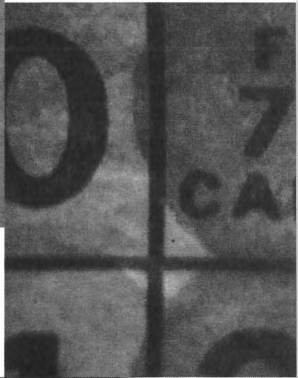


MARK OWENS

READING THE

WRITING AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF
URBAN SPACE IN JEM COHEN'S

LOST BOOK




Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut
Visible Language, 34.1
Owens, 34-55

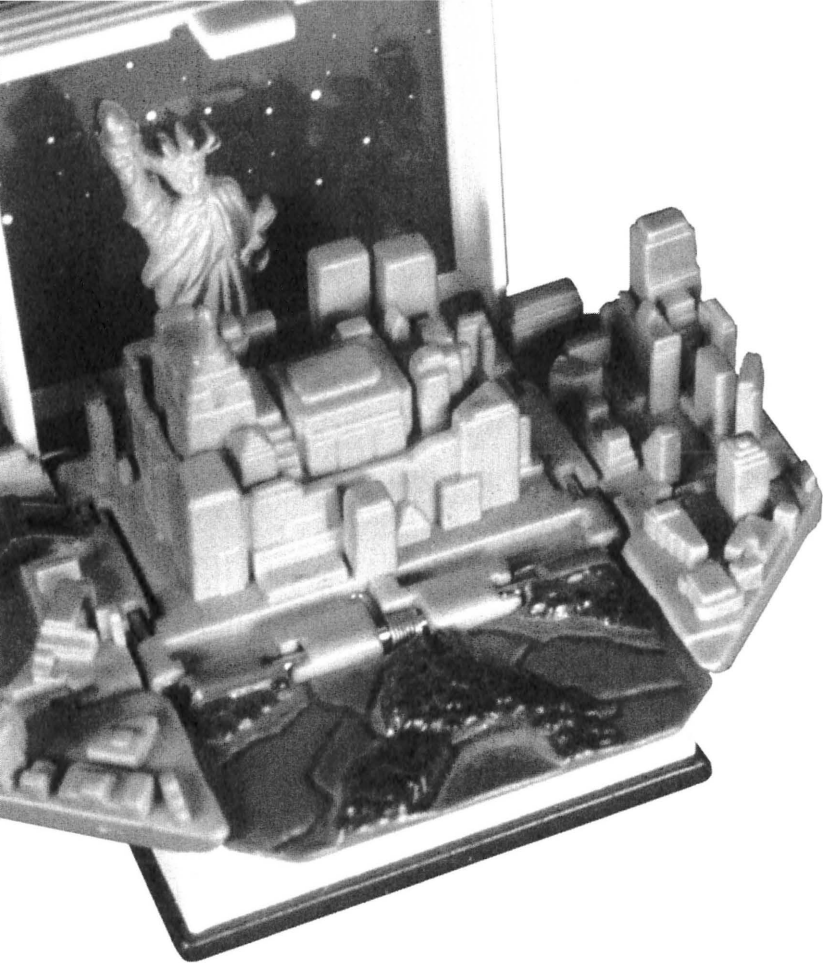
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CITY:

H I G N I D V E R Y
FOUND



This essay takes the short film *LOST BOOK FOUND* (1996) by Brooklyn-based filmmaker Jem Cohen as an exemplary meditation on the materiality of writing in contemporary urban space. The film brings the materiality of the book form and the textuality of the city into contact through the memory of the narrator, who makes frustrated attempts to “read” the city and locate himself in urban space through various forms of writing: handwritten notices and flyers on the street, degraded and palimpsestic typography on the sides of buildings, prices and signs in store windows, various found objects and scraps of paper, blowing garbage tracing patterns on the sidewalk. The essay analyses these scenes of writing with reference to a number of important theorizations of urban space and argues that the film’s attention to sites of low-capital exchange and street-level commerce represents an attempt to map the individual’s relationship to a volatile urban fabric responding to postindustrial modes of investment and exchange that can occasion the rapid refashioning of entire city blocks. So doing, the film seizes on the spatialization of writing and the materiality of the book form as potentially redemptive sites for grasping the urban future and for understanding the city as a text that is ultimately authored by the material practices of those who walk its streets every day.



