

J. MAYER H., ETC.

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More than a year after moving from New York to San Francisco, I still found myself unsure about the signage at the Bay Bridge toll. “VALID ETC.” the light blinked, as the exact toll was deducted from my Fast Track device. For my whole life I’d understood “etc.” as the abbreviation for etcetera, so it took some time to realize it was an acronym here, not an abbreviation—even despite the final period—and that it belonged, as an acronym, to an exploding subset of the English language. DIY, LOL, PDA, ETA, KIT (my acquaintance quipped: “Obviously you don’t have kids!”), SPF, STMP, TTYL: every day new acronyms are coined as people race to express things more efficiently, more generically through SMS messaging, email, and rapid-fire speech. An acronym, then, ETC., but for what exactly? Eventually, in order to relax and enjoy the scenery while crossing the Bay, I made my decision: “Exact Toll Collected,” a fitting finale to the sequence of passing through the gate, being scanned, and then authorized to proceed.

In Tokyo for the first time, however, it didn’t take more than a day to rediscover my doubt. The double-decker expressway offered a lane marked with a sign, otherwise incomprehensible, that flashed ETC. Electronic toll collection, I decided, designating the type of lane rather than what happens at the toll gate. And still I don’t know, I’m only guessing, and probably going too far as I speculate that Japan and the West Coast share some sort of dialogue about this that the East Coast doesn’t yet participate in, with its more forthright toll booths that say “Paid \$6.00” or whatever as you zoom past. I don’t know, and probably won’t ever know for sure.

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It was in the early nineties that Jürgen Mayer added an H. to his name and, with that, launched his professional practice. His first, foundational act was to create a kind of a mask, a persona that would become the Jürgen Mayer H., then the J. MAYER H. whose work you see elaborated in the pages of this volume. I remember when he told me that Mayer was too common a name in Germany, like Smith in the US, and that there was a famous artist with whom he didn’t want to be confused. Already Jürgen knew that fame lay ahead and his response, as it would be with so many subsequent projects, was to produce a coded interface, asserting and veiling his own presence and that of his built work. Jürgen Mayer went to work for Jürgen Mayer H., who in turn went to work for J. MAYER H. Change your name before someone says, “Hey, you! I know you!” Then J. MAYER H. went to work: coding and recoding the surfaces of everyday life; indicating and providing a meaningful reflection on the indeterminacy of cultural forms, the slippage one encounters between the “ETC” of here and there, of us and them; and demonstrating the ways in which architecture can either mask or embrace this indeterminacy, or maybe try to do both at the same time by hiding buildings in plain sight.

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Alphabet soup was introduced by Campbell’s in the first few years of the twentieth century. It offered the possibility of creating, then ingesting words by combining letters in a fluid medium. Around the same time, “alphabet soup” became a term, now obscure, that signified linguistic abuse, the articulation of random, free-floating concepts instead of sound,