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Performing Architecture

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rchitecture has always been understood to involve a balance of theory and practice – of ideas and action, preparation and execution – the practice part of the equation traditionally referring to physical buildings. Yet for young architects coming into the profession in the early 1970s from depressed economies in the major capitals of Paris, London and New York, holding high the banners of radical intellectualism, deconstructivist critique of architectural history and social and political activism, the opportunity to apply their thinking to real construction was non-existent. Writing about architecture, teaching, exhibiting and giving presentations at conferences were significant options. Those who taught at the Architectural Association in London, the Institute for Urban Studies and Cooper Union in New York, or UP6 at the Beaux Arts in Paris, among them Rem Koolhaas, Diana Agrest, John Hejduk, Bernard Tschumi and the generation who followed them, including Nigel Coates, Zaha Hadid and Elizabeth Diller, begged off the idea of building altogether. Instead, each honed his or her critical and aesthetic manifestos, applying the deep research and investigative methodologies of their training to reinventing the idea of architecture as a powerful conceptual tool and activist platform. In doing so they established a dramatic reasoning that would inform their buildings at a later date.

DO HO SUH

Rubbing/Loving Project: Company
Housing of Gwangju Theater, 2012.
Commission for Gwangju Biennale.

Not building was also in part a legacy of the radical architecture of 1960s utopianists and provocateurs including Cedric Price, Peter Cook and Ron Herron of Archigram, Super Studio and Archizoom, among many other groups who insisted that cultural criticism be as solid and foundational to contemporary architecture as any design debate. Social and political history, as well as points of view about technology and consumerism, freedom and control, lifestyle and economic reality, drove their parlance. The difference between a building and 'architecture' – between functional shell and futurist delirium – was debated in vibrant drawings, collages and texts in the large-format glossy magazines of the day (*Domus*, *Casabella*, *Architecture and Design*) that announced these visions to a small but expectant community on a regular basis. Similarly, conceptual artists of the 1970s used magazines as their exhibition space for work that investigated the underlying intellectual premises of art-making.

In contrast to these conceptually focused architects, visual artists had actual outlets for their creative visions: a gallery network and art spaces that exhibited their material with an immediacy and urgency that matched their deeply felt call for an art of ideas and stand against the art marketplace. They also had available to them the open-ended possibilities of live performance for realizing their ideas in space, in front of a small but growing audience of followers. In the storefront spaces of downtown New York, in artists' live-in lofts, on the streets, in parking lots, and on landfills along the Hudson River, visual artists were able to execute their cerebral propositions and to experiment on an ongoing basis, continuously expanding and developing the scope of their investigations while assembling new terminologies, techniques and materials. The evolving nature of this inventive work introduced new variables into film, video and photography, as well as into painting and sculpture. It seemed that mini-treatises, written or executed, about the body as material, the psychological quotient of space and the symbiotic relationship between performer and viewer were constantly being extended across different media. It made sense, then, that these concerns might also be something for architects to consider.

Such was the case with Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio who, in the early 1980s when building commissions were scarce, chose to generate performances and installations in the avant-garde art and theatre worlds. Nine performances between 1983 and 1999, including *Civic Plots* and *Jet Lag*, allowed them to explore a number of recurrent obsessions:

how to increase the felt volumes of architecture; how to build structures that mediate the way viewers see them; how to 'stage' a building for visual effect. These performances served not only as life-sized working models for their ideas about architecture, but also provided a laboratory for the concepts that would eventually give their realized buildings their most distinctive qualities.

Diller and Scofidio's approach also served to underline the contrasting methodologies of artist and architect, beginning with how artists think and are trained versus the thinking and training of architects. Even though a single author might generate the first drawing and concept for a new architectural commission, the translation from initial gesture to realization is a long, involved and complex process. Research, preparation, drawing, blueprint and storyboard might take several if not many years to complete, each stage involving numerous people as well as technical and engineering know-how, critical contributions from many experts, attention to the expectations of the client and, of course, the assembly of significant financial resources. For artists, however, no such minutely considered proposals are expected – neither the months or years of accommodating a client, nor such a level of critical feedback and revision along the way. Licence to proceed with a work without permission to construct, after weighing of potentially significant architectural implications, and to execute a piece when and where the artist chooses, is an enviable freedom. Architecturally scaled installations, having as much to do with works that inhabit or redraw the large volumes of a given space, such as those by Michael Beutler, Ann Hamilton, Laura Lima, Danh Vo or Ernesto Neto as well as such 1970s conceptual pioneers as Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham or Gordon Matta-Clark, offer propositions that can just as easily converse with architectural polemics.