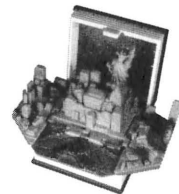
In beginning a discussion of a film that I take to be an exemplary meditation on the materiality of writing in contemporary urban space, it seems appropriate to begin, not simply with a quotation, but with an object. It is a souvenir keychain in the form of a small book titled, *New York Story*, and as the title promises, the tale this particular volume narrates takes in the scope of the entire urban landscape. For, when pressed, a button on the side triggers the spring-loaded cover of the book to open, revealing a model of Manhattan in miniature. Oriented to the south, the model is fronted by the green expanse of Central Park, with the Empire State Building and Twin Towers clearly legible in the cluster of buildings that forms its center, the Statue of Liberty looming larger-than-life in the background. Perhaps amusing enough as a clever piece of kitsch engineering, the keychain also embodies in a particularly condensed form the tension between the desire to grasp the complexity of contemporary urban space as a totality (meant here literally, as a holding in the hand) and the materiality of the book form that structures Brooklyn filmmaker Jem Cohen's remarkable film *LOST BOOK FOUND* (1996).¹

Indeed, the keychain seems fetched from one of the many New York curio shops and discount stores that Cohen documents in such lush detail. Moreover, in its form as a book the keychain resonates with a number of foundational texts in the theorization of contemporary urban space that have drawn parallels between the city and the written text, among them a passage from Henri Lefebvre's *Right to the City*:

The city was and remains object, but not in the way of particular, pliable, and instrumental object: such as a pencil or a sheet of paper. Its objectivity, or 'objectality,' might rather be closer to that of the language which individuals receive before modifying it, or of language (a particular language, the work of a particular society, spoken by particular groups). One could also compare this 'objectality' to that of a cultural reality, such as the written book, instead of the old abstract object of the philosophers or the immediate and everyday object. Moreover, one must take precautions. If I compare the city to a book, to a writing (a semiological system), I do not have the right to forget the aspect of mediation. ... On this book, with this writing, are projected mental and social forms and structures.²

Here, Lefebvre uses the comparison to the written book in order to point up the specifically textual, or linguistic, character of urban space as a socially constructed form. As a souvenir that attempts to conceptualize the city in its totality through an exaggerated miniaturization of urban space through the form of a book, the keychain both embodies this textual understanding of the city and points up its inevitable failure. For, as Susan Stewart has remarked, the souvenir "is by definition always incomplete," standing in a metonymic relation to a now lost, supposedly "authentic" experience.³ Just as the keychain seems to desire to "translate" the city into a book that can be grasped as a whole (from cover-to-cover), so too, *LOST BOOK FOUND* turns to the materiality of writing and the book form in an effort to grasp the disorienting space of the contemporary city as a readable text. Nevertheless, as Cohen's narrator discovers, the fragmentary writing that makes up the city is always inevitably a partial representation of the ever-shifting urban totality,

a jumble of handwritten notices,
decaying signs, and
scraps of paper.



Loosely documentary in format and composed largely of short scenes shot in Super-8 on the streets of New York during a six-year period in the early 1990s, *LOST BOOK FOUND* is semi-autobiographical, a fictionalized account based on Cohen's own experience as a street vendor when he first moved to the city. The film opens with several shots of Manhattan rooftops at night, as we hear the voice of the film's narrator attempting to locate himself in the urban landscape:

High above the city, there are thousands of views like these. I'm looking down from an office building and twenty-six floors below almost all of the executives and secretaries have long since caught their taxis and commuter trains home. I look west, wondering how far over you can see, if it is possible to find Ninth Avenue from any of these office windows. Far away, I hear a sound like the ocean – traffic, I guess. I can't see the west side of the city at all.

