

# Blow-Up: Architecture + the Technology of Contemporary Art

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## INTRODUCTION

Both the process and product of building have become synonymous with what we call technology. What we call technology includes digital platforms employed to represent and produce buildings, from softwares that visualize architecture in the design phases to softwares that provide virtual environments in which to “draw” architecture by assembling templates of manufacturers’ wares—from windows to “wall types.” Technology is the term we also apply to BIM (Building Information Modeling), used to generate and manage data during a building’s life cycle, and to the products within a building that monitor or collect environmental data, from solar panels to surveillance cameras. What we call technology within contemporary architecture represents what Dalibor Vesely termed an “instrumental point of view,”<sup>1</sup> guided by instrumental thinking which, as the philosopher noted, tends to “impose its hegemony by creating a world that it can fully control.”<sup>2</sup>

This contemporary architectural reading of technology as instrumental, as world-controlling, is far removed from the Greek origins of the word, *techné*, knowledge related to making. If “technology” resides in our instruments, and not in our knowledge, then it is conceivable that the work of the architect can be conducted by virtually anyone engaging with the proper controls: what difference does it make who is plugging in the coordinates? The danger of instrumental thinking is that it reduces architectural practice to a series of specialized strategies or operations that can be done by anyone, opening up the opportunity for the appropriation of those strategies by disciplines not bound by architecture’s discourse

or its history. The benefit of instrumental thinking is that it reduces architectural practice to a series of specialized strategies or operations that can be done by anyone, opening up the opportunity for the appropriation of those strategies by disciplines not bound by architecture’s discourse or its history.

Appropriating the methods of architecture—its strategies and operations—was for artists of the 1960s the most direct method of critiquing the institutions that regulated and controlled art’s economic and cultural value. Cutting, removing, indexing—these operations were a radical turn on the historical relationship between art and architecture, through which art had often been the necessary vehicle, the technology, by which the perception, representation and the making of architecture was transformed. As noted by Sylvia Lavin, “[a]rchitecture’s history of interaction with other mediums is a long and complex story of intimacy, power and control, but it is also a history that has repeatedly played a central role in the discipline’s advancement. From perspective and painting in the fifteenth century to performance art and pneumatics in the 1960s, medium specificity has remained current as a question and architecture has remained projective as a discipline by detouring through medium alterity.”<sup>3</sup> Consider that the development of perspective was heralded in 1425 not by a treatise, but by the painting of two panels by the architect Brunelleschi.<sup>4</sup>

Over the last twenty-five years, art has become more than a technique to embellish or advance architectural form, it has become a site for architecture’s analysis. For, although architecture has always been a *motif* within the visual arts, in in-

creasing numbers, and as if in response to architecture's own willingness to picture itself—a willingness that begins in the Postmodern era—architecture is now the explicit subject of much visual art across media. Consequently, a certain faction of contemporary art can be viewed as a silent compliment to the acknowledged history of the built environment—a non-verbal form of architectural history, a legitimate site of interpretation, criticism, and analysis—and, as this paper will argue, a technology through which architecture is experienced, theorized, historicized and disseminated.

### A BRIEF HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK: CONTEMPORARY ART AS A TECHNOLOGY

If art's historical role is as a technique to embellish or advance architectural form, art's contemporary role is as a technology through which architecture can be momentarily liberated from function and experienced as non-instrumental. This arguably began in the 1960s<sup>5</sup> in the practice of institutional critique, through which architecture's own materials and strategies were appropriated (and transformed), following on the heels of some notable and well-documented chapters within the history of art and architecture's postwar intersection.<sup>6</sup>

