

Connie Samaras' *After the American Century* Lisa E. Bloom

Connie Samaras is a photo-based artist who lives and works in Southern California, a part of the world that was once known for its modern freeways, vast infrastructure and world renowned educational system and universities. California from the post-war period until fifteen years ago was a state confidently pointed toward the future, but is now in decline as the country and state are in a deep recession and facing shrinking state and city budgets. Samaras, who has lived in this state through its successes and failures, is interested in futures at a moment when the one she cares for the most is failing.

Her exhibition at UCR/California Museum of Photography focuses not on Los Angeles, the city where she lives, but on another city of the future—Dubai. Cities like Dubai are emerging centers that are often situated within the global network of cities that includes Shanghai, Beijing, Singapore, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Qatar, and Mumbai. Samaras' project on Dubai is one segment of a series that seeks to create a dialogue for an American audience about the places at home and abroad that are most associated with the future in the 21st century at a moment when there is a strong belief in the U.S. that the center of power has shifted outside the West. Dubai is especially interesting to her since it is positioning itself as a gateway between these newly emerging centers of the East and West and as such has become integrated in the global economic system.

Since she titles her series “After the American Century,” her project presupposes that the glory days of American cities like Los Angeles are in the past, and now it is cities situated in geographically extreme environments—Dubai, Las Vegas, and the polar station at Antarctica (the other sites that she focuses on in this series), places that are built in deserts, and on ice that want to make the 21st century their century—that define this era. Samaras is drawn to Dubai in particular since it is quite unique in that it does not have a conventional historical core, or a conventional population make-up. Situated in the desert, it is seemingly a tabula rasa where various urban experiments are being carried out. Yet, a closer examination of Samaras' work reveals that it is not its former presumed emptiness that interests her, but rather how Dubai's urban landscape makes us think in more complex ways about the rapid bubble cycles of neo-liberal capitalism and its market-driven approach to economic and social policies and the ways such approaches have foreclosed and stolen our collective futures.



Her aesthetic approach seeks to activate a science-fiction imagination to interrogate the gap between what we expect to see of Dubai—touristic views that represent the landscape as an urban spectacle that is new, futuristic and decidedly Middle Eastern—and what she found there—a cosmopolitan, corporate-

looking ghost town that had already begun to feel the impact of the global financial downturn. Once promoted in the media as ‘the Oz’ of the Middle East, for Samaras it appears that Dubai is much more than an upstart urban agglomeration that attempts to compete with the established “global cities” of the twenty-first century; for her photographs of Dubai's unfinished skyscrapers in their strangeness will recall to American viewers widely circulated photographs of real estate developments lying empty in American suburbs in Southern California that have been especially devastated due to predatory and speculative lending by the banks, and the tent cities springing up around the U.S. as a consequence of the housing crisis.

Her work is also in dialogue with the present discursive context of Dubai: what concerns her is how this now-modern city is no longer a remote space in the desert but rather a site closely connected to globalized economic and geo-political forces. Her work attempts to symbolically position Dubai in the neo-liberal order of transposable postmodern architecture of new urban megacities. This is evident in her photographs of buildings such as the new Burj Dubai and how it relates to other global developments and the liberalization of foreign direct investment into Dubai. Built by an American company, the Burj Dubai, the world's tallest building for now epitomizes the notion of mega-projects that Dubai is known for, distinguished by superlatives—the tallest, the highest, etc. The Burj Dubai photographed in the downtown area by Samaras both during the day and at night looks like the buildings constructed by similar companies elsewhere in the world and as such situates Dubai within the global network of cities. From her photographs of the Burj Dubai and others it is not always clear what is specific to this place, what is memorable and distinct except the vast monumental scale of many of these building projects and the unfinished nature of this real estate boom in Dubai's downtown area. Her photographs of the Burj Dubai significantly foreground the incomplete construction around the monumental skyscraper in the downtown area, suggesting that Dubai's moment in history may be just another moment in worldwide capitalist bubble cycles.



