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Lev Manovich defines modularity as the quality of a digital object such that it is discrete and inter-changeable within a structure.¹ The familiar cut-and-paste graphic is a common example of this phenomenon, as is the structure that facilitates the entire web, and the various links that constitute its components. Modularity then is more than simply objects inserted into a space, but also describes the method of interaction that objects undergo within space. In the simplest sense modularity allows a kind of technical flatness (from its lack of hierarchy) on and within the already flat space of the two dimensional screen.

The modularity of the palm tree comes naturally to Southern California. The same attributes that enable an environment to accept modules finds an analog model in the Californian desert, and the history of Los Angeles' development. As the emptied desert was filled in a brief period of time by tract developments, the palm tree accompanied these developments. Like heads on pikes, palm trees looked like organic signs indicating that the age of the resort had arrived. As developments proliferated like desert fungus, palms indicated the final domestication of the desert. Like many things in these developments, the palm trees (except for one species, *Washingtonia filifera*) were also not native to California.

Images of palm trees in Southern California appear as early as the nineteenth century, though as Emmet Wimple writes, the palm tree was first proliferated in Southern California by the Spanish missions as early as 1769.² These early palms were a part of the missions taming of the land, including its soon to be 'saved' native inhabitants.

While the missions may have had their own reasons for planting palms, there is also a long history between the palm and evangelists, and with a note of irony, between the palm and conquerors. The conventional iconic value of the palm tree as it relates to Judeo-Christian tradition is both a symbol of victory, as well as a symbol of life.³ For this reason it is interesting to engage Ferdinand Deppe's *Mission San Gabriel* (1832) – a depiction of a group of native Americans beneath a palm tree while a *Californio* stands with his hand on his waist apparently talking to them – as a sign of “civilization.”⁴ The other natives appear to have already gone to the Mission, located in the background (where we see a service in progress before a large crowd). The palm in this case acts in at least three ways: as a formal modeling element (it is documentary), a diegetic element (providing shade for the gathering?), and as a symbol hovering over the native Americans' heads.

As it turns out, the palm trees in Deppe's painting may be rooted in recorded presence: a photograph of the same Mission taken seventy-nine years later by Alvin Langdon Coburn shows at least two palms in the same general space.⁵ This does not change the iconic reference above inasmuch as it reveals the steady development of depicting Southern California with its palms. It is not a verification of the palm trees, but a prompt to ask why the same image – the presentation of a Californian Mission – feels the need to always possess these compositional elements; indeed, on a fundamental level this extends to the representation of California through the imaging of its Missions, including the natural vegetative seeding of the land (not forgetting the plant's non-native status). This trope is not limited to self-representations by Southern Californians. As an illustration by Jon O. Brubaker lauding California's status as a realized Cythera shows,⁶

even on the other side of the continent in New York, California (and not just Southern California) had already firmly planted the palm tree as a symbol of recreation, luxury, and tourism.

Still, the quantity and variety of palm trees encountered today is different from the early nineteenth century, and even from the early twentieth century. The greatest changes can be traced back to a few significant moments, foremost among them being the “[s]ome twenty-five thousand [palm trees that] were planted in honor of the 1932 Olympic games.” Besides complementing the city fathers idea of themselves, at the time the “merchants are said to have favored them because their foliage didn’t block the signs of their shops.”⁷

However, the palm tree was not California’s first or only dendritic symbol: it usurped the orange grove in its rise to fame: “in modern iconology it has replaced the orange tree as the symbol of local promise; unlike the useful citrus groves, which are felt to be victims of ‘progress,’ the decorative, idle palm tree stands for the breaking of that promise.”⁸ Thus the brief history of Southern California’s palm tree presence is one of literally planting, and up/rooting itself in both imagery and upon the landscape. In a word, it is the vegetal manifestation of modularity.

