BALANCE OF POWER
Cynthia Davidson on ReActor

THE RITUALS OF DOMESTICITY have long been a focus for cutting-edge practices in both art and architecture. Examples abound: Architects Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio slyly subverted the politics of gender and labor underpinning household chores in their Bad Press: Housework Series, 1993–98, which included a set of men’s dress shirts pressed into bizarre shapes according to “Instructions for a Dissident Ironing”; artists Arakawa and Madeline Gins literally recalibrated the topography of the domestic landscape in their 2008 Bioscove House (Lifespan Extending Villa), which sought nothing less than to challenge humankind’s acceptance of its own mortality. Over the past ten years, the artists Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley have made a significant contribution to this ongoing and cross-disciplinary inquiry, teaming up to test the relationships between architecture and domestic inhabitation in four performance projects, the most recent of which is ReActor, 2016, a boxcar-like structure balanced on a single column and set on a hilltop at the Omi International Arts Center in Ghent, New York.

Omi, about a two-and-a-half-hour drive north of New York City, is a three-hundred-acre spread of rolling fields for sculpture and architecture installations founded by arts patron Francis Greenburger. ReActor stands in Field 01, a sixty-acre parcel overseen by architect and planner Warren James, whose mandate is to explore the intersection of architecture and sculpture through temporary pavilions, landscape pieces, and experimental constructions that introduce new forms, materials, and ideas. Each work remains in place for two years.

In Omi’s natural setting, the rectilinearity and position of ReActor command the eye. With its flat roof, black structural frame, and long window walls, the forty-four-by-eight-foot rectangle vaguely recalls Philip Johnson’s modernist midcentury Glass House. But if at first it seems to be more building than sculpture, the object is certainly not a typical work of architecture; where Johnson’s seminal vitrine tightly hugs the ground, ReActor is perched on a single concrete column, fifteen feet tall, and is engineered both to rotate in the wind like a giant weather vane and to seesaw up and down.

Movement is at the heart of Schweder and Shelley’s collaboration. They met in 2005 when they were fellows at the American Academy in Rome. Schweder, trained as an architect, was then exploring what he calls “performance architecture,” based on the notion that both spaces and the subjects occupying them are in a constant state of mutability. These investigations included a series of inflatable rooms, such as The Hotel Rehearsal, 2013, a mobile piece composed of a van, a scissor lift, an inflatable room, and guests (in its second iteration, later that year, the work was renamed Rehearsal Space and installed alongside the Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut for two weeks, with Schweder as the guest). When he came to Rome, Shelley, a sculptor, painter, and performance artist, was already known in part for his 2004 performance piece We Have Mice, in which he lived for a month behind and between the walls of Pierogi gallery in Brooklyn to draw attention to the plight of artists in then-gentrifying Williamsburg. His solo practice also involves diagrammatic paintings that investigate the structure of language and narrative. When working together, Schweder and Shelley explore the spatial and social conditions embedded in architecture by occupying forms of their own design. Prior to ReActor, they had performed a series of “social relationship architecture” pieces in which the artist-occupants’ daily routines were determined by their respective relationships to their inhabitable objects, which in turn were complicated by the movement the artists set off in the objects themselves. Both object and subject were, in fact, caught in a conundrum of control.

In a 2009 joint experiment, called Stability, the artists lived for one week in a twenty-five-foot-long open wooden structure suspended from the ceiling at its central point, like a swing. Minimally furnished as a live-work space—the project’s components were listed as “various construction materials, household appliances, two people”—the structure would swing or tip like a seesaw if either man moved from his respective end space toward the center without signaling the other to do the same. In Counterweight Roommate, 2011, the artists built a narrow, thirty-two-foot-tall tower that each could climb or descend only by using the other as a counterweight. This required them to be tethered to the ends of a long rope throughout every activity—sleeping, bathing, eating—of their five-day inhabitation. The final work in the series was In Orbit, 2014, a thirty-foot-diameter circular form—essentially a giant hamster wheel—furnished as a live-work space and suspended from the gallery ceiling. In order to occupy the object

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to dip dramatically toward the ground. This drop also changed the way the wind caught the structure, causing it to rotate faster on its central column. Shelley adjusted his stance to the tilt of the floor plane, then adjusted again when Schweder returned to his own porch, having done nothing but move a few feet inside to open a window.

What is revealed by this game of balance and counterbalance? Does the configuration of an architectural structure, and in this case its movement, influence the relationships of architecture's inhabitants, or is it the other way around? The name Reactor is itself ambiguous. Who is the actor? Who or what is reacting to whom or what? And because it is outdoors, the work also specifically registers the forces of nature. As it drifts in one direction, then back the other way, the object responds to the wind rather than resisting it, making visible an invisible element that architecture is generally built to withstand. As such, Reactor directly addresses the ways in which static architecture is traditionally shaped by dynamic systems—both natural and social—and the ways in which those systems, in turn, may produce architecture that reinforces our expectations for human behavior and habitable form. Schweder and Shelley wear brightly colored jump suits in all of their performances, conjuring sites of incarceration. They seem to be prisoners not only of their physical constructions but also of the social protocols required to maintain domestic harmony. Ironically, though they must occupy their pieces together, their mostly solitary confinement at the edges is what keeps Reactor (and all of their structures) in balance.

When occupying Reactor, both artists keep diaries chronicling their experiences. (They will take up brief residence again May 5–7.) Shelley has written of an evolving relationship with the structure: “My experience

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ReActor is on view at Omi International Arts Center, Ghent, NY, through July 2016.