As a symbol of the institutional, social and economic power that regulated the value of art, the architecture of galleries and museums was directly targeted in this practice. In Mel Bochner's *Measurement* series (1969), the artist obsessively documented every dimension of available gallery space in order to objectify the room, rather than display art; in his *Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles* (1974) Michael Asher removed a wall to reveal the dealings and interactions of a gallery staff that are normally concealed from view (Fig. 1); and Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* (1963-65) captured and exhibited humidity levels within a gallery by allowing moisture to enter a Plexiglas cube, drawing attention to the danger that the environment of the gallery presents to even the work it is ostensibly designed to exhibit and protect. These works collapsed the distance between critique and architecture, acting, essentially, as frames to "expose the cultural confinement within which artists function...and the impact of its forces upon the meaning and value of art."<sup>7</sup> Bochner, Asher, and Haacke as well as Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Robert Smithson, Mierle Laderman

Ukeles, Gordon Matta-Clark and others, appropriated architectural practices—cutting, removing, measuring, recording and so on—and turned them upon the very technology of surface and structure that architecture provides. Through the frame of art, architecture was revealed as a political agent, a fact that white walls belied. As Buren announced in 1970, "any work presented in that framework [of the Museum] that does not explicitly examine the influence of the framework upon itself, falls into the illusion of self-sufficiency—or idealism. Art, whatever else it may be, is exclusively political. What is called for is the *analysis of formal and cultural limits* (and not one or the other) within which art exists and struggles. These limits are many and of different intensities. Although the prevailing ideology and the associated artists try in every way to *camouflage* them, and although it is too early—the conditions are not met—to blow them up, the time has come to *unveil* them."<sup>8</sup>

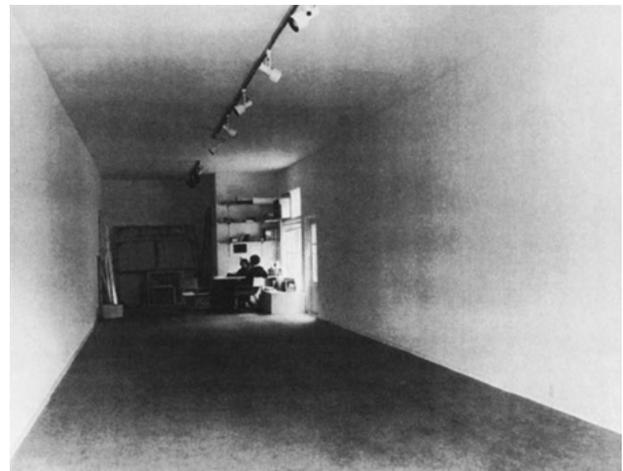


Figure 1. Michael Asher, *Installation at Claire Copley Gallery, Inc. Los Angeles, 1974*. (Photo: Gary Kruger.)

Inevitably, such physical "unveiling" of the duplicity of architecture requires the permission of its institutions. Certainly for Asher, Haacke, Bochner and others, permission for "critique" was granted by the galleries and museums that they targeted. And it is true that most of the art that has been written as evidence of the earliest forms of institutional critique was temporary (and sanctioned)—inhabited briefly and documented dutifully before it was destroyed to make room for the next. One exception persists. In 1976, the architect and theorist Andrew McNair invited Gordon Matta-Clark to participate in



Figure 2. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Window Blowout*, 1976. (Photo Courtesy of © Asian Art Museum.)

the exhibition *Idea as Model* at Peter Eisenman's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in New York City.<sup>9</sup> Matta-Clark showed up with photographs of vandalized windows from Bronx housing projects and an air rifle. As told by Robin Evans: "He wanted to blow out some of the institute's windows and hang pictures in the holes. The curator agreed that he could take out a few panes that were already cracked, but Matta-Clark went ahead and shot out the lot. Next day the glaziers were called and his contribution was repaired into nonexistence before the opening. Eisenman said it was like *Kristallnacht*, missing the point."<sup>10</sup>

To borrow Buren's words, *unveiling* architecture is a temporary act of exposure. Consider Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect* (1975) for the Paris Biennale, enacted upon two 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings that were already slated for demolition. Though the work is said to have problematized the state-led urban renewal project of Les Halles and Beaubourg area, and to have called into question the political role of the state-sponsored Centre Pompidou, it, like the work of Buren, Asher, and Haacke, is an invited critique. An agreement is struck between the artist and the cultural institution that is to be "critiqued," the work is done to the surface of the symbolic architecture, it is photographed, and then it is destroyed soon after the exhibition closes. An "unveiling" exists temporarily within the built environment, and into perpetuity through sanctioned and predicted photographs and films. *Blowing up* architecture, on the other hand, is unpredictable and is permanent—at least momentarily, until the pieces are put together again. Such acts are not celebrated.

