...luster, the sheen of things, for example, is the real subject matter of all those compositions of oysters and glasses and wine and silver so familiar in Dutch painting. One might describe the whole effect of this art as an attempt to endow its object with an adjectival skin, so that the half-visual, half substantial glaze we ingest from these pictures by a sixth, coenesthetic sense is no longer a question of surface, no longer “superficial.” As if the painter has succeeded in furnishing that object with some warm name that dizzily seizes us, clings to us, and implicates us in its continuity until we perceive the homogenous texture of a new ideal substance woven from the superlative qualities of all possible matter.

Roland Barthes on Alain Robbe-Grillet
In a sentence this thesis is the production of a compositional system – played out in a series of representational exercises which attempt to reconcile recent advances in digital aesthetics with a specific disciplinary history of formalism and its interpretive mechanisms. In this context, “composition” translates as the formal logics at work in a project that (consciously or unconsciously) precede and determine its execution.¹

The premise of the project is that we are in a moment of formal agnosticism in which cloudy notions of affect and complexity promote obscurantist strategies alienating viewer, object and the process of production from one another in turn. The overwhelming impulse at work in most new brands of digital formalism is predicated on a post-compositional practice of channeling systems/special effects rather than intentionally arranging discrete elements into meaningful organizations; think only of novel tectonics, complex facade patterns and projections, biological and network metaphors, notions of intricacy or entropic formlessness to name just a few trends.

In 1991, Fredric Jameson wrote the following of the then fully-realized, corporate style of Postmodern architecture as it resonated in the young Frank Gehry’s Santa Monica house:

> What this account suggests is nothing quite so much as the alienation of the older phenomenological body (with its right/left, front/back, up/down coordinates) in the outer space of Kubrick’s 2001, with the security of the Newtonian earth withdrawn.²

Writing more specifically about the neo-modernist turn in more contemporary architecture, Hal Foster similarly bemoans the obscurantist strategies of the Light Construction set in the Art-Architecture Complex (2011). Such neo-moderns or architectural minimalists advocate the use of synthetic substances and advanced printing technologies to create painterly surfaces in which effects such as “haze” and “evanescence” reverse the structural clarity of the Miesian glass box; structure and skin become conflated as so many opportunities for optical dissolution. Both of these accounts presume a dialectic of phenomenological grounding vs. an unhappy, alienated consciousness unmoored by the spectacle of black box materials and technologies; a kind of digital sublime:

> ...The result here is that surface tends to overwhelm structure (this is also true, for example, in much “blob” architecture and other buildings that privilege the envelope above all else), or, rather, the two combine in the production of atmosphere and affect. – Rather than resist this condition, this line of thought seems to run, why not make a virtue of it somehow? The argument leads one, as it has led Herzog and de Meuron, to advocate an architecture not merely of surface over space but of the two conflated as “surfaces for projection.”³

Moving back a few decades, what we tend to see in post-war theoretical discourse, is a rift on the compositional axis between the so-called “deep structures” derived from geometric

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A BRIEF THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION (PART I)

PRE-DIGITAL

MATERIALISM
MINIMALISM (SERRA, JUDD)
ARCHITECTURAL PHENOMENOLOGY
GRAVES
KAHN

TEXTUAL COMPOSITIONAL

EMBODIED PERCEPTION

TEXTUAL COMPOSITIONAL

SURFACE / SKIN

VENTURI
MOORE
MEMPHIS GROUP

COMPOSITIONAL PARADIGM (OBJECTS AND THEIR ARRANGEMENTS)

GEOMETRY
EISENMAN
WITTKOWER
ROWE

TEXTUAL COMPOSITIONAL

EMBODIED PERCEPTION

TEXTUAL COMPOSITIONAL

SURFACE / SKIN

VENTURI
MOORE
MEMPHIS GROUP

COMPOSITIONAL PARADIGM (SYSTEMS / EFFECTS AND THEIR MOVEMENTS)

GEOMETRY
FOLDING
DECONSTRUCTIVISM
SINGLE SURFACE
FIELD CONDITIONS

OPTICALITY
COLORFIELD PAINTING
GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY
FRIED
GREENBERG
ROWE/SLUTZKY

ANALYTIC METHODS:

LITERARY / TEXTUAL
COMPOSITIONAL / FORMAL
PHENOMENOLOGICAL
PSYCHOANALYTIC
ICONOGRAPHIC

DIGITAL

MATERIALISM
INTRICACY
NOVEL TECTONICS
MATERIAL COMPUTATION

EMPATHY THEORY
AFFECTION THEORY
MIND INDEPENDENT
COMPLEX SYSTEMS
MATERIAL AGENCY

SURFACE / SKIN
AFFECTIVE-ORNAMENTATION
TATTOO
MESH / MOIRE
BLUR

ANALYTIC METHODS:

AFFECTIVE CRITICISM
PERFORMANCE (SOCIAL,
ECONOMIC, ECOLOGICAL)
PROJECTIVE POTENTIALITIES

A BRIEF THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION (PART I)
A theoretically and historically analogous Post-Modern split in the surface-structure conversation can be traced in sculptural discourse between East Coast Minimalism and the Light and Space movement on the West Coast in the 1970s. Minimalists such as Robert Morris and Richard Serra advanced simple manipulations of platonic geometric forms in space. Their aim was to set-up a phenomenologically authentic, time-based experience of material and shape between perceiving subject and delimited, physical object. Light and Space sculptors (James Turrell, Robert Irwin, Laddie John Dill et al.) shared the Minimalist interest exploring reduced geometric forms and their gestalts. However, these artists departed from Minimalist materialism, by embracing complex, painterly surface conditions involving high-tech, light sensitive chemical finishes, holograms, projections, fluorescent lighting and atmospheric manipulations in and outside of gallery spaces. While geometrically wedded to the Minimalist interest in ideal form, the Light and Space set co-opted Colorfield principles to dissolve the material object into a purely optical condition; effectively erasing the boundaries of thing and viewing subject. Needless to say, Hal Foster’s *Complex* advances the notion that most significant, contemporary digitally-informed architecture is motivated by the innovations of West Coast Minimalism and its assimilation of painterly strategies into sculptural objects; a condition in which designers feel compelled to caricature the fluidity and speed of the market through complex formal essays in light, space, geometry and surface.

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4 Mentioning “deep” structures in a twentieth-century formalist context inevitably calls to mind the depth psychology of Freud and Jung.
What this thesis posits instead, is a generative, formalist compositional system in which painterly surface-effects (informed by digital aesthetics) interact with the geometric lattice of the architectural support. The aim of developing a digitally-inflected surface-support dialectic is not a reactionary attempt to revive anthropocentric notions of spatial organization, but to create a method of rigorously assimilating advances in our collective visual vocabulary into intelligible and intentionally-conceived procedures.

A strategy is put forward, not dissimilar to the Light Construction set, which maps concepts from post-war painting onto architecturally-specific geometric organizations (similar experiments on a controlled sculptural scale can be observed in the totems of Anne Truitt and the shaped canvas-line-color play in Robert Mangold’s later work). Rather than obscuring any deep structures however, such scenarios complicate the ontological status of structure and skin, and the perceptual effects they have on materiality and optically; setting them into active, reciprocal relations. Responding to the fatalistic criticality of Foster and Jameson (where

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architecture can do little more than approximate the achievements of advanced art) the thesis wagers the possibility that digitally-informed surface conditions and democratic, open-ended phenomenological experience are not mutually exclusive. The architectural imperative however, is that one must understand surface and support as two sets of analogous compositional data in the act of forming a design. Only then can intelligible perceptual and hermeneutic complexity result (as opposed to the obscurantist digital fetish for effects like blur, haze, unknowably vast fields, tectonics that seem to defy physics etc.).

The origin of this strategy stems from an outlier phenomenon in the east coast/west coast split in the 60s and 70s where object and spatially-conscious painters such as Frank Stella explored the tension between surface and support that this thesis will extrapolate into architectural composition. Michael Fried’s reading of Stella’s Irregular Polygons for example, suggests that a system of this kind could produce objects in which the graphic and geometric aspects of the form would compel conviction as being equally present in the gestalt of the composition. Surface and support would assert themselves, but neither would be read as either “deep” structure, or superficial applique; a kind of perceptual leveling of the two experiences. It should be obvious in the example of Stella’s Polygons that no knowing viewer would confuse the canvas with the paint or a purely optical moment. This is not a method advocating something like optical camouflage (as in the literal surface complexity of Light Construction). It is instead about setting-up a condition of calculated ambiguity in which the compositional logic begs the question of what is more in the world; a particular surface or its underlying structure?
The passage above outlined the basic theoretical DNA of the project—a broad dialectic with potential for pedagogical application—where what follows is a more singular, idiosyncratic test-case employing a known historical type (the Post-Minimal “complex”) as a formal framework. Poised at the nexus of the art-architecture-landscape axis, the complex is a privileged compositional trope. In the 1970s the complex represented the collapse of architecture, painting, deep history and immediate phenomenological experience. As Lucy Lippard observes in her work on such historically-conscious art of that time, the complex appears as a critical archetype in Jungian dream interpretation as the “temenos”; a symmetrical garden the dreamer constructs for oneself as a protective space in which the conscious mind can confront its unconscious counterpart—deep structures indeed.⑥