Representations of this modularity are present in a number of California art works. For example, Kirby Kean’s *Night Scene Near Victorville* (1937) is said to picture “the intrusion of cars into the landscape.”⁹ The photograph – a night shot composed of four physical elements, not including the atmosphere – features a car with its headlights on as it drives over the dark outline of the earth. Other elements within this photo (apparently representative of the landscape?) are a palm tree and an electricity

transmission line. These elements are the only things present in the photo; so if the car “intrudes into the landscape” then it must be intruding upon something, though it hardly seems meaningful that it would be either the tower or the palm. In fact, as far as intruders go, both the tower and the palm necessarily precede the car. The palm would either have had to be planted recently, or have been growing there a long while (either way, it was already planted before the car came in to motion); and the electrical tower has obviously been there some time since the wires on it are taut; such things do not happen at the speed of passing traffic (though it is a nice metaphor for the ‘rate of progress’).

However, what is fascinating about this particular photograph is that three significant icons of Southern California are represented in this photograph. The palm tree is accounted for, as is the car; the power line in the desert has everything to do with rise and maintenance of cities and industry (especially in the history of LA); and all three of these things share many of the same symbolic characteristics: the palm as a symbol of success and also of leisure and hence excess as a result of success, the electrical tower as an engineering feat and link between the earth transforming from raw power into human potential, and the automobile as it heralds the mobile, modular, desirable, and semi-autonomy of humanity via the machine. All of the symbolic values these three objects ‘possess’ extend further to the fact that they have been ‘planted’ in California, where they have developed into icons of that physical and conceptual space, so each partakes of excess, production, and motion.

The second work I want to use for highlighting the palm tree’s relational importance to California’s automobile image, and thus partaking of part of the automobile’s attributes, is Robert Frank’s *Covered Car, Long Beach, California* (1956).

Here a parked car covered in a white tarpaulin rests beneath two non-native palm trees. A single-story nondescript, flat-faced office building divides the space behind them, acting as an urban horizon between street and sky. The drab office building, uninteresting and yet supremely functional in its economic design (and therefore ‘plainly’ modernist as a symbol of commerce) complements the automobile as a sign of wealth: the money to buy an automobile precious enough to cover, and the money to become a commuter, thus calling forth California’s mania with the suburban home. The palm trees in this case emphasize the double sign. As McClung observed, the palm trees do not hide the business storefronts, but even more so, they are the organic prototypes for business signs themselves: they stand long, thin, with their palm leaves at top (the sign of their palm-ness), just as eatery or gasoline station signs do – like a Big Boy with his burger aloft. Palm trees, likewise, if they are associated with business, are the proto-Hellenic columns of luxury; the secret selfish goal of capitalist commerce.

Hiroshi Sugimoto’s *Drive-in Theaters* (1993) series in one way reverses the normal arrangement of palm trees centered within images. Here the theater screen itself has been effaced by the film light projected onto it over time, until all that remains is the screen’s glowing surface and the dim but distinct environment surrounding the theater.¹⁰ However, even here the photographs record each theater’s Southern California location, and in almost all of the photos palm trees can be found somewhere at the fringes of the theater’s screen. Thus the palm’s iconic status in Sugimoto’s photos helps to recall from the whitewashed projected space of the theater screens an image of Los Angeles, and therefore the Hollywood production machinery that made it. It also attempts to capture the empty space of projection in the over-exposed blankness of the screen. Sugimoto’s

photographs are the factual documentation of the emptiness of the filmic space, thus also inverting the normal trope of blank space filled with modular objects. The body-less projection on the screen is compartmentalized as the sum of its light, in the middle of the light-writing photograph. The palm tree hides in the ornament of the frame, modular and marginal; if this had been a theater the palm tree would have been the unquestioned dendrils atop some painted-in column. Instead it was planted, and normally swaying in the wind, save for the fact that it, too, is also frozen and painted into the picture frame.