One particular photograph of shattered windows in a brick wall, a selection from Matta-Clark's *Window Blowout* (1976) (Fig. 2) series that was to occupy the empty frame of one of the actual broken windows, is oftentimes mistaken as a representation of this event. That Matta-Clark's undocumented and unsanctioned critique upon the building of the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies can be represented by circulating a surrogate—a photograph of the blown-out facade of a building in the Bronx, the symptom of the institution Matta-Clark critiqued by breaking the institute's windows—suggests more than the mere sensationalization of art history. It suggests that just as the image of broken glass in a Bronx façade was intended to replace the actual broken glass in the Institute's façade, this (false) image itself could stand in, enduringly, for an authentic critique—a *blowing up*—that took place fleetingly. And, it suggests that the artists that follow Matta-Clark's 1975 attack on the Institute for Architecture need not enact their critiques upon architecture physically, but that they may choose to engage architectural strategies within the realm that, increasingly, stands in for architecture—the realm of the photograph or the video. It suggests that the time for Buren's *blow ups* has come.

### BLOW-UPS

There is a distinct shift in contemporary art's approach to buildings and the built environment following the 1960s—this work exemplifies art not acting *upon* architecture, but art acting *within* architecture, inhabiting it as it adopts, to disparate ends, architecture's aesthetic principles, methods and strategies. Unable to engage in a direct confrontation with architecture outside of the consensual gallery or museum, contemporary artists have turned from operations such as cutting, removing, and indexing—tactics of unveiling—to tactics of *blowing up*, we might say. Tactics of *blowing up* architecture, while distanced from the physical act of building or unbuilding, are aligned with the architectural processes of either anticipating or recording its presence—processes often embedded deeply in the instruments of the computer, the camera, etc. These operations can be conducted at a remove through the use of digital and new media technologies—the same used often by architecture—including digital video, digital photography, and the technological platforms of the Internet, high definition (HD) displays and high-resolution, large-scale projection.

To wit, Thomas Ruff, Gunther Forg, Candida Hofer, Luisa Lambri, Thomas Demand, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, James Casebere and Jeff Wall are all photographers who have made architecture their subject, complicating the normative understanding of its imaging while at the same time grappling with the particular, perhaps more abstract question of architecture's translation into analogical and digital photographs. Further, such artists understand the power of an image within the discipline of architecture, and thus work within this realm to advance a-historical readings of architectural history—radically revising and rewriting it. *Cremaster 3*, the final installment in Matthew Barney's five-part cinematic series *Cremaster* (1994-2003), narrates a fictitious account of the construction of the Chrysler Building, itself both main character and location for the struggle between Hiram Abiff, the presumed architect of Solomon's Temple (played by the sculptor Richard Serra), and the Entered Apprentice (played by Barney). Drawing on the Masonic myth of Hiram Abiff, whose murder and resurrection are played out in Masonic initiation rites that mirror a candidate's progress through three stages, from Entered Apprentice to Master Mason, Barney simultaneously narrates the construction of the Chrysler Building—in its near-final scenes, the narrative reverses what we know, in truth, to be the final rising of the spire of the Chrysler Building to assume its true and magnificent height, and instead lowers this spire to crush the flawed apprentice.

Barney's film stands in for a trend in which architectural history is wholly revised or, more accurately, revised through the visual arts. Revising architectural history or re-visioning it by engaging in technological platforms that produce and disseminate images contrary to architecture's canon is the aim of two particular projects that will serve as studies of the phenomenon of contemporary art as a technology through which architecture is experienced, theorized, historicized and disseminated anew.