The scenes that accompany these remarks are sped-up time lapse images shot from the upper floors of a skyscraper. Figures jitter and move in the windows of adjacent buildings, and traffic lights streak haltingly along the avenue below. As Michel de Certeau has noted in his essay, "Walking in the City," traditionally this kind of view of the city from on high – atop the World Trade Center, in his example – enacts a scopic fantasy, a god's-eye view that would make the complexity of urban space readable in its totality as a "transparent text."⁴ It is the dream, too, of the souvenir keychain, whose exaggerated topography attempts an impossible view of the whole of Manhattan. In opposition to this model, de Certeau insists that the city is actually written in the everyday practices and movements



of city dwellers walking on the streets, those who “follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it.” (93) “The networks of these moving, intersecting writings,” he insists, “compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces.” (93) Similarly, Cohen’s narrator cannot locate himself from the office building window – one of thousands of possible views. His gaze is partial, incomplete, and the remainder of the film thus turns to those who populate the city streets – the push-cart vendor, window shopper and pedestrian – in order to examine the fragmentary urban text as it is written at street-level.

Told in voice-over along with short, primarily black-and-white scenes of push-cart vendors, roughly the first third of the film following the rooftop scenes recalls the narrator’s job ten years prior selling roasted peanuts on Ninth Avenue. The narrator explains that his position behind the cart provided a unique view of the city:

“I discovered that simply by standing behind the cart and selling I had put up both a wall and a window from which I could watch what happened on the street, on the block, on that long corridor of businesses and passersby. And as I became invisible I started to see things that had once been invisible to me.”

Instead of the view from on high, it is this “window” made possible by a kind of street-level commerce that shapes both the narrator’s and filmmaker’s vision of the city. The remark is also accompanied by one of the first of many scenes of writing in the film, a jump-cut close-up of a faded sign painted on the side of an apartment building; a crumbling capital ‘s’ and ‘h’ straddle a window, the remnant of a piece of signage spelling out ‘FISH’ along the length of an entire floor. The scene suggests that the new invisibility made available to the narrator by his job as a push-car vendor includes an awareness of the various forms of writing that make legible changes in urban space over time.



The narrator goes on to describe an encounter with a sidewalk fisher, a man who gathers objects that have fallen through subway gratings, and it is in this figure that what Lefebvre might call the “objectality” of the city finds its most concrete representative in the film. The narrator explains that the sidewalk fisher had “*devised a wide range of systems and instruments for retrieving objects depending on their weight, shape, and how they’d fallen. He could tell a lot about certain metals by their distant appearance in the shadows under the iron gridwork, and he knew a great deal about the city.*” Here Cohen presents a ground-level reader of the urban text, one for whom the city is legible in its discarded, neglected, and lost objects. The narrator goes on to explain that previously the sidewalk fisher had sold other objects, “*scrap metal, clothes, electronics, used books,*” and after asking if he had anything left to trade or sell the street fisher had returned with a peculiar book:

It was a composition notebook full of handwritten listings,

page after page of places, objects, incidents, all having something to do with the city. ... The book wasn't filthy or falling

apart, but you could tell it had been around a long time. It re-

minded me, a little, on the outside, of something from school, maybe a notebook from a science lab. On the inside, it looked

at first like a salesman's records – hundreds of addresses, dates,

and so on. But it was carefully divided into chapters of some kind, and things were grouped with other things for some rea-

son. And some of the groups were given titles or headings. It

was those titles that made the whole thing

strange.



ten listings

The narrator borrows the book and reads it for a day, but decides not to purchase it from the sidewalk fisher. The listings, however, begin to haunt the narrator's memory, and the remainder of the film documents the process through which the categories in the lost book come to shape the narrator's experience of the city over the following ten years.

This experience, as the gestures to de Certeau and Lefebvre have already begun to suggest, is one in which the very space of the city is understood as a shifting, complex scriptive system, both a text to be read and a place of public writing. In this way, the materiality of the lost book – which is only ever glimpsed in the film as a shadowy object, or a blur of handwritten pages – and the textuality of the city are brought into contact through the figure of the narrator, whose frustrated attempts to locate himself in urban space are interrupted by the remembered voice of the book and its listings, dates, times and categorizations. Often these categorizations are heard in the background, or as a voice-over to specific scenes: shots of storefronts, signs in windows, graffiti and litter blowing on the sidewalk. For example, the narrator explains that “*potential versus kinetic energy*’ was written by a listing of hundreds of liquor stores,” and elsewhere the book-voice uses similar categorizations: “*atomic number*” describes prices in a grocery store window; “*conservation of matter*” designates a clearance sale display, “*the alchemist*” a pawn shop, “*Mendel’s Law*” a men’s clothing boutique, and “*the observatory*”

here given





an establishment for off-track betting. Further, as the narrator explains, his attempt to make sense of the categorizations and their relation to the space of the city takes on a specifically textual dimension:

And parts of the book come back in flashes, bits and pieces; sometimes the listing is triggered by reasons I couldn't guess. Certain places, things, incidents, that seem to fit like words in a crossword puzzle with a shape that's always changing, whose subject I was never sure of in the first place."