John Baldessari is a good choice to turn to in order to find another example of Southern California's modular palm proliferation. In his composite *Alignment Series: Palm Tree (for Charlemagne)* (1975) the palm tree's growth is dependent on an accumulating composition. That is, on its most superficial level, the composition is about how to make a palm tree through a collage of photographs, and concomitantly, how the palm tree as an icon is the sum of disparate and unequivocal parts. Baldessari's palm tree suggests a personal value because its base begins in the mouth of a clarinet player laying on his back and holding his clarinet vertically as the palm tree rises like a charmed serpent from the transformation of the player's breath. The value of this reading is further supported by the fact that this base constituent photo, the ostensible roots of the palm, is the only black and white photograph of the series of seven. The personal nostalgic value of the black and white photograph (Baldessari's first major photographs were in this medium), not to mention the very first photos themselves, combined with the literal breath (and music) that gives rise to the palm tree already make the palm tree an act of volition, creation, and its documentation. The choice for a palm tree is perhaps both compositional and symbolic. Compositionally, the palm tree is formally well suited

for such an enterprise since it is long, thin, with no branches, and thus easier to form a long line without “pruning” the tree. On the other hand, a redwood might also have worked as well for this purpose, or even a street lamp. Thus the palm tree seems to possess an alternate, if perhaps even unintended value: that no other dendriform fulfills both this formal value and also occurs so frequently (so emblematically) in Southern California. This is an argument of convenience and hardly creative. Still, extrapolating from this crude foundation, the palm tree as the ‘obvious’ choice for this composition then engenders alternate values. For instance, though the palm tree may occur frequently, there is no reason to choose it in a composition that does not need to call attention to place, unless of course, it is more than merely a formal exercise. Baldessari suggests as much in one of his three “concerns” that directed the *Alignment Series*: “The anti-compositional device of focusing on an idea rather than what is visually pleasing....”¹¹ That Baldessari wished the arrangement to be “pleasing” already incorporates and goes beyond facile concepts of the merely formal and compositional. There is then some reason to believe that a sense of identity and continuity exists between the artist as creator of the palm tree, and the palm tree as symbolic of the artist himself.¹² Yet this self is fragmented and distributed. The palm tree’s existence as such depends on the modularity that forms its total constituency. There is no ostensible blank background to build on. The palm tree grows semi-organically. Piece by piece it is grafted together to complete its unity: e pluribus, et cetera.

Piece by piece is exactly how Edward Ruscha formed his not so well-known but remarkable booklet, *A Few Palm Trees* (1971).¹³ Here in a collection of palm trees Ruscha gives an excellent example of modularity. The book begins with the statement:

“Camera facing west on all photos.” This becomes some point of Cardinal certainty. A piece of information that would allow anyone to conceivably duplicate his photographic moment. The point here is that such an indication emphasizes the modularity of any viewer willing to take up the position Ruscha indicates. For instance, a long bushy California Palm, cut out from its original photographed context, but preserved in every frondating detail has as its only designation a lonely address on the facing page. Because the palm tree stands alone on its page facing an address alone on the opposite page, the two lonely objects appear to correspond. The empty words are fulfilled by the decontextualized photograph. The words themselves are non sequitur without an earth to ground them in, and likewise the tree is so isolated it cannot relate to anything beyond its page unless it can somehow latch onto the text, the address, that allows them to regain some minor identity beyond the page; in effect, the palm tree also manages to find some earth to reground itself through the abstract connection to the text. Both text and palm are modular, and both treat the other as a blank space from which meaning can be taken from / rooted in. Finally both text and palm are modular within the context of the white page. The production of the book’s space enables the images to face one another, and from that juxtaposition acquire meaning.

For Mushkin the palm tree is an obvious symbol that evokes Los Angeles space. Like Ruscha’s decontextualized palms and addresses, Mushkin’s palm also resides in the video’s field of vision without any context or indicators of meaning. As if to emphasize its modularity, the palm trunk stands immutably while the palm top and its fronds spin slowly on its axis. The golfers that enter and leave pay no attention to the palm, nor should they, because their play revolves around their own axis: their game and more

particularly, the flagstick. The bicyclist rides by noticing nothing and no one, the chair sits by itself, and the dog – larger than anything else by far, thus disturbing and confounding any sense of perspective – ambles across without regard for anything at all. And why should any of these things relate to one another? Because they share the space? Sharing space is a relation, but necessarily one fixed within a dynamic. Each object on screen follows its own rules because they are all modules inserted into the blankness of the video space. Even the blankness is a textured thing that is scripted upon dead pixels and their zero charge (or the CRT which does or does not fire).