### **L.M.V.D.R./LE BAISER**

On the one hand, 13 excerpts from Thomas Ruff's larger project *l.m.v.d.r.* (1999-2001), published sans explanation in the catalogue for the retrospective exhibition *Mies in Berlin*, shown at MoMA New York, Altes Museum in Berlin, and Fundacion La Caixa in Barcelona between 2001 and 2002. On the other hand, Inigo Manglano-Ovalle's 12-minute video and multimedia installation, *Le Baiser*

(1999), which takes as location Mies' Farnsworth House (Plano, Illinois, 1951).

It is impossible to consider Ruff's *l.m.v.d.r.* series, or any photograph of the eponymous architect's work for that matter, without being reminded that Mies van der Rohe's mid-career transition from war-torn Germany to the United States was heavily buoyed by photography.<sup>11</sup> Existent photographs of the 1947 exhibition *Mies van der Rohe* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York are photographs of photographs of the Barcelona Pavilion, photographs of blown-up sketches for the Resor House, photographs of the photographs of the glass skyscraper model that first appeared in the final issue of the journal *Frühlicht*, edited by Bruno Taut and published in the spring of 1922. The power of the photograph in the career of Mies van der Rohe rivals or outweighs the power of the building.

*l.m.v.d.r.* was initiated by a commission from the Kunstmuseum Krefeld in 1998 and exhibited in part in 2000 at Museum Haus Lange, concurrently with the re-opening of the two Krefeld villas after their extensive renovation. One photograph of this series, *h.e.k. 02* (2000) (Fig. 3), is an elevational photograph of Haus Esters showing the foreground lawn, delimiting brick half-wall and the brick house itself in gray tones, along with the surrounding trees that frame the house. The sky rising behind the trees is an impossible, blemish-free powder-blue, as though retouched for a 1950s era advertisement. Nothing else appears to have been retouched—the lawn has bald patches worn down to dirt, the half-wall has wept sediment in white, chalky traces that run ver-



Figure 3. Thomas Ruff, *h.e.k. 02*, 2000. C-Print 51.18 x 94.49 inches 130 x 240 cm. Edition of 5.

tically against the horizontal banding of the bricks. The architecture is as orthogonal to the picture plane as possible, the whole photograph hovering somewhere between a hand-drafted ideal, and an actual place for human inhabitation.

In this photograph, hanging on a wall and just barely visible through a window of the ever-inferior Haus Esters is Ruff's *h.t.b. 01* (1999), an image of the ever-exalted Tugendhat House. This photograph seems to succinctly echo a statement by Kent Kleinman and Leslie van Duzer: "Haus Lange and Haus Esters did not make Mies van der Rohe famous. One might even say that the two neighboring brick villas in Krefeld, Germany (1927-30) have long been treated as a threat to Mies's legacy: doubly damning evidence first repressed by the architect himself and subsequently repressed by his apologists. The history of this neglect is in its own right revealing, for to make two substantial buildings essentially disappear suggests a remarkable degree of consensus between the architect and his critic."<sup>12</sup> The subject of this photograph is neither Haus Tugendhat nor is it Haus Esters, but rather the tension of a legacy told in photographs, some celebrated and others silenced, until now. Where Matta-Clark's aforementioned and never-realized installation of photographs occupying the gaping, broken openings of the institute's windows is a direct critique of that architecture, Ruff's critique of an equally powerful architectural legacy is quieter, removed from the actual architecture by the medium of photography. Perhaps because of this, it remains intact.