For a new generation of architects, producing architectural interventions without the burdens of the profession is an irresistible enticement, and many are now venturing into the domain of the art gallery, museum or sculpture park. Drawn by the dramatic possibilities of temporary installation as well as by the appeal of engaging directly with audiences, and the increasing disposition of audiences towards event-driven cultural activities, a new field of highly visible architectural events – at architecture schools as well as at international architecture and design biennials – is taking shape. Architects, sometimes in collaboration with artists, choreographers or musicians, are expanding the nature and scope of this field,



ALEX SCHWEDER &
WARD SHELLEY

*The Newcomers, 2017.
Commission for Performa 17,
Liberty Plaza, New York.
Photo by Paula Court.*

providing ways to publicly demonstrate experiments that previously would have been confined to the specialized 'crit' of the graduate seminar classroom. How does sound invade the walls of a building? How is it possible to exhibit acoustics, showing the poetic sensibility that informs finished buildings, yet remains invisible to the naked eye? New outlets for such questions expand the relevance of architecture as a humanist discipline, making it accessible in entirely new ways to a public beyond the architectural community. For these performances and installations articulate architectural viewpoints and values in ways that drawings, axonometric projection and models cannot. They demonstrate, visually and viscerally, the nature of architectural learning: headings such as 'spatiotemporality', 'surface', 'time', 'place', 'material' – elements that are part of an essential inventory in the theory phase of architectural practice – can be activated and experienced in reality. Architecture as performance is now a working premise.

That many architects of the first decades of the 21st century are deeply engaged with contemporary art is in part a necessity, as the directors and boards of the contemporary art museums that are being constructed around the globe have come to comprise a new class of demanding and adventurous clients. Ever since the opening of the Guggenheim Bilbao by Frank Gehry in 1997, and Tate Modern – Herzog & de Meuron's remake of a Bankside Power Station – in London in 2000, it is these kinds of 'museums of the future', which anticipate multimedia exhibitions for high-capacity audiences, that architects are being asked to imagine and design. Conversations with curators and artists, and now performers and choreographers, are essential to the process of these architects. Museums as containers for a broad range of cultural activities,

a series of voluble performance spaces in themselves, are being designed with spectacular halls where hundreds may gather, and multi-storeyed artworks are routinely commissioned to fill them. Tech requirements for lighting systems, sprung floors, purpose-built greenrooms and recording, editing and conservation facilities, as well as flexible spaces for dance, music and live performance are changing the look and the function of these buildings. Some have themselves been designed to be in motion, as in Rem Koolhaas' super-flexible renovation of a 19th-century building in Le Marais in Paris for the Lafayette Foundation. A central gallery space on elevator tracks at its core moves up or down to expand or reduce spaces on different levels according to artists' specifications, and their desire for intimate or expansive spaces. Koolhaas conceived the building as an always-changing theatre for art – an intimate place of focus and experimentation that in its variability provides a systematic way to escape architectural stagnation.

Buildings that move, and in so doing question domestic or social landscapes, acting as metaphors for balance and compatibility, routine and unpredictability, are in the ever-expanding domain of Alex Schweder. His re-conceptualization of architecture emphasizes the everyday actions naturally scripted into buildings, and the built environment that we inhabit. 'Performance architecture', as he names the unorthodox temporary structures in which he lives for up to ten days at a time with fellow artist Ward Shelley, provides a way for him to examine the complexity of architectural arguments, and to do so up-close and in conversation with viewers. Outfitted to be lived in, each with a toilet and kitchen as well as sleep and work stations, the unexpected shapes of these constructions – a half-a-metre-wide (2 ft), four-



DILLER SCOFIDIO + RENFRO

Blur (braincoat), 2002.

Photograph of project design.

Commission for Expo.02, Lake Neuchâtel, Switzerland.

storey edifice, an elevated house balanced on a single point that spins in the wind and tilts with the shifting weight of those inside – demand that each person find new behaviours in the process of occupation.

Performance also provides a critical tool for examining the controversies of architecture; to articulate fierce disagreements with relentlessly commercial developments that blatantly ignore the mixed communities around them. Aggressive, expensive, and representing power and might, the towers that high capitalism affords continue to be built regardless of the social and economic distress, homelessness, and the numbers of displaced migrants that mount daily in cities large and small. Some architects question the role of their discipline in acceding to the demands of the ‘one per cent’, and issue proposals for common spaces and the comfort of community as counterpoints to these harsh divisions. With names such as ‘Office for Political Innovation (OPI)’ (Andre Jaque’s office in Madrid and New York), ‘Laboratoire de Architecture, Performance et Sabotage’ (Didier Faustino’s practice in Paris and Berlin) and ‘Office for Subversive Architecture’ (OSA) (a collective network of architects with members in London, Berlin, Vienna and Darmstadt) these activist studios make public their approaches to the hierarchies of architecture through live performance, installations and built structures. OPI, which includes an economist, a sociologist and a journalist on the team, explores the implications of today’s socially indifferent property developments through interactive buildings and the use of various media in installations and houses that are as colourful as they are highly designed platforms for public participation. Faustino invites viewers to fit themselves into his built forms, enacting the shape of Yves Klein’s *Leap into the Void* (*Opus Incertum*, 2008), or climbing a staircase to nowhere (*Stairway to Heaven*, 2001), in works that examine the political and ethical underpinnings of public sites while also reflecting on the relationship of the body to buildings. OSA, by contrast, inserts itself into already existing public spaces to fashion intimate hubs for social engagement (as in *Hoegaarden*, 2005, a grass-covered outdoor pub built into a sidewalk) or to point to the wastefulness of long-standing buildings that seem to have been randomly abandoned or slated for demolition (as in *Accumulator*, 2008, a giant funnel directing rain water into a defunct swimming pool).