For the purpose of this thesis, the complex is re-interpreted as a self-enclosed field condition; a system of objects set into an artificially prepared ground. Ground, in this case (as in much Post-Minimal/Land Art) acts as a painterly condition in low relief; a stage for the interplay of surface, structure, object and optical field. The components of the complex are scaled to human proportions—suggesting furniture, tools, vending machines, small cars, power-boxes, speakers or amplifiers—though no specific use is to be assigned to any one object. While the project is staged within the history of abstraction and its analysis—the placeless floating world of Modernist nonobjective painting often likened to the autonomous compositional space of music—the program of the project might be imagined as a derelict suburban high school athletic field, urban park, rural airfield or highway off-ramp rest stop reclaimed as a park somewhere in the Northeastern region of the United States. As such, the complex may be traversed, but its center is occupied by a central lightbox-object; peripheral viewpoints around its circumference are privileged. The dispersed nature of the compositional algorithm and its concern with painterly problems of surface articulation also encourage aerial perspectives (views from bleacher-seating, nearby towers and aerial photography).

Like the vocabulary of many 3D modeling programs, the grammar of each exercise is built first on logics of point-line-plane and paper-thin surfaces in an idealized representational space. The compositional system underlying the positioning of individual objects within the complex adheres to several rules; an implied grid is the most fundamental structural restraint. A cruciform axis anchored in the central object organizes the overall constellation of elements radiating from its base. Secondary objects (largely grouped in sets of two, four and sixteen) occupy positions at the corners of squares offset from the center. A minor, more provisional class of elements employing scatter operations and projections are sometimes permitted—though they are understood as secondary to the primary logics of the symmetrically organized sets.

Individual elements are spaced in a manner suggestive of game-board layouts, Beckett’s vacant stage sets, athletic formations, tombs, libraries, military obstacle courses, labyrinths or circuit-boards; their literal positions alluding to a perceptual phenomenon in which discrete volumes radiate their own space.⑦ While each isolated moment is faithful to an encompassing, plan-based group-logic, the composition unfolds for the viewer in time as a field of industrial components in part-to-part relations. The objects ostensibly speak to one another in an obscure language meant to be read as a topographic essay in relations between individuals, sets, and interstitial vacancies. However varied the emergent relations within the field, each element within the structure can only be understood via reference to a center. In this sense, one can read an allusion to Wright’s notion of an open, radial, growth-based composition. Grids, symmetries, and a central axis precede the conception of the objects and their positioning within the overarching geometric lattice.

⑦ The notion of ground-as-painterly surface and object-to-object interaction is theorized by Sigfried Giedion as a phenomenon known as “group-design”. Giedion enumerates a number of modernist environments in which figure, ground, landscape and inhabitable structures are treated with uniform surface conditions; thereby assimilating each distinct element into surreal, scaleless, otherworldly microcosms. See: Giedion, Sigfried. Architecture and the phenomena of transition: the three space conceptions in architecture. Harvard University Press, 1971.
Isolated objects organized in sets of two, four, six, eight, and sixteen radiate from the centerpoint.
Compositional Analysis

Object to Object Interactions

Projection Elements

Concentric Growth Patterns

Radial Symmetry

Self Enclosed Field Condition

Implied Grid

Secondary Scatter Conditions

Space Radiating Volumes

System to System Interactions

Concentric Growth Patterns

Radial Symmetry
Implied Grid
Radial Symmetry
Serial Repetition
Implied Grid
Radial Symmetry
Concentric Growth Patterns
Implied Cruciform Centerpoint (Primary Axis)
Lighting Implied Cruciform Centerpoint (Primary Axis)
Greenery Space Radiating Volumes Secondary Scatter
Implied Bounding Square

COMPOSITION V
COMPOSITION VI