A different method of critique lies in Ruff's *d.p.b. 08* (2000) (Fig. 4). Between the yellow-green of a smooth grass lawn and the course undulations of a dark green vegetative canopy, three bold, white planes sweep in dynamic gesture—perhaps they are speeding past us, or we past them. Cradled within the smeared white planes is a dark, long rectangle somehow bounded by shadow and glass. It was Robin Evans' observation that for every component in the Barcelona Pavilion, there were three planes of reflected symmetry and, further, that even the chrome-clad cruciform columns dissolved into "attenuated smears of light."<sup>13</sup> Such dissolution has been represented here pictorially by Ruff—each pixel seemingly dragged across the picture plane, an effect of extension, of movement, that provides occasion to consider the pavilion as synonymous with the notion of fast-paced modernity that it

symbolized. Ruff's photographs don't merely depict Mies' architecture, they effectively build it anew.



Figure 4. Thomas Ruff, *d.p.b. 08*, 2000. C-Print 51.18 x 70.87 inches, 130 x 180 cm.

If building anew through the digital adjustments of photographs is the work of Thomas Ruff, consider *Le Baiser/The Kiss* (1999) (Fig. 5). Despite the intimacy promised by the title, it is a video starring a custodian who seems entranced by his own activity—methodically cleaning a large pane of glass. His eyes lovingly trace the path of his squeegee, expertly gliding over the surface of the glass, leaving no trace of its path or of the dirt that it removes. A full pan of the camera reveals (to a knowledgeable audience) that this is the west elevation of Mies van der Rohe's 1951 Farnsworth House. The custodian is Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, the artist of both this twelve-minute video, and of the spare vellum-screen and aluminum-frame installation upon which it is projected. Whatever else takes place in this video seems second-

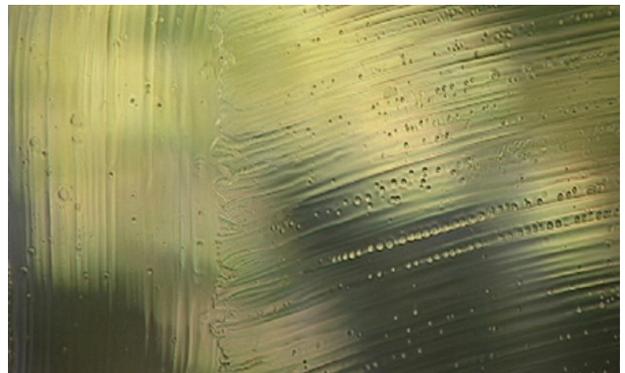


Figure 5. Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, *Le Baiser/The Kiss*, 1999. Video still /detail.

ary to the task of washing and lavishly re-washing the glass wall—there is, in fact, a second character, a woman inside the glass house who stands at a turntable, wearing headphones and dutifully ignoring the ritual in front of her.

Reflecting on the anecdote that the artist learned to wash the glass by filling in for the window washer bi-weekly<sup>14</sup> is a reminder that cleaning glass is a physical act that is required for glass to maintain its invisibility, a hand-crafted dissolution of maintenance that aligns with all of the hand-crafted dissolutions of architecture that made building the Farnsworth House possible. As told by Michael Cadwell, the plug welding that gave the house its familiar elevation—vertical steel members sliding past horizontal steel members, the appearance of structure held in place by magnetic attraction—required “a high degree of craft, yet each operation disappears into the next. The mechanical craft of the seated connection disappears with the industrial craft of welding, the industrial craft of welding disappears with the handcraft of sanding, and the handcraft of sanding disappears with its own operation. There is no glorification of technology in this curious sequence, just as there is no remnant of craft.”<sup>15</sup> Cadwell’s observations, as performed by the artist, are embedded in Mies’ architecture, if only for a moment upon the glass, but for a longer duration in the playing and re-playing of this video at various galleries and museums. In Manglano-Ovalle’s work, again we have an artist making an elevational portrait of a modern architecture, again it is Miesian, and again, the portrait subverts. Even the interior depicted through the glass wall that Manglano-Ovalle washes is not Mies’ Farnsworth House, nor is it Edith Farnsworth’s—it is Lord Peter Palumbo’s Farnsworth House, full of all the tchotchkes that he collected and maintained in the glass house—countless figurines of globes and airplanes, so many so that the desk, covered with these objects, is purposefully concealed behind the curtain, hidden from view during the performance for the camera.