The categorizations seem to represent attempts to systematize the city's complexity through natural laws and logics, and are used throughout the film to designate various locations of low-capital economic exchange, including informal sidewalk bazaars, discount stores, resale shops and souvenir stands. This yoking of the scientific, the economic and the spatial resonates strongly with another foundational theorization of the modern city, Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life." In this essay Simmel argues that the very discontinuity of life in an urban money economy, its density of sensory phenomena and emotional intensity, gives rise to an increased dependence on quasi-scientific modes of calculation:

The calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money economy corresponds to the idea of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a mathematical formula. It has been money economy which has thus filled the daily life of so many people with weighing, calculating, enumerating, and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms.⁵

As Simmel explains, this predominance of systematization in the metropolis organizes life from the outside, “to the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign human traits and impulses which originally seek to determine the form of life from within.” (328-329) At the same time, however, Simmel finds that the contemporary division of labor into ever-greater specializations, combined with the sheer proximity and density of individuals in the metropolis, necessitates an increased need for self-individuation, leading to “the strangest eccentricities, to specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-distanciation, of caprice, of fastidiousness...” (336) That Cohen’s narrator compares the lost book to “a notebook from a science lab” and “a salesman’s records” locates the materiality of its writing within the scriptive practices of bureaucratization and the division of labor that Simmel delineates, while its idiosyncrasy suggests its function as a signifier of difference. Here, we might also remember that the sidewalk fisher is described as having developed “a wide range of systems and instruments for retrieving objects.” Recalling Lefebvre, this parallel suggests that the narrator’s memory of the book’s lists are informed by a similar desire to understand the city in its “objectality,” as a mysterious system, book or language that might be “read” through its various forms of textuality—objects, notes, signage, graffiti, litter.

This connection between capitalism, textuality and urban space is made more explicit by Cohen’s narrator near the end of the film, when he wonders aloud about the author of the lost book:

Who wrote the lost book? Are there really any laws

and systems, scales, balances? What is the city made of? Sometimes it seems as if the city is the rubble of

stories and memories, layers and layers, and that ob-

jects, all the remnants of things, are like the city’s skin.

Many of these objects, these leavings, are the relics

of commerce, the simple exchange of goods and ser-

vices. Most people spend most of their lives earning ⁴³

a living. One man or woman's loss is another one's gain. Time is money. A man is selling puppets at the corner of 6th Avenue and 40th. It's 1993, and I'm watching from my car. Across the street to my right is a giant clock covered in plastic. Somewhere along the avenue I hear the

*sound
sweeping. of*

At this moment Cohen's narrator begins to reproduce the language of the lost book, recording the precise location and date, even as he questions the very idea of a system that would make sense of the city. But it is the unlocatable sound of sweeping "some-where" on the avenue that nevertheless points to the processes of capitalism and exchange that continue unabated. This understanding of the city as a totality that escapes the perception of the individual, but which is nevertheless somehow legible in the material byproducts of capitalism – what I want to call its "writing," understood in the broadest sense – points to a final series of critical terms that I want to bring to bear on a number of specific scenes of textuality in *LOST BOOK FOUND*. First, in its thematization of the city as a syntactic, scriptive system, the film could be seen to stand as an exploration of contemporary practices of "cognitive mapping." Working from terms developed by Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City*, Fredric Jameson has explained that the practice of cognitive mapping, or the "mental map" of city space that shapes each inhabitant's personal relationship to the urban totality, becomes increasingly difficult to maintain with the expansion, alienation, and constant flux of the contemporary city.⁶ Extrapolating this concept in order to describe the increasingly unmappable relationship of individual experience to the interconnected systems of global capital, Jameson calls for the development of an "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" that would begin to offer tactics for grasping those connections, thereby enabling political praxis and the development of a new sense of collectivity on a global scale.

