

## BITTER/WEBER: Recent Geographies

Opening Reception: Thursday, March 22, 6-9 pm  
7pm: introduction by Walter Seidl

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opening hours: Tue-Fri 12-6 pm, Sat 11-4 pm

Jeff Derksen

## BITTER/WEBER: Recent Geographies



**Bitter/Weber**  
*Bucharest/Paris#2, 2007*  
1/5, C-Print auf Aluminium kaschirt,  
180x126 cm

**Sabine Bitter** and **Helmut Weber**'s new work captures the paradox of emergent or new urban landscapes that are not newly built, but are made new by social, economic, and urban transformation. These „recent geographies“, as Bitter/Weber designate them, are born out of the fact that cities are at the center of global change. Globalization, for all of its opening of the world and its deepening of national and local connections, focuses its transformational powers on cities, and therefore materializes dramatically in the textures and rhythms of daily life and the production of urban space. The shift subtly caught in Bitter/Weber's work is that „global cities“ are obviously not just the major financial command posts, but that peripheral cities (on the edge of regions but in the orbit of global capital) such as Belgrade and Vancouver, and the periphery of cities themselves (such as the banlieues of Paris and the state-modernist New Belgrade, across the river from the old city) have become „globalized cities“ in new, fascinating, and conflicting ways. These minor cities, if we can call them that, are altered and moulded by the hands of globalization, yet (and not paradoxically) they are cities that are deeply textured in their particular, beautiful, transitional, and complex ways. The urban texture of such cities takes on the layers pressed into them from globalization – and the drastic reworking of the city in the global system – yet the layers of past planning, and the vectors of past ways of living (or „culture“) still resonate in the city space.

To brush up against these global-urban textures, „Recent Geographies“ is comprised of spatially complex photo collages of large-scale postmodern architecture, a video work on the urban plan for Novi Beograd (New Belgrade) devised by **Henri Lefebvre** in 1986, and photographs of architectural interiors of former state buildings in New Belgrade. Drawing from the language of critical urban geography, „Recent Geographies“ is initiated from the understanding that geographies are never terra firma or fixed places, but are sites and events built and rebuilt, constructed and deconstructed, „done and undone“ by citizens who are constantly producing space and social relations through their everyday activities. Yet, at the same time, the event of urban space is also produced by global vectors embedded into everyday life – these vectors carve into urban governmentality, patterns of ownership, and the possible forms of urban democracy and citizenship.



**Bitter/Weber**  
*Belgrade/Los Angeles #4*, 2007  
 1/5, C-Print auf Aluminium kaschiert,  
 180x126 cm

This new integrated body of work begins with images of architecture and urban space from the postmodern aspects of Paris, of downtown Los Angeles, of the state architecture of Romania, and from Canada’s representative postmodern city, Vancouver. Mixing and juxtaposing these images, Bitter and Weber focus on postmodern architecture found in urban territories and economies that are seemingly incompatible: city space planned and produced by socialist Yugoslavia, the social housing on the fringe of Paris which erupted in riot and flames by the socially dispossessed, the highly mediatized urban core of Los Angeles, the grand boulevard of Bucharest, and the Pacific Rim cosmopolitan city of Vancouver.

These urban geographies are in transition, being altered by immense and competing global, national, and local pressures. Yet, these pressures are resisted and reshaped by the citizens who live in globalized cities. Curiously, in these „recent geographies“ of globalization and neoliberal spaces, postmodernism emerges as a style that has crossed very different and even contradictory economies and spaces -- a style that has been called upon to represent very different social and spatial logics and social visions. In one large collage in „Recent Geographies“, a grand boulevard in Bucharest bends seamlessly into the social housing project, Abraxas, by Ricardo Bofill in the banlieues of Paris (a building central in Terry Gilliam’s dystopic film *Brazil* which warned of a grey and administered modernity). In another collage, the Genex Tower, an intensely postmodern gate to postsocialist Belgrade and a former state import-export company, merges into Moshe Safdie’s new public-private library of Vancouver, a building that is itself a postmodern collage of a Roman coliseum, a shopping complex, and library. All of these sites, merged through the camera and digital alteration, are in transition, grappling with the opening of state and city spaces by globalization and its software of administration, neoliberalism.

To catch this complexity as spaces that were relatively stable become hubs and subsidiary engines of globalization, „Recent Geographies“ speculates on postmodernism as a style that is flexible, adaptable, or applicable to particular cityscapes and specific planning and civic intentions. This opens up Fredric Jameson’s famous assertion that postmodernism was more than simply an autonomous style, but is dynamically produced by the economic and social structures of capital and is more properly the „cultural

logic of late capitalism". Bitter/Weber complicate his formulation by showing the structural similarities of postmodern architecture in cities and in architectural projects that have not had such total or shared economies or social logic. Postmodernism, as we see it in „Recent Geographies“, now holds remnants of other logics -- in Romania, in former Yugoslavia, in the social housing of Paris, and in the public-private spaces of Vancouver. Postmodernism then becomes properly historical -- the very process it was defined against—rather than the pastiche of history. Yet, at the same time, postmodernism seems to have returned – despite its damning architectural critiques and its theoretical relegation – as a logic of neoliberal globalization. Why is it the style so often turned to as cities are being remade, being creatively destroyed, as one way of urban life is overlaid with a new one (a new one that often descends from above with little discussion or consultation from citizens). In cities such as Vancouver, there is a postmodern sameness to the new cityscape, a cityscape driven by the logic of real estate that finds its representation in a form of postmodern architecture. But this postmodernism, while linked in some global manner, as „Recent Geographies“ shows, is not identical to the postmodernism in New Belgrade, in Bucharest, or on the volatile peripheries of Paris.



**Bitter/Weber**

*Belgrade #17, 2006*

1/5, Farbfotografie auf Aluminium kaschiert, 33,5x49,4 cm

Along with these reflections on postmodernism's global shape, the video project of „Recent Geographies“ focuses on the urban plan that geographer and urbanist Henri Lefebvre submitted, with a group of architects, for a 1986 competition to redesign the modernist state plan of New Belgrade. Lefebvre's unpublished text, which reiterates his geography of an urbanized and „active citizen“, is read by citizens of Belgrade and New Belgrade in spectacular interiors of large-scale buildings (such as the Sava Center or the Genex Tower), as well as smaller-scale sites like the Hotel Putnik or the Hotel Metropol, a hotel that was formerly used for visiting state dignitaries. This important historical text from Lefebvre contrasts with the emergent context of New Belgrade as it is globalized and drawn into a neoliberal orbit as a city which is being opened to a form of Western investment that does not look for an „active citizen“, but seeks the „shock treatment“ of short-term profit. The video catalyzes Lefebvre's concepts of „the production of space“ and „active citizenship“ to catch New Belgrade as a recent geography in an uneven transition between economic models and social logics – and a city space whose textures are simultaneously modern and postmodern, state and neoliberal, historical and „new.“ As with all of the recent work of Bitter/Weber, notions of architecture and agency, and of citizenship and the spaces of agency are central in „Recent Geographies.“

*Jeff Derksen  
Vienna, 2007*