

# Dissipated Scandals: Architecture and the Edge

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There is not one avant-garde "today" but ten avant gardes.

1. The avant-garde of dissipated scandals.
2. The avant-garde of less than nothing.
3. The avant-garde of cemeteries.
4. The avant-garde of almost complete blindness.
5. The avant-garde of colorful French Bohemians at the turn of the century.
6. The avant-garde of simian vulgarity.
7. The avant-garde of endless lies tantamount to significance.
8. The avant-garde of vicious circles, logical illusions, tautologies, obvious contradictions.
9. The avant-garde of the Kitsch of the recent past.
10. The avant-garde of almost complete blindness.

— Robert Smithson, 1966<sup>1</sup>

It may seem that the avant-garde has been debunked by the likes of Manfredo Tafuri from within architecture and, more generally, by a critical generation extending from Renato Poggioli to Hal Foster, with Benjamin's angel hovering over any attempts at revival. Despite all obituaries, the concept flourishes as a posture and ratifies a changing spectrum of architectural forms. In many ways this is a healthy condition. As with fashion, in support of which I will also make an argument, the avant-garde propels architectural investigation and motivates a discipline which can otherwise stagnate, given its anachronistic criteria, and tend toward conservatism, due to its dependence on capital and its alarm concerning its own future. But paradoxes must be recognized and parlor revolutions identified as such. The inclination to direct progressive energy toward superficial and temporally vulnerable imagery should also be remarked upon.

Despite a thirty-year devaluation of the concept of the radical, traditional avant-garde formats are intrinsically identified with new fields of activity in many disciplines. A counterpoint to accepted understandings of work or study locates new critical sites and requires new critical methods. It also promises relief both from the accumulated discursive mechanisms that accompany the conventional and from the power structures that define those mechanisms. However, since the 1960s, the simple label of *alternative* has automatically ratified, for those who wish it, the cutting-edge nature of their work.

Propelled by economy and ideology, architecture has diversified, expanding into new territories, and finding there new ways to view what is already done and what may occur. Architects are, by necessity, redefining their roles in cultural production. Addressing young practitioners, recent issues of trade magazines describe more women and men pursuing some related occupation than those who are following established vocational routes.<sup>2</sup> Other ways are found by a generation for whom traditional architectural work is precluded,

either by a glut of talent or by an inability to bear the drudgery that awaits interns entering the profession. To exhaustively chart these other routes would be impossible here. Suffice it to say, many step away from architecture while seeking shelter beneath its spread mantle. It has been typical of the historical avant-garde to both flaunt and insist on the support of convention. Like the *faubourg*, the community that lies just beyond the city walls, exempt from its rigid laws while deriving protection and patronage, the avant-garde tends to expect that the accepted culture that it claims to transcend will provide systems of display, publication, academic sanction and financing. In architecture such residual dependence is perhaps the greatest problem for what should otherwise be seen as a process that will expand the scope of a diminishing trade, a process that may actually take back several of the fields of endeavor that trade has willfully given up.

The discussion here, the general points of which should pertain to other acts of disciplinary border-crossing, will concentrate on alternative work that places itself on the glittering cutting-edge, pushing away from an orthodox interpretation of architecture toward related fields that have special *cachet* in current discourse. Some faubourg practices in architecture emulate certain of the visual arts, where an avant-garde that is nearing extinction in traditional fields, like painting and sculpture, has found refuge in new methods. Architecture has regularly taken its cues from the arts, searching, in culture's most critical medium, for a forum for its theories and imagery. This quest has been encouraged by the representational possibilities, however superficial, offered by the computer.<sup>4</sup> While disciplinary expansion is beneficial in a field that badly needs new turf, some architectural work has strayed so far in this direction as to provoke the charge, from conservative elements, that it has lost connection.