LOST BOOK FOUND can, I think, be seen to contribute to this larger political enterprise, but in order to do so it is necessary to understand Cohen's own debt to earlier theorizations of modern capitalism and city space. Some clues as to this critical backdrop are offered by Cohen himself, when he describes the process of making the film: "I found connections between the street vendor, [Walter] Benjamin's '*flaneur*,' and my own work as an observer and collector of ephemeral street life."⁷ Also, in the credits to the film Cohen mentions both Benjamin and *The Dialectics of Seeing*, Susan Buck-Morss' book on Benjamin's *Passagen Werk*, or *Arcades Project*.⁸ For Benjamin, the *flaneur*, or the idle walker and observer of the nineteenth-century city was a liminal figure in the development of modern capitalism, someone whose "mode of life still surrounds the approaching desolation of city life with a proprietary lustre" and who occupies an uncertain economic and political position, neither a member of the urban collective, nor fully inscribed within the middle class.⁹ As representative instances of this incipient modernity Benjamin turns to Baudelaire and the Paris Arcades, glass-roofed precursors of the shopping mall, which had become glorified flea markets by the early twentieth century, perfect analogues to the discount stores and clearance sales that Cohen documents in LOST BOOK FOUND.

In his notes for the *Arcades Project* Benjamin seizes on the way in which the fetishized commodity comes to shape Baudelaire's remembered experience of the city. This characterization also resonates with the attention to discarded objects and textual ephemera that structure Cohen's film. Paraphrasing Benjamin, Buck-Morss explains that for Baudelaire:

Experience is 'withered,' a series of 'souvenirs.' 'The 'souvenir' is the schema of the transformation of the commodity into a collector's item.' In Baudelaire's poetry, the experiences of his own inner life are subject to this same fate. ... Baudelaire, 'incomparable as a ponderer,' inventoried the moments of his past life as a clutter of discarded possessions, trying to remember their meaning, trying to find their 'correspondences.'¹⁰



These remarks return us forcefully to the territory of the souvenir keychain with which we began and ramify outward to implicate the specific “New York Story” that *LOST BOOK FOUND* has to tell. Just as Baudelaire is seen to relate to his past experience as a “clutter of discarded possessions” with hidden “correspondences,” in the film the lists and categorizations of the lost book are often heard along with scenes or locations of discarded and outmoded objects and commodities – found items sold on the street, souvenir stalls with wind-up toys spilling onto the sidewalk, discount store window displays, “for rent” and “going out of business” signs. These locations also shape the narrator’s experience of the city and his memories of the lost book, as he remarks:

“The lists, the book memories, seem to be triggered by certain objects and places that have something in common. Perhaps most strongly of all I hear them in the discount stores and [video] arcades, where there isn’t any weather, and the seasons are marked by different kinds of sales.”

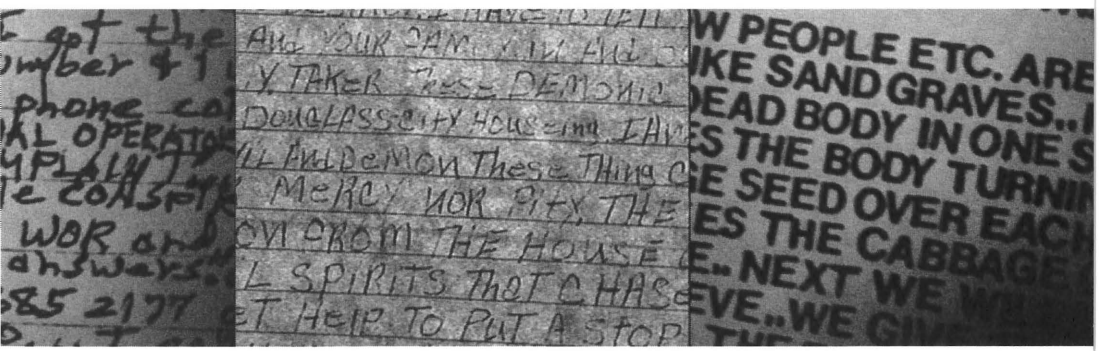
As we have already noted, these street-level spaces are also the locations of many of the scenes of writing in the film. These texts sometimes take the form of flyers that insist on “correspondences” similar to those expressed in the lost book, as the narrator remarks:



There are handmade notices around the city, xeroxes, broadsides, posters. I often see them in front of the main Post Office. A lot of them are religious. Sometimes they're about things that happened to someone, about how the Post Office is holding their checks, or somebody in government has it out for them, detailed connections between agencies, doctors, officials. Others are harder to figure out.

