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Oasis Link

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by

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VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
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Thank you to my advisors Nicole Killian, David Sheilds, Danielle Aubert. I could not have done this without you.

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Thank you Shawn Taylor, Pallavi Sen, Nicole Lavelle, Taryn Cowart, and my family for all of your support.
“If surface is a kind of place, or site, the designer is its geographer.”
This document is written from the perspective of the Oasis Link community, a group of dissidents who have resettled in the Mojave Desert sometime in the near future. It is a speculative design document.
Surface is what is visible. It’s the crust of the earth and the face of a meteorite—the coat of a jackrabbit and the waxy skin of a Mojave Prickly Pear—the facade of a building or a piece of cloth sewn into a garment.

Surface is superficial, but it also reflects and defines the underlying structure of something—it makes the hidden visible.
We make our home in this dry, dusty desert, but the surface of the land is only half the story. The other half is made up of the events that have taken, and will take place here. Stories manifest on surfaces, through text and image, on the pages of a book or a glowing computer screen. As the oracle of Oasis Link, I serve as the interface between the physical surface of this land and the surfaces that display our story.

Surfaces disrupt the temporal and spatial aspect of my story, but also act as sites for their reassembly and unification. My narration is not simply recounting a series of connected events, but the observation, participation, performance, and creation of these events. I am a part of the story that I am telling.
Together we stand witness to the land. Its surface is covered by arroyos, craters, dusty red sandstone, quiet lava fields, cracked mud, treeless mesas, and spare outcroppings of pillow basalt. I speak what is seen and recount the events that take place here. The land is a surface to be read and its material state is transformed by those who inhabit it.
My vantage point is from the edge of a vast salt flat that overlooks Oasis Link. Here I keep watch over a small flame that burns continuously and has done so since Upriver Times. It is a coal seam fire, an environmental relic borne of industry from a distant past—the only remaining link to those who came before us and it also signifies our unknown future. My acts of divination do not attempt to reveal this future, but are instead a ritualistic gathering, organizing, and articulation of the fragments of our existence in this place. In other words, I tell stories that about today so that we might imagine where we are going tomorrow.
We are leading a slow revolution. By interrupting the existing network we will construct a new one. The world threw a structure at us and we will manipulate it as we see fit. What new history can emerge from the surface of a place? What can we construct with these raw materials?

In what follows I will share my collection of words and images that I have gathered during my time at Oasis Link.
My name is Castalia\(^1\). I was named after a meteorite\(^2\) that fell to earth in North Carolina in the year 1874.

This is not a record, this is a story\(^3\)—one that is part of a greater volume which recounts the history of Oasis Link. It is a small part, but like all small parts, it is an important part.

This story is about the way things are and the way things could be.

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1. A nymph whom Apollo transformed into a fountain at Delphi, at the base of Mount Parnassus.

2. Three pieces were collected totaling about 7.3 kg with a majority of the material in one 5.5 kg individual. Being a xenolithic and brecciated H5 chondrite simply means Castalia is beautiful.


*Perfect Lives* has been called “the most influential music/theater/literary work of the 1980s” at its center is the hypnotic voice of Robert Ashley. His continuous song narrates the events of the story and describes a 1980’s update of the mythology of small town America. *Perfect Lives* is populated with myriad characters revolving around two musicians — “n”, the singer of myth and legend, and his friend, Buddy, “the world’s greatest piano player”. They have come to a small town in the midwest to entertain at the Perfect Lives Lounge. As Robert Ashley describes in the opera synopsis, “they fall in with two locals to commit the perfect crime, a metaphor for something philosophical: in this case, to remove a sizable about of money from the bank for one day (and one day only) and let the whole world know that it was missing.”
A meteorite name must clearly distinguish the occurrence to which it refers from other meteorite names, and should convey the geographical location of the fall or find.1

1. http://meteoriticalsociety.org

The meteoritical society is a non-profit scholarly organization founded in 1933 to promote research and education in planetary science with emphasis on studies of meteorites and other extraterrestrial materials, including samples from space missions, that further our understanding of the origin and history of the solar system. The meteoritical society is the organization that, through its nomenclature committee, gives internationally recognized names to meteorites, and then publishes these names in two places, the meteoritical bulletin and the meteorite bulletin database.
Author and surface have become active components in narrative, obscuring the relationship between construct and reality. Michel Foucault was critical of the notion of the individual author. In his essay *What is an Author?* he argued that authorship has long been in flux and the relationship between author and text has undergone a number of transformations throughout history: from early religious texts where the identity of the author and their original intent has been lost over time to the scientific texts of the Renaissance that required the name of the author as validation as well as potential proof of transgression. In 1710 the British Parliament enacted the Statute of Anne which granted the government the power to regulate copyright. Michael Rock points out that at this moment, “text came to be seen as a form of private property,” whereas the

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“the gospels in their purest form were public domain.”

