and that are transposed into the language of brick, mortar, stainless steel and glass with a suitably "green" aura. The principal trope of supermodernity is *excess*, after all, and this new tense is created through the logic of sheer excess. This thinker defines non-places as possessing no identity or identifiable history. Non-places are purely transient. Augé identifies three species of accelerated transformation. In terms of temporality, he specifies an "acceleration of history," which ineluctably brings on an overabundance of events.<sup>7</sup> He identifies a palpable surplus in the realm of space: "the excess of space is correlative with the shrinking of the planet,"<sup>8</sup> which brings on spatial overabundance. Finally, he identifies a specific figure of excess, as "the figure of the ego, the individual."<sup>9</sup> Grenier offers an autoreflexive critique central to which is a dialogical critique that dovetails with Augé's negative definition of the non-place: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place."<sup>10</sup> Augé holds that the word 'non-place' for him "designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces."<sup>11</sup> Grenier proposes his brave new architectural worlds of inhabitation in such a way as to invoke these complementary but altogether distinct realities.

As some commentators have pointed out, the real strength of Vidler's work lies in its overall engagement with recent developments,

concerning the hopes of reaching new understandings and definitions of "space." Warped Space is not atropaic, after all—it is itself, of course, profoundly *diplopiac*—it is a phenomenon of the built world that impacts directly, by virtue of urban and spatial pathologies, and Grenier's paintings evoke consummately anxious visions of the modern subject caught in spatial systems beyond its control as it attempts to make representational and architectural sense of its predicament.

The manifestly corn-pone component in *Gated Community* (2009)—a rainbow—is like a vast advertising hoarding in mid-air from Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*. This, but a lure, a red herring, meant to be swallowed whole—hook, line and sinker. Grenier's *United Communities* collides Mao with Donald Trump, Le Corbusier with Albert Speer, Orwell's Big Brother with the House in TV's Big Brother series. These architectures are surely gag orders or scold's bridles for designated dwellers, the perps on the Merry-Go-Round of an Orwellian nightmare designed by Martin Heidegger in the depths of the Old Forest. Grenier's apparent utopianism is an effective but paper-thin mask for a far more sinister, underlying reality: architectures meant to contain, direct and restrain the many, and, in so doing, suffocate or snuff out the One.

James D. Campbell

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, cop. 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Marc Augé, *Non Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, cop. 2000).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> See Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, (English translation by Mirra Ginsburg, 1972), (Avon Eos, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Augé, *Non Places*, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Augé, p. 31.

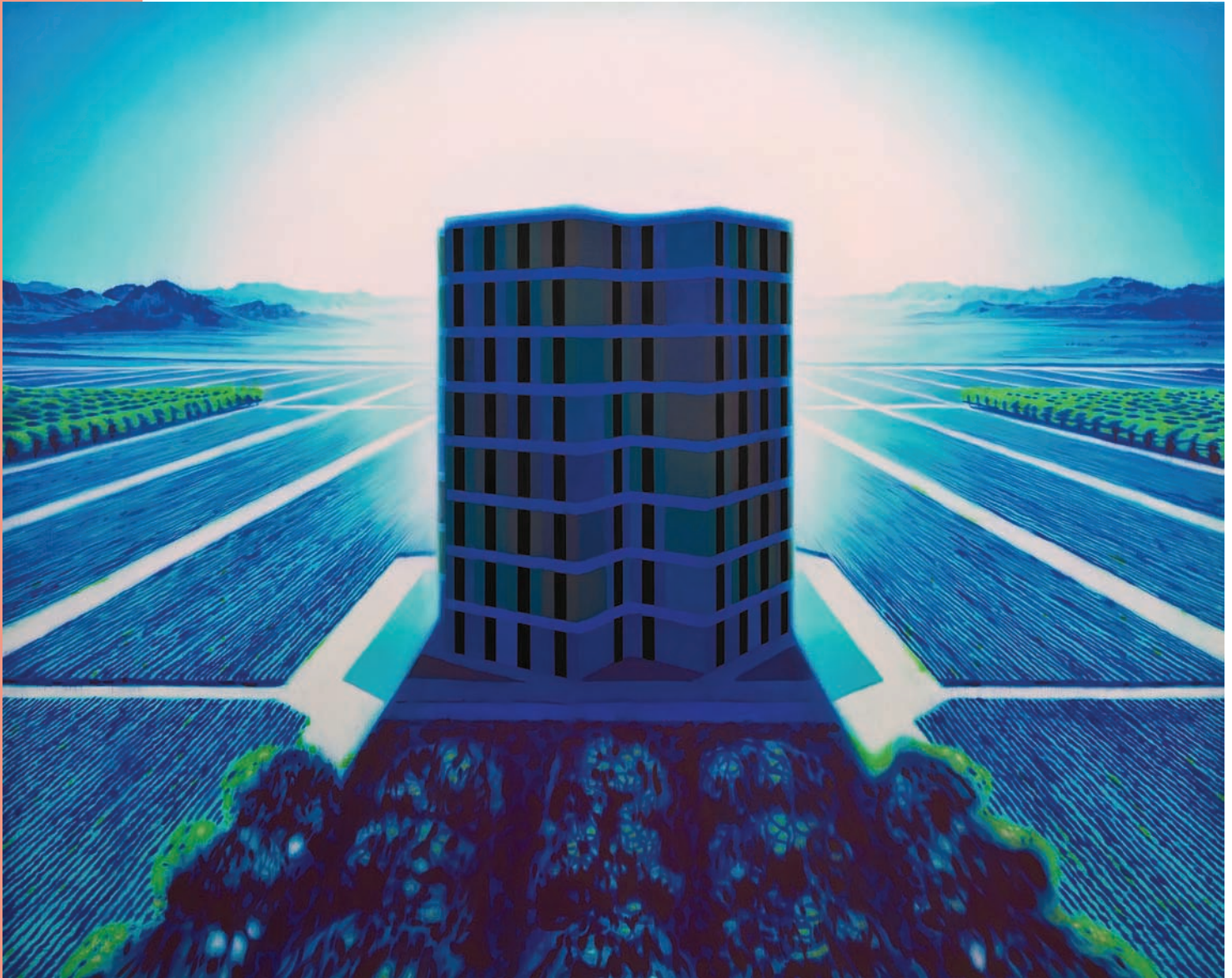
<sup>8</sup> Augé, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*





Nicolas Grenier, *Les travailleurs migrants*.

Nicolas Grenier, *Vertically Integrated Socialism* (Detail).