Commitment to an architectural process that can straddle politics, economics and crisis management,

treating issues related to health and housing, immigration and community, forms the basis of the Teddy Cruz Studio situated at the border of the United States and Mexico, at the point where the material excesses of San Diego's urban sprawl spill over into the under-served shantytowns of Tijuana. Observing how discarded objects – from traffic cones to car tyres, truck beds, garage doors and prefabricated houses – are recycled from north to south, using the waste of San Diego to create viable structures in the slums of Tijuana, Cruz and his team, 'Cross Border Initiative' (at the University of California in San Diego), including political scientist Fonna Forman, use the creative intelligence that comes of necessity to those living at the border as the foundation for an architecture of inclusion. For Cross Border Initiative, the wall between Mexico and the United States is a site for problem-solving rather than one of policing and instability. Their 'unwalling' activities, as they describe their architectural activism, realized in housing complexes on both sides of the divide, allow people to see each other beyond fences and to participate in the social and economic reorganization necessary for more equitable cities.

Such reimaginings of an architecture 'on the move' arise amid the urgency for instant solutions to alleviate the despair of millions of immigrants and refugees fleeing war zones in many parts of the world. These issues are a high-alert trigger for architects to find design solutions for 'temporary' settlements that are in fact anything but temporary, and that can provide a place of safety and refuge – even the capacity to rekindle fragments of community. In Berlin as in Frankfurt, Jordan and Turkey, architects must consider emergency humanitarian design – 'instant cities' that recognize mobile communities and imagine new architectural and urban structures to accommodate them. They and the municipalities they serve must also consider the necessary conditions for re-inhabiting towns and villages in the countryside, in France as well as England and Germany, from which vast numbers have moved to urban centres, calling for the repopulation of such denuded places by those without home or country.

Mobility between vastly different cultures has allowed Diébédo Francis Kéré, born in the rural village of Gando, Burkina Faso, and trained as an architect in Berlin, to apply the training methods of one to the long-held traditional building methods of the other. This practice of combination has as much to do with the communal belief system instilled in Kéré as a child in a West African settlement as to inventing a new

architecture to suit its climate and economy. In the semi-arid savannah with its oppressive heat, brought by hot and dry Saharan winds, interrupted by a monsoon season with frequent flooding, Kéré built the first primary school in Gando in 2004 as part of his graduating diploma. Together with the men and women of Gando, using local building methods and materials, Kéré constructed a natural air cooling and water preservation system that created a model for ecological and sustainable architecture. Commissioned to design a temporary theatre for Berlin's famous Volksbühne Theater in one of the monumental aeroplane hangars at the old Tempelhof Airport, where more than 8,000 refugees are currently housed, Kéré once again brings his participatory ethos of inclusivity and communal celebration to drive his design: Volksbühne Tempelhof will respond to the many traditions, cultures and languages of those living in housing units on site. A structure that itself 'performs' inside and outside the hangar with its extraordinary ceiling height and massive roller doors, this universal mobile stage will demand radical experimentation from its performers, directors, media technicians and stagehands alike.

Architecture as performance, visceral and experiential, is an overt teaching tool for architects in training as well as for audiences. It underlines the profound implications of architecture, for every building carries within it social and economic realms that seep into their surroundings, even as the structure itself goes some way towards establishing an objective monumental hierarchy. Fraught with their antithesis, permanence, the ephemeral gestures of performance insist on an imaginary architecture as a place of enquiry (intellectual, aesthetic, political), while the poetics of performance space adds a real and relatable vocabulary to the discipline, infinitely expanding the idea of architecture and the kinds of mental, emotional and actual spaces that we can inhabit. Whether they be works of procession by artists or architects such as Arto Lindsay, Francis Alÿs or Bryony Roberts, dance as 'liquid architecture' by choreographers such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Yve Laris Cohen or Gerard & Kelly, or sound installations by Bernard Leitner, Katarzyna Krakowiak or Marina Rosenfeld, the discourse of architecture is exponentially expanded through actions. Space and surface, time and place, data and materials are each reconfigured and reconsidered in entirely new ways through the matrix of the 'live', infinitely enhancing our experience, as well as our knowledge and understanding, of the spaces that we occupy.

ALEX SCHWEDER & WARD SHELLEY

ReActor House, 2016.

Omi International Arts Center, Ghent.

Photo by Richard Barnes.

Architect Alex Schweder and visual artist Ward Shelley use their bodies as tools of balance in their precisely-designed architectural structures. *ReActor* is a precarious home that balances on a 4.5-metre (15 ft) concrete pillar, allowing the house to rotate 360 degrees and tilt depending on the whereabouts of the two inhabitants. Their first piece outdoors, the structure invites the changing weather, of wind or rain, to determine the motion of the elevated house. Wearing red and orange jumpsuits, Schweder and Shelley co-exist in the home's symmetrical, glass-walled interiors for five days, altering the building's orientation and mobility with each movement of their daily routine.