This spectrum of authorship, ranging from public to private, has evolved with the development of new technologies and shifting social conditions, both of which have an impact on the ways in which the text is displayed. In a practical sense, surface is the place where a text is physically actualized. Surface is a page in a book, an LED billboard, the fabric of a t-shirt, the screen of tablet. Surface is the site of a text.

Author and surface are responsive, they are not static. Each can be taken at face value, yet they adapt to their current environment in a state of fluctuation.

There used to be an idea called ‘copyright,’ which was the legal right to be the only one to reproduce, publish, and sell media. Here we take what we can get and share what we have. These words that I’m saying to you right now are not my own. They’ve been lifted from a thousand sources. But do you think because of that I’m disingenuous? I hope not!

And anyway, given the state of things, you have no choice to take my voice at face value. The origin of my words was lost long ago. But how would one assign value and moreover, legal right to words, to stories? For this to happen voices needed to be transferred to a material that could hold them even when the origin of the voice was no longer present.

The agency of a text is in part enabled by the author, in part by the surface, and in part by the viewer. It is the viewer that connects and arranges the text as
they see fit across a range of surfaces. Within this process—this transmission and transformation of narrative—is the ability for reality to be complicated and compromised. However, in terms of storytelling, this is not a disadvantage. I believe it necessarily complicates reality and asks something of the viewer, instead of simply presenting them with a totality, a truth, that need not be questioned. Images and words from news stories, documents, and other established realities may enter into new, fictional contexts. This transition allows the
viewer to bring a piece of their own experience into the realm of fiction.

I believe that graphic design is in a unique position to gather and re-present text and image as narrative and the development of new sites for its production and circulation. I am particularly interested in how these new forms of narrative can be used to speculate about the future of place—that is, locations defined by their relationship to individuals or groups of people.

What we have here is a device for gathering stories from our voices. Memex comes from the words “memory” and “index.” The easiest way to think about Memex is “how can I make the unseen seen?” This relic from the early days of Oasis Link is in part what kept the original collective dream alive and unlike its predecessors, copies of voices are to be shared freely. This device reconnected the voice with the written, a tie that was severed in the Upriver Days.

We use it to record physical copies of our voices before we upload them to our network. Both processes are long and laborious, but the time it takes gives us the opportunity to talk and drink dandelion root tea together. One question our elders had in the early days was “how does an a collection of digital information—an intangible space—become a place?” They questioned their question: “Does it need to become a place?” and “Could it be that it is already a place?”. They had read of buildings called libraries, actual houses of knowledge where people had once gathered. We sat around and debated these questions as the microfilm soaked in its borax bath. We spoke of building a library as we rubbed salt and sand over the crackling film strips and laid them to bake in the heat of the midday sun.

After the microfilm is dried and set to cure, we climb up the foothills until we reach the observatory.
Speculations

Documents allow us to record and share stories. They allow us to explore new ideas and alternate realities. They allow us to meditate on our past and imagine our future. To create a document is to give structure to the past, as well as the future. A document can be a site of possibility.

One such document is called Speculative Everything, by Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. Their London-based studio uses “design as a medium to stimulate
discussion and debate amongst designers, industry and the public about the social, cultural and ethical implications of existing and emerging technologies.”

Dunne and Raby point out that a key function of design is problem solving. They posit that the optimistic drive of designers to find solutions to the most pressing global problems is perhaps misguided and that sometimes it may be more productive to change “our values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.” Speculative design is one such method for introducing alternatives.

What does speculative design mean to Oasis Link? We believe that it can help us develop a toolkit that will allow us to be the architects of our own future. We are cultivating a new library of knowledge and someday we hope to share it with the world. For now we must start small, with ourselves and with our immediate environment.

As members of Oasis Link, we left our original homes voluntarily, but should not be reduced to escapists or idealist—instead we are dissident vanguards.

1. http://www.dunneandraby.co.uk/content/biography
We have only stepped aside for a moment, but our lives continue to run parallel to those in other geographic locations. New systems of communication are being developed to further extend our open-source network. It is our hope that these documents may serve as a witness to and record of our endeavors.
True Journey is Return

We knew when we arrived at Oasis Link that we could never go back to where we came from. The journey would change us even if we traced our steps back to the beginning. True journey is return. We are redefining our relationship to time and space in this heterotopic reality.

This place was not our home when we arrived. Today it is.