For Mushkin modularity is sublimated into an aesthetic, instead of simply an operating structure. While her piece may have depended on software that was itself modular, and operated on its object in a modular-layered fashion (Manovich uses the example of a Director film, which is a program Mushkin used), the instances of modularity I want to address are the still and moving objects that appear in her installation. The palm tree, the chair, and the flagstick never leave the screen. The chair is the only object that does not move – it is static and sitting – while the palm tree ‘sways’ mechanically and the flagstick is at one point laid on the ground to let some golfers putt. The dog, golfers, cloud, and bicycle all enter and leave at intervals. Yet all of these actors are modular within the video as we see it. The key aesthetic indicator is the background. The soft texture of the park lawn, or golf green, reveals no information except for the objects that appear on top of it. If the objects and their shadows (because we must keep in mind these objects had no shadows until they were endowed with them) were removed what would remain would be a sickly yellow-green mottled backdrop, something you would expect in a portrait photographer’s studio if day-glo were the new

rage. The background has no topographic information and no perspectival indicators for depth of field. Without the objects upon it, the ‘park’ would be totally flat, vertically and horizontally. And it is precisely this utter blankness, the lack of visual cues, that makes every other visual object seem inserted, superficial, even pataphysical.

I have tried to show that modularity is a common element in these various examples, and that it takes form in a supposedly open undeveloped space awaiting some kind of fulfillment. That fulfillment can take place by inserting bodies, or investing ideas – even the idea of an “open” space. The ideas have no natural nor primary claim upon the space. They can be placed, removed, or otherwise altered as necessary. What is necessary however is the recognition that the two aspects are inseparable, each requires the other for its definition. The ease of which these two facets can be determined, over-determined, and exposed is something that Southern California (Los Angeles) seems to excel at beyond other spaces: from a blank space of an unknown frontier, to a palm painted at a Mission, a spinning digital palm tree top, to the denouement of all palm trees: the mobile phone tower ‘disguised’ as a palm tree.[*Fig. 5*] Rather than a true disguise though, the cellular palm (might we call it a mobile?) is the evolution of the palm tree, the next iteration in an interminable line. It literally communicates play, work, and leisure. It is fabricated, synthetic, exotic and still emic to the system of the palm tree already present in Southern California. This is a modular example of the modularity-blankness system that is Southern California.

It is the very desert-ness, perhaps the quality of light, the relative pressure of the atmosphere, and the ceaseless techno-bustle of the world’s fifth largest economy that constructs the Southern California city. There is the historical development of Southern

California cities from arid space to urban sprawl that parallels the settlers' dreams of creating in an empty space a manifestation of their dreams.¹⁴ Building a city on the desert floor is to build from the imagination. It is to put on to the blank space something that is other to it, different from it, an expression upon the face.¹⁵ Yet as an expression its meaning is derived in part from the dependent relation it has to the blank surface. The desert was the *tabula rasa* where 'developers' could construct their desires (from their 'machines of desire'). In this sense Southern California is the very real product of a *utopia* as William McClung argues, and Los Angeles is the paradigm of Southern California as the built landscape. Before it was a landscape it was transformed from a desert. This strictly ideological desert is the same transformation that Vidler notes in spatial relationships from a 'horror vacui' to a 'tabula rasa.'¹⁶ From a space where blankness was dangerous and threatened to consume (through desiccation), to a space where blankness was a fully inscribable 'place,' Los Angeles cum Southern California underwent a process of transformation.