Something about reading clouds for faces and messages, systems of numbers, patents, theories of electricity, science and business schemes. I used to read these broadsides, and whenever I saw handwritten messages I read them too. I might have been looking for clues, or maybe it just got to be a habit."

These scenes of writing locate the lost book within a larger category of urban textuality that seize on urban space as a forum for "disruptive" expression and critique. Conspiracy theories, personal crusades, unhinged metaphysical speculations: all of these forms of writing address a presumed public audience and exhibit a particular discursive impulse, the desire to make connections, to wrest meaning from the flux of urban experience. It is an impulse



that the film's narrator comes to share as he reads the handwritten texts he encounters. In a number of instances these objects bear the material traces of human interaction: a notice reads "Ring the Bell," with a crude "Fuck You" scrawled beneath it; a note reading "Elevator out of service," "Always" inserted between the lines in another hand. In addition, several of these handwritten forms of textuality are explicitly commercial in nature, including marked-up lottery tickets and scratch games, a sign inviting consumers to "Get loose and shop," and a note that reads: "To Mom may you get lots of money Love Kisha."

A final category of texts in the film are architectural, signs on buildings with degraded, palimpsestic, or missing typography, and while these are not obviously forms of public writing in the same sense as the various handwritten messages in the film, they do suggest the way in which the contemporary city is also characterized by rapid, large-scale spatial changes on the level of real estate that contribute centrally to the alienation and dislocation of the individual. This connection is made explicit near the end of the film when Cohen's narrator remarks:

I can't tell why one place feels like another, what ties parts

of the city together. I can't even remember what build-

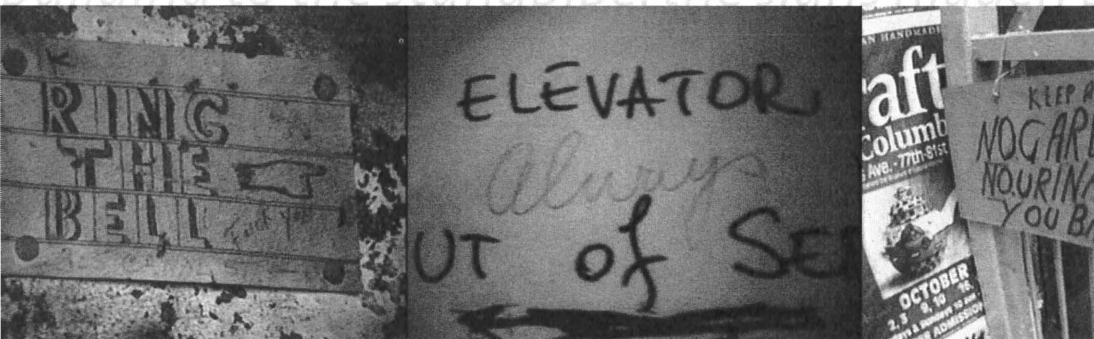
ings used to be here just a month or so ago. I know that

everything can't be important. A business card printed

for one reason and dropped for another, the measured

distance from the building to the standpipe, the signs hid-

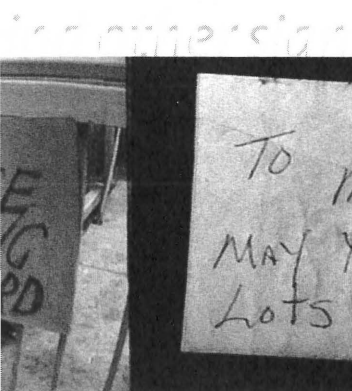
den behind other sign on the sides of buildings.