1. General Temporal Theory

"To go was not enough for him, only half enough; he must come back. In such a tendency was already foreshadowed, perhaps, the nature of the immense exploration he was to undertake into the extremes of the comprehensible. He would most likely not have embarked on that years-long enterprise had he not had profound assurance return was possible, even though he himself might not return; that indeed the very nature of the voyage, like a circumnavigation of the globe, implied return. You shall not go down twice to the same river, nor can you go home again. That he knew, indeed it was the basis of his view of the world. Yet from that acceptance of transience he evolved his vast theory, wherein what is most changeable is shown to be fullest of eternity, and your relationship to the river, and the river’s relationship to you and to itself, turns out to be at once more complex and more reassuring than a mere lack of identity. You can go home again, the general temporal theory asserts, so long as you understand that home is a place where you have never been."

—The Dispossessed, Ursula Le Guin
August 13.—We are now ready to start on our way down the Great Unknown. Our boats ride high and buoyant, for their loads are lighter than we could desire. We have but a month’s rations remaining. The sugar has all melted and gone on it’s way down the river, but the lightening of the boats has this advantage: they will ride the waves better.

We have an unknown distance yet to run, an unknown river to explore. What falls there are, we know not; what rocks beset the channel, we know not; what walls rise over the river, we know not. Ah, well! We may conjecture many things.

With eagerness and some anxiety and some misgiving we enter the canyon below and are carried along by the swift river toward Oasis Link.¹

¹ our experience was similar to that of John Wesley Powell as described in The Exploration of the Colorado River and it’s Canyons.
What does the future look like?
A little vocabulary for a big mystery:

In this land of hope and patience, impatience and memory, it is as though a fundamental chasm has for all time separated the spiritual from the material. Here we have a series of tests and prototypes carried out by Oasis Link in our search for new systems of living that hinge on mobility and flexibility. We are looking for physical manifestations of networks, so that we might develop adaptive ways to inhabit this desert valley—we are looking for ways to connect with each other and with this land we call home.

We must imagine the future before we can build it. The following are examples of potential ways of living and investigating where we live.
The Suitkit is a full integration of physical, mental, and lived space. This nomadic living garment links your body and mind to your immediate physical environment.
Car Studio is an experiential method of investigation used for gathering visual samples from a site and bringing them back to Oasis Link.
II. Repurpose

The structure of our lives here is sedimentary. All knowledge we possess and all the materials available to us have been moved from a place of origin to a new place of deposition. Through this process ideas and objects morph, layer, erode, and fracture. We gather these things and repurpose them to fit our needs. Sometimes we learn from the past, sometimes we disregard it, and sometimes the past is so fragmented and worn by the weather that we cannot see it clearly. Regardless, the future cannot be separated from the past—legible or not.
Patterns made using artifacts from digital painting programs. These patterns are reproduced using refurbished analog printers—in this case a Risograph CR1610.
Billboards for the annual spring Agave Harvest and Roast are made by weaving found print artifacts together.

Frames are made from salvaged wood and supported by cinder blocks from the abandoned aluminum processing plant.
II. Reconstruct

History is inquiry. It is knowledge acquired through investigation. How do we pass down a history of things we did not experience directly?

A certain power lies within the act of retelling history. Shifts in perspective help uncover things that may have been missed in the first telling.
These volumes examine the history of five sites in Virginia and West Virginia using material uncovered at the Red Hills Caldera archive.

Records

1 – Seneca Rocks
2 – Yorktown
3 – Hampton
4 – Blue Ridge Tunnel
5 – Culpeper
These histories were reconstructed by the Oasis Link researcher team following years of careful research.

Yorktown, VA
Although these texts are incomplete they offer valuable environmental and cultural insight into these sites.
These texts are an aggregate of a wide range of source material, including audio and video recordings, business memos, legal documents, photographs, and print ephemera.
They are currently on display at the Sun Dome.

PART ONE

The mythic and the mundane.

Where am I?
It stores a petabyte of digital content.
People are eating stacks of pancakes and Virginia ham for breakfast.

Further out of town things get interesting.
I buy some button covers at one of the junk shops.
How much does that sell for?

PART TWO

These three principal problems—
...he expressed a great deal of uneasiness.
One thing that this document does which Mr. Coleman and I feel very strongly about is recognizing the place of the automobile in our society.

Until now, our transportation policy has been like a production of Hamlet without Hamlet.

What are some of our policy priorities?

PART THREE

Japanese Steak House.

There is no way this could ever happen.
It would appear that my boyfriend and I have a secluded table to ourselves when in fact...
It's the architecture of escapism.

But somehow we are still aloof a tunnel.
Is one happy Christmas Target or do 95 at night in a semi truck.