Outside the architectural community in which Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio find most of their following, they join many installation artists. D+S's work evolves from Marcel Duchamp and a host of his offspring moving through Dada, the Situationists and Fluxus, and the "happenings" of the '60s on one hand, through Ernst, Schwitters, Tinguely along another axis, and Lissitzky and Agit-Prop along a third. D+S's installations parallel the recent experiments of Rebecca Horn, Vito Acconci, Louise Bourgeois, Ed Kienholz — and the shock of Damian Hurst or Kiki Smith — to mention a few of the "lounge lizards of the apocalypse" who have made the sort of work executed by Diller + Scofidio both the most emphatic and the most ubiquitous of current art strategies. Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, David Hammons, Hans Haacke, Chris Burden, to name a few of the best, are Diller + Scofidio's contemporaries or immediate predecessors in this particular arena.<sup>6</sup> Their writings emulate Paul Virilio and literary artists like Barbara Kruger, and show the pervasive influence of Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New*

York, delighting in post-structuralist contradiction and word-play. A very rich genealogy precedes D+S.

Almost a century after the *Bride Stripped Bare* and her extraordinary siblings, international art shows are dominated by installations. Such a glutted and nostalgic market demands exceptional concept and execution of those who enter it. What continues to underwrite the best of this work in the arts, like that of Haacke or Hammons, are formats that derive from a classic definition of the avant-garde: insistent censure of bourgeois culture, the impression of novelty, the redefinition of predictable objects or activities, jarring juxtapositions, varying degrees of code transgression, multiple readings producing a graying of the signified to the point of provocation, and an insistence on the dominance of the sublime. All these are cardinal to the work of Diller + Scofidio. Diller herself seems to state such objectives in defense of Peter Eisenman "The difficulty of undermining the very structures that provide a forum for an argument to be staged is a paradox particular to architecture....Particular formalisms (the category cannot be thought of as monolithic) stake out extrarepresentational arguments — ones lodged principally through the production of spaces that engender ideological special effects: instability, anxiety, doubt."<sup>7</sup> If their architecture is only "critical" however, then a dilemma emerges, since the work is perceived as marginal while insisting that its marginality is its justification. It seems better to view this work in relation to the art from which it is derived. Then it can be seen as theory embodied, form about form, hardened words whose topic is architecture.

At the 1996 Venice Biennale of Architecture, Diller + Scofidio looked good. Their inclusion, a polished overlay of text and pressed shirts that could be dated precisely by its play on folding and ironing, on Deleuze and domesticity, was more at home in the show than the other architect's portfolios. What allowed them to make a strong appearance at the Biennale, and at the MoMA or in advanced architecture journals, is undeniable cleverness, a medium that is meant for exhibition, a sensitivity to the pulse of cultural change, the possibility that they really are the best architects in this ethereal arena, and an undeniable professionalism about presentation of themselves as well as their art. This is an important element of their activity in lecture hall or gallery. As Richard Hamilton wrote in the 1960s "the act of mythmaking has been transferred from the subject-matter of the work through the artist himself as the content of his art."<sup>8</sup> But there are also problems with this work. First is an insistent novelty<sup>9</sup> that can only be confirmed within the same confines of architecture that D+S appear to be breaking. Perhaps because its authors are architects, it can be *too* designed. Since it contends it is *about* architecture, it must be perpetually critical to invoke the canon that would ratify it, a canon that the work's slick aesthetics sometimes challenge. Given that all progressive work in this century of Modernism must be first understood in relation to the sublime, D+S's often contradicts through its beauty. The stance taken is ambiguous despite the immediate impact of the forms — the enigmatic overlays of text and lurid or distorted images.

The prolific display and publication of the Slow House, the only building Diller + Scofidio have presented in recent years, makes the difficult argument that the authors are simultaneously practitioners and above the prosaic considerations of practice. In presentation of this project there always appears a photograph of this building under construction. The image is not captioned in *Flesh* or in the exhibition *New Territories* that was inaugurated last year at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Barcelona, nor was it explained by either author when the project was minutely presented in two lectures I attended. It just appears: tangible and promising. The MACBA assigned a photographer to document the completed building and only then discovered that the project had been stopped after foundation work. The authors do not reveal, or revel in, this fact. Any radical should rejoice in the destruction of a project perceived as too extreme to complete, but Diller and Scofidio are architects, and they perform on a stage of staid teaching institutions and address an equally

conservative clientele of other architects who must applaud their work. They may wish to be perceived as both builders and iconoclasts, real and surreal. But a paradox that haunts the arts generally is repeated, in the simultaneous desire for the edge and the mainstream, a desire somewhat more powerful in architecture due to the enormous investment involved and the conservatism that accompanies such economics. Progressivism is denied at the moment it is promoted.