Ruff’s *l.m.v.d.r.* photographs, and the record of Manglano-Ovalle’s performance *Le Baiser*—both made possible by the technologies of digital imaging platforms, from software to video cameras—have been distributed widely, joining and necessarily complicating an entire architectural history long dependent on photographs. The question of whether these photographs will endure, and if that en-

durance will allow them a position within the larger trajectory of architectural history and theory, or the legacy of Mies van der Rohe, remains to be seen.

## IN CONCLUSION

Arata Isozaki has observed that “architecture is the name of the mechanism through which the metaphysics that ground Western thought inevitably came into existence.”<sup>16</sup> Contemporary art has become a technology to expose, critique, complicate, historicize and theorize that mechanism anew. With the use of advancements in digital technologies available to contemporary artists, the media saturated and media driven culture of the architect is now wide open for appropriation, alteration and revising. Interventions upon the built environment must no longer take place upon them, as was required of the institutional critiques of the 1960s. In contemporary art, through the means of digital production and presentation technologies, such critiques and revisions take place virtually upon the surface of architecture, blow-ups that multiply the possibilities of critique and re-write history such that one can only imagine, in fifty years, the cacophony of architectural history, theory and discourse as these ‘outside’ voices enter into dialogue with architecture. As Paul Pfeiffer has noted of our contemporary relationship to technology—it is not instrumental, it is not separated from us, it is, rather, already deep inside of us. The technology of contemporary art is already deep inside architecture, transforming, bending, interpreting and building it anew. This technology is out of our hands.

## ENDNOTES

1 Dalibor Vesely, “Architecture and the Question of Technology,” in *Architecture, Ethics, and Technology*, ed. Louise Pelletier and Alberto Perez-Gomez, (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1994), 44.

2 *ibid.*

3 Sylvia Lavin, *Kissing Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 35-36.

4 John White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967). On the first and smaller panel is painted the Baptistery. The sky above is painted with burnished silver and a conical hole is drilled through it such that it expands from the size of a lentil bean on the painted side to the size of a ducat on the unpainted backside. A viewer was invited to stand behind the work at a fixed spot located across from the Baptistery. His eye against the panel’s unpainted backside, he would see the Baptistery. However, when, say, Brunelleschi extended a mirror in front of the viewer, the painting of the Baptistery was reflected in a stunning representation of reality. As noted by

Isabelle Loring Wallace in the essay *N-O-W-H-E-R-E*: what Antonio Manetti doesn't describe in his biography of the architect is the inevitable and visually confusing phenomenon of the conflation of this perfect perspectival painting with the *real* buildings and *real* sky that would also be reflected in the mirror.

5 Often referenced is Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site-Specificity," *October* 80 (1997): 85-110.

6 Although art and architecture are inherently spatial enterprises, there is a way in which the interest of postwar art in the explicitly spatial art of architecture aligns with what Edward W. Soja has called the "spatial turn." See Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989). For an interdisciplinary perspective, see *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Barney Warf and Santa Arias, eds. (London & New York: Routledge, 2009).

7 Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site-Specificity," *October* 80 (1997): 89.

8 *ibid*, 88.

9 <http://htcexperiments.org/2008/09/17/project-05-architectural-criticism-in-baltimore-2004/>

10 Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast: Architecture and its Three Geometries* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 90.

11 For his observations, the authors are indebted to the research of Martin Soberg.

12 Kent Kleinman and Leslie Van Duzer, *Mies van der Rohe: The Krefeld Villa* (Princeton: Princeton Architecture Press, 2005), 12.

13 Robin Evans, "Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries," in *Translations from Drawing to Building* (London: Architectural Association Publications, 1997), 241.

14 <http://bombsite.com/issues/72/articles/2318>

15 Michael Cadwell, "Flooded at the Farnsworth House," in *Strange Details* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 113.

16 Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money*, ed. Michael Speaks, trans. Sabu Kohso (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), viii.