Here, the shifting textuality of the city is seen to extend in scale from the discarded object – the dropped business card that stands in for all of the textual ‘leavings’ of everyday capitalist exchange – to the buying and selling of urban space itself, a trajectory that could be said to trace the expansion and abstraction of capitalism from modernity to postmodernity, from industrial modes of production rooted in business and manufacture to more abstract modes of production like land speculation, finance, and the stock market.

This trajectory thus brings us back to the question of how *LOST BOOK FOUND*, and specifically its attention to the materiality of writing practices and the book form as a way of grasping the complexity of contemporary urban space, might be seen to contribute to a contemporary aesthetic of cognitive mapping. As Jameson has argued in a recent article, land speculation, along with finance capital, represents one of the most abstract forms of postmodern investment and can be seen to have shaped the massive repurposing of space in New York City over the course of the twentieth century, during which large areas have been converted from manufacturing and small businesses to office space for financial, insurance and real estate companies.¹⁰ While his subject is architecture, and Rockefeller Center in particular, the connection Jameson makes between “the spatial history of New York” and postmodern modes of investment allows us to locate the instances of cognitive mapping in *LOST BOOK FOUND*, both the peculiar taxonomies of the lost book and their effect on the film’s narrator’s experience of city space, within the problematic posed by Jameson’s aesthetic of cognitive mapping. That is, the sense of placelessness and dislocation repeatedly expressed by

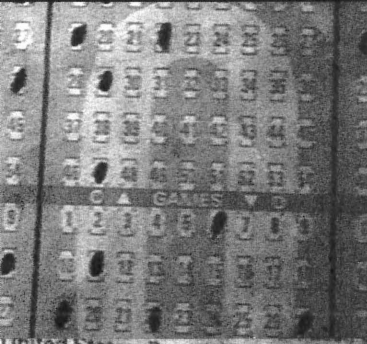


the narrator of *LOST BOOK FOUND* can be seen as a response to the volatility of an urban fabric constantly being reshaped by modes of investment and exchange that can occasion the rapid refashioning of entire city blocks. This phenomena is mentioned when Cohen's narrator recalls returning to the city after a period of absence.

When I moved back there were whole areas I didn't recognize. . . Blocks of buildings had given way to new office towers, but a lot of them were unable to find tenants. It was while I was driving in midtown looking at some of the new buildings that another one of the book's headings came back to me, and that was the phrase, 'Glass is a liquid.'

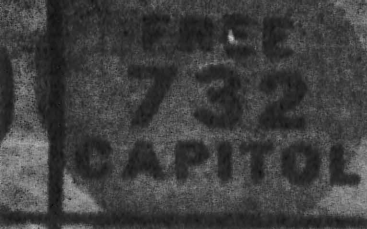
Cohen's narrator repeatedly expresses this sense of exasperation and dislocatedness; he "*can't even remember what buildings used to be here just a month or so ago,*" and remarks that the categories of the lost book "*began to seem more and more useless and crazy, the idea that anyone thought that they could connect so many things, that there was any kind of order.*" But despite this sense of bewilderment, in his attention to the materiality of writing, locations of low-capital exchange and the book form the film's narrator does, I think, begin to suggest something on which an aesthetic of cognitive mapping can find purchase. In the final moments of the film the narrator explains the way in which the remembered categories in the lost book and his subsequent attention to the numerous forms of textuality in the city have forever changed his experience of urban space:

It's ten years since my job as a pushcart vendor. I pass over the streets of the city and I still find myself asking: who wrote the lost book? Sometimes I still hear their voices making lists in my head. I walk into a hallway and see twenty other hallways; one store window becomes fifty store windows; one store for rent, one thousand stores for rent. I look and see a scrap of paper, face down – a weight loss program, a job application, a torn up letter. I keep seeing other pieces of paper, and I have to turn them over, too. I'm riding in an elevator and the numbers keep on going, past the number of floors in the building, past the prices of the discount sale, past the numbers of this week's lottery.