Hal Foster writes, "Since the middle 1970's critical theory has served as a secret continuation of modernism by other means...So too, critical theory has served as a secret continuation of the avant-garde by other means."<sup>10</sup> Bothered by many of the problems already described, architectural theory is another alternative field, one that finds legitimacy by afaubourg association with academic rather than practical institutions. Though the range of theory is as broad as the many forces that play on architecture, the strongest voices often turn to topics from outside our already catholic practice. These cross-overs contribute significantly, although some are predictably self-indulgent. All should make reference, at least tangentially, to architecture. Most show some damage inflicted in the fragile realm of ideas by the constant dismissal and appropriation of terms and topics for the sake of currency. Pushing the envelope does not automatically imbue value. Cleverness for its own sake, denials of the obvious effect of theory on form-making, and efforts at legitimization through the arcane, bring on an exhaustion of purposes and leave theory open to blanket dismissals by conservatives of many persuasions."

Pierre Bourdieu says, "One of the reasons why intellectuals don't pay attention, in my view, is that they have very many interests related to cultural capital."<sup>12</sup> For several reasons, the practitioners of theory become vulnerable to the quick rationalizations and quicker reproof that are gradually supplanting more involved discourse in the institutions and journals, where attacks on form and ideas in the name of the "real" are gaining greater acceptability. "The latest French theory," "jargon," "fashion," are scornful terms heard regularly now in the halls of discourse. But cultural-critical models deserve to be defended. They urge an engagement of the complex political-esthetic realm in which architecture must function, but are dismissed wholesale by some with agendas that encourage simplification and avoidance of both the issues that are revealed and the difficulty in adapting these models to architecture. "The latest French theory" has reframed our view of culture and its representations to such a degree that, like Marx's, we take for granted the formats brought forward by Foucault, Barthes, Lyotard, Derrida, etc. Jargon allows us to communicate in a field in which discursive structures are constantly changing and nomenclature needs to be established. Fashion keeps us honest and aware: honest in our skepticism and ethics, aware of the power of image and transformation. But potential champions of these crucial critical formats depart the field without a fight or justify their work by the standards of the most strident naysayers, eschewing a vital radicalism that is perhaps the strongest legacy of the avant-garde.

It also appears that history has become suspect for a generation that wishes to throw off the implications that the study of history might reveal and the rigor that has to be brought to bear in such study. But this has produced criticism that denies rich fields for critical action, fields that include ideas and events that have occurred. This can leave little but opinion and word-play. The critic floats free: free of acquired knowledge, free of responsibility to past conditions or logic, free to emote, to joke, to propagandize. The healthy rejection of post-modern contextualism in the last decade may have led to a weird imitation in an ideological realm which must, by definition, continue to reflect surrounding phenomena and take into account concepts and situations that already exist. It is as if the invigorating rejection of historical form as an overt referent in design has brought on an alarming rejection of history and culture as intellectual material.

The problems that haunt the American scene boiled over in Diane Ghirardo's "Eisenman's Bogus Avant-Carde" that appeared first in *Casabella* and then in the ill-fated *Progressive Architecture* in late 1994 and continued to stew in the many responses assembled as "Eisenman (and company) respond:" published in early 1995.<sup>13</sup> While appearing melodramatic at the time, on rereading after the subsequent years, this seems to have been one of the more indicative exchanges of the period, perhaps more in its subtexts than in its professed polemics. It brought up some decisive points and exposed some extremely raw nerves. Some of Ghirardo's comments were ill-conceived or simplistic and Eisenman, if he responded to her at all, sidestepped by posing several quasi-rhetorical questions of his own for his team to respond to.<sup>14</sup> He deftly moved the discussion to a point where any opposing arguments to those he solicited would be nonsensical. It is obvious that form is inevitable, the bottom line in fact, and that form is political especially when it is involved with an art that is as economically and culturally engaged as architecture.

In its intricate defense of the obvious, Eisenman's group thus avoided the awkward but more potent assault that Ghirardo leveled at his "bogus avant-garde" and the strong discussion she presented on aesthetic dissent and power. They also ignored her self-righteous inquest, her very personal