There is no
The Great Firewall investigates information censorship in China in the early part of the twenty-first century.
The recent discovery of an incomplete digital archive from the Museum of Natural History has been used to approximate a number of North American landscapes.
IV.
Stories

History may be our bedrock, but the stories we layer on top define who we are. They are the basis of our new collective consciousness.

We used to tell our stories down by the river, but now the river is dry and our stories are like electricity, flowing in currents above ground.
WHILE ALL THAT LIFE RUSHES PAST YOU
THAT YOU CAN JUST SIT THERE
IN A TAN BUCKET SEAT
WHILE THE WORLD MOVES
IT DOESN'T MAKE A LOT OF SENSE

I WANT TO TELL YOU A STORY
IT'S MOSTLY ABOUT NOT STANDING
STILL
OR
I MEAN NOT STAYING IN ONE PLACE FOR TOO LONG
WHAT I MEAN IS
THIS IS A STORY ABOUT SITTING STILL
WHILE THE WORLD MOVES
IT DOESN'T MAKE A LOT OF SENSE

Presentations occur every Thursday evening at the Sun Dome. These slideshows are made up of fictional narratives based on found snapshots from unknown locations.
What did these buildings from the past mean to the people who once inhabited them? Where are the bricks that were used to build them? Where are the stories?
We have collected and recorded the story of Oasis Link. Some of the voices are our own and some of the voices are borrowed and some of the voices have been stolen. We gather stories so that those who come after will remember us.

Recorded in these volumes are pieces of our everyday lives, conversations, observations, and technologies we have developed. From this we hope to build our future.
off water rarely travels far as a continuous

sheet, for it is broken up into rivulets and streams

by surface irregularities in a rock layer and pressure

...
The Heroines of Oasis Link

We Look Toward You!

These are the guides we have selected to help us in our journey.
“Circulationism is not about the art of making an image, but of postproducing, launching, and accelerating it.”
Mai-Thu Perret is a Swiss artist who has been writing “a multi-disciplinary fiction chronicling the lives of a group of women who move to New Mexico to establish a feminist commune in the desert” for over a decade.

Her work has greatly influenced my own. Early on I read a quote by her which said something along the lines of, there can never be too many imagined utopias, which I used as an entry point into the conversation. I was particularly drawn to her use of an evolving story as a starting point for her work. I wanted to produce a work that grew over time and could manifest in a range of mediums. Perret’s work exists within an art context, but I was interested in adapting and modifying her methodology for use in a graphic design context.

“In any case, my work is an ensemble, more like a symphony than a single voice.”

We Look Toward You, Mai-Thu!
“We are volcanoes. When we women offer our experience as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There are new mountains.”
“Only a spiral galaxy can bring forth new stars perpetually.”
ZL: My interest in reviving the classics (which began in 1995) was sparked by two factors: the sophistication of personal computer technology, and Emigre magazine’s shift towards theory and the subsequent need for text faces to set large bodies of text. Each design gives me the opportunity to study details of classic faces that I’d never fully appreciate or notice through casual observation or usage. For example, working on my Bodoni revival, Filosofia, allowed me to better understand this long-time classic. This kind of scrutiny, in turn, has given me ideas for faces that are not strict revivals, such as Tarzana and Solex.¹

1. www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/reputations-zuzana-licko

The narrative voice of Castalia: Matrix II OT

The collective voice of Oasis Link: Aaux Pro Black

Citation Header: Dead History

Citations Body: Platelet

Matrix was designed by Zuzana Licko in 1985.

Proposes a kind of design that is used as a tool to create not only things but ideas.


The catalog for an exhibition of contemporary speculative graphic design in San Francisco.


A collection of essays that examines technology, politics and the displacement of images and screens.


A book that organizes the leftover research material and speculative proposals from a related project by the author dealing with experimental geography and the private colonization of public spaces.


In his essay, the Death of the Author, Barthes argues that the reader must work to separate an author from his or her text.


A science fiction novel about neighboring planets, one of which is inhabited by capitalists and the other by anarchists.


Proposes a kind of design that is used as a tool to create not only things but ideas


Proposes a kind of design that is used as a tool to create not only things but ideas


Perret, Mai-Thu.
A Swiss artist whose work centers around an ongoing fictional narrative about a group of women who form a feminist commune in the desert.

Ashley, Robert.
An American composer who produced operas for television.

Metahaven
A Dutch design and research studio whose speculative work analyses power structures and investigates new modes of graphic design production.

Benjamin Bratton
A theorists whose research is situated at the intersections of political & social theory, emerging computational media & infrastructure, and interdisciplinary design methodologies.

Andrea Zittel
An artist based in Joshua Tree, California whose work investigates the biological, social, and domestic aspects of life.