The transformation can be viewed through the changing relationship of the space to its name, but most importantly it should be viewed as a space developed ideologically in order to develop physically. McClung notes that: "Los Angeles, which has developed on so many different scales and at so many different paces, offered plenty of blank canvases upon which futures could be built."¹⁷ Thus Los Angeles is a *utopia* in that it is a construct upon blankness, but as a construct it is still blank itself (its meaning relies on the desert-face-blankness system); furthermore, as a dream-city atop the blank, Los Angeles is the epicenter of (constructed) modularity. If Los Angeles seems *real* juxtaposed to the desert, then one need only remember Baudrillard's comparison between

Los Angeles and Disneyland, where the former is the blank space for the artifice of the latter as it becomes the *real imaginary*. From this it is easy to see how the construct of the blank (and the artifice of its construct: the modular) fabricates its meaning in the counter signification (the *play*) of its modules. Where one needs *presence* it takes presence from its other, describing itself apart from the other as the *absence*. It is the truest form of an ideological binary manifest in space. The desert either is, or it is a vacuum; the city is defined against the desert; Disneyland against Los Angeles; the singular versus the infinite; human presence versus inhuman absence, module atop the blank; inscription on surface; light and space; everything nothing; and when we see the top of the palm tree swaying, we'll know we're back home.

¹ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001; p.30-31.

² Wimple, E. "Image of a City" in *Los Angeles and the Palm Tree*. Los Angeles: ARCO Center for Visual Art, 1984; p.7-8.

³ Uses of the palm as a symbol of victory are already a part of common lexia; consider the OED's definition of palm used figuratively: "Put emblematically for Victory, triumph; supreme honour or excellence, prize; esp. in such phrases as to bear the palm, yield the palm, etc." [from the Oxford English Dictionary Online (<http://dictionary.oed.com>)]. As a symbol of life, consider the numerous Judeo-Christian references, which also reference the synecdochic value of the palm for the oasis, and thus water and life [consider Jesus' triumphant entry fanned by palm fronds as recounted in John 12:12-13, which as a custom apparently is derivative from Roman traditions].

⁴ Cf. Walter Benjamin: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

⁵ Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Giant Palm Trees, California Mission* (1911).

⁶ Jon O. Brubaker, *California: America's Vacation Land* (1930); poster produced by New York Central Lines; cf. Barron, Stephanie. *Made in California: art, image, identity, 1900-2000; exhibition catalog for LACMA*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000. Hereafter Barron 2000.

⁷ McClung, William Alexander. *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; p. 125.

⁸ *ibid.*, 55.

⁹ Bernstein, Sheri. "Contested Eden: 1920-1940" in Barron 2000; p. 122.

¹⁰ cf. Baudrillard: We lived once in a world where the realm of the imaginary was governed by the mirror, by dividing one into two, by theatre, by otherness and alienation. Today that realm is the realm of the screen, of interfaces and duplication, of contiguity and networks. All our machines are screens, and the interactivity of humans has been the replaced by the interactivity of screens. ... That we fall so easily into the screen's coma of the imagination is due to the fact that the screen presents a perpetual void that we are invited to fill. ¹⁰ Baudrillard, Jean. *The Transparency of Evil*. Trans. by James Benedict. New York: Verso, 1993; p. 54-55.

¹¹ Quoted from van Bruggen, Coosje. *John Baldessari; exhibition catalogue from MoCA, Los Angeles*. New York: Rizzoli, 1991; 31.

¹² This line of reasoning seems further supported by Baldessari's recent *Overlap Series: Palms (with cyclist) and pianist* (2000) and *Palm (with cityscape) and climbers*, (2000); not to mention the odd palm tree tops that appear like onlooking Dr. Seuss heads in *Throwing Four Balls in the Air To Get a Square (Best of 36 Tries)* (1974). (cf. Baldessari, John. *John Baldessari; exhibition catalogue from Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea de Trento e Rovereto*. Milano: Skira, 2000; p.120-21.

¹³ Ruscha, Edward. *A Few Palm Trees*. Hollywood: Heavy Industry Publications, 1971.

¹⁴ cf. Calvino's *Le Città Invisibili*.

¹⁵ Cf. Deleuze and Guattari's "Year Zero: Faciality."

¹⁶ Vidler, Anthony. *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press 2000.

¹⁷ McClung, William Alexander. *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press; p.4-5.