Though Samaras' photographs of the Burj Dubai suggest that Dubai's built environment is becoming more like other super modern cities transformed to cater to the uncertain forces of capital flows, her images, and the way they are particular to the extremeness of the Dubai landscape, suggest a more complex perspective. Her images gain an otherworldliness when set against the empty desert landscape of the region, as though these structures under construction are unable to make a dent in the earth. Most of these spaces are not yet lived in, and the built environment does not foster a sense of attachment. Like the landscape, the photographed exteriors are empty and deserted and seem of another place and time as in her photograph of a worker's labor camp containing a mosque in Jebel Ali that, with its intense artificial light and shadow, makes it



Address hotel with its large turquoise man-made lake is not meant to indulge us in fantasies of wealth but alter our perceptions of such places by her focus on the workers in small boats in the foreground. The line between reality and appearance, truth and fiction is blurry in her photographs. Some of the alien-looking interiors and exteriors are so unlikely because of the extremeness of their scale, we are unsure if we are viewing photographs of the built environment of an urban spectacle of outlandish riches or just sheer con-artistry since the proportion and the excessive scale of the built environment seems so extreme, creating a dissonance with the discourse of Dubai as a model city of the future.



Samaras' aesthetic strategy combines the everyday with the surreal to visualize a global city in which Dubai on one level becomes like the rest of the world's major cities in terms of its built environment, but at the same time remains an exception and outside of nature due to its seeming artificiality. When she gives us something on a human scale we get labor camps, and groups of blue uniformed Southeast Asian construction workers. The images of construction workers are especially uncanny since it populates these buildings with people that we know would not otherwise occupy them when these extravagant buildings are complete. (over)



above (top to bottom): *Mosque, Workers' Labor Camp, Jebel Ali*, Lightjet print, 38x48" 2009; *Workers Checking Fountain Nozzles at Burj Dubai Lake*, Lightjet print, 38 x 48" 2009; Still from *Magic Planet*, HD video, 2009

middle (top to bottom): *Downtown Burj Dubai, Night*, Lightjet print, 38x48" 2009; *Downtown Burj Dubai, Day*, Lightjet print, 38x48" 2009

far left: *Electric Towers, Dubai Skyline*, Lightjet print, 38x48" 2009

We tend to think of access and inaccessibility, as being invisible, as being written out of spaces such as this one, but in Samaras' alien images, capitalism's "other" (immigrant workers) seems quite legible in this landscape. In this city

of the future distinguished by superlatives, relations of power and property are inscribed in space. By blurring the line between human and machine in her video of Southeast Asian construction workers, Samaras makes us question the segregation and fragmentation of labor to comment on the underside of globalization and how the kind of market logic



of neo-liberalism extends into the realm of labor relationships. Her photographs provide the needed lens of science fiction's imagination to make us aware of the friction between built spaces and spaces under construction, and the relationship between architecture, economic segregation and capital flows.

It is also significant that Samaras presents Dubai as always under construction. For Samaras, its incompleteness is not an indication of failure. Rather, it is over-built, over-expanded—indicative of financial bubbles. It is this aspect of Dubai that links her interest in Dubai with what is happening now to cities in the U.S. It is these similarities, not any particular sense of colonial emptiness or exoticism, that Samaras' photographs underscore. Consequently, her work suggests some important new directions in contemporary art, and, in the process, her work leverages the science-fiction imagination to make us think critically about the place of neo-liberalism in current discussions of space, urban growth and development at a moment when we are contemplating a foreclosed future due to the way failed neo-liberal policies have led to crisis and even misery in the U.S. and elsewhere.



top: Still from *Magic Planet*, HD video

bottom: *Workers, Sheikh Zayed Road*, Lightjet print, 38x48" 2009, Collection of Julie Lazar

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CONNIE SAMARAS

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Connie Samaras is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles. She is also a professor in the Department of Studio Art at UC Irvine. Her photography and video work deals with political geographies in the everyday, the liminal space between fiction and real world, art as historical artifact, speculative landscapes and future imaginaries. She has exhibited extensively and has received numerous awards including a California Community Foundation/Getty Mid Career Artist fellowship (2006), a National Science Foundation Polar Artists and Writers grant (2004), a Los Angeles Cultural Affairs COLA fellowship (2003), and the Adeline Kent Award (2002). The first solo exhibition of "After the American Century" was partially commissioned by the Montalvo Arts Center as part of curator Julie Lazar's series, *Agency: The Work of Artists* (2009). The project was also made possible by funding from the University of California Institute for Research in the Arts and the UC Irvine Council on Research, Computing, and Libraries.

Lisa E. Bloom teaches visual culture, photography, and film at the University of California, San Diego. She is the author of *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), and *Jewish Identities in American Feminist Art: Ghosts of Ethnicity* (Routledge, 2006). Her current book project is tentatively titled: *The Aesthetics of Disappearance: Climate Change, The Polar Regions and the Contemporary Sublime in Contemporary Art*.

cover: *Downtown Burj Dubai, Night*, Lightjet print, 38 x 48" 2009
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