United States, Puerto Rico and the C

Game & State	Lotto Numbers	Bonus Number	DATE
59-66	68-69-74-77-74-76-77-20		
	01-05-09-24-34-35	21	
	18-22-30-41-47-49		
	16-25-34-35-37		
	01-15-16-27-29		4/18/02
	08-14-15-29-29-30		
4-0	01-51-58-59-51-01-75-30		
	07-09-19-28-27-28	14	
	09-10-16-24-31-36		
	20-24-35-39-49-43	30	
	03-05-06-11-12-37		

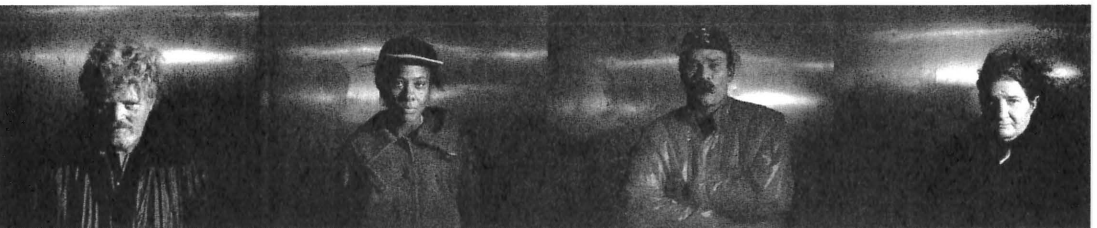


if not precisely a vision of coherence, at this moment Cohen's narrator does articulate a sense of spatial interconnection, a multiplication and condensation – “one store for rent, one thousand stores for rent” – that reverses the “thousands” of partial views available from the office window at the opening of the film. These scraps of paper, flyers, signs, and textual ephemera, like the commodities in the discount sales and sidewalk bazaars that populate the ever-shifting urban landscape, are those “relics of commerce” that form the material texture of our own embattled, post-modern urban spaces, connecting them. What Cohen's narrator describes is a kind of urban hypertext whose reading requires a new kind of exponential thinking, an expansion and proliferation along the material byproducts of postmodern capitalism.

Through the figure of the *flâneur* Benjamin looked to the outmoded, kitsch commodities of urban industrialism at the turn of the century for their residual revolutionary potential, for the way in which they held within their very material form a kind of utopian, collective wish. In the so-called postmodern or post-industrial era of the turn of our own century, in which cybernetic modes of investment and global commerce appear to be displacing more traditional kinds of exchange, Cohen's attention to spaces of street-level commerce seizes on the city both as a space of public writing and as a text that is written by the public.¹¹ The collective potential of this sense of urban textuality is glimpsed, I want to suggest, in the closing moments of the film when Cohen moves from scenes of the city, in which individuals only ever appear as parts of the crowd – either moving past the camera or from behind, gazing into store windows – to a series of thirteen “portraits” shot in front of Madison Square Garden. These images follow the narrator's final question, “Who wrote the *Lost book*?”, and suggest that anyone could have written it. In this way the future of the city, its inevitable, ongoing authorship by those who walk its streets every day, is left an open and enabling question.



It is appropriate, then, that *LOST BOOK FOUND* concludes with a return to the street fisher, who is seen at beginning of the film pulling something up from a subway grating. In the final seconds of the film this object is retrieved and handed to the camera. The camera cuts to a round metal tag with "CABLE NO. N.Y. TEL. CO." inscribed on its surface, lit in the same dim light in which the lost book was glimpsed earlier in the film. It is a nondescript bit of urban detritus whose written surface nevertheless points to its origins in the massive system of global communications networks administered by the New York Telephone Company, better known as Bell Atlantic. The street fisher's open hand is the only gesture out to the viewer in *LOST BOOK FOUND*, and thus might stand in for Cohen's own gesture in making the film. Shot largely in the outmoded medium of Super-8 and available only on video – itself an increasingly endangered medium – the film offers a vision of the postmodern city as an interconnected fabric of transitory texts whose very materiality might help us begin to grasp our relationship as individuals to the infinitely complex spatial dynamics that shape our world.



THE AUTHOR WOULD LIKE TO THANK JEM COHEN FOR HIS SUPPORT OF THIS PROJECT AND PAUL ELLIMAN FOR HIS EXAMPLE.

Mark Owens is a graduate student in the Graphic Design Department at Yale University. This essay is part of an ongoing thesis project exploring writing, space and the city; it is his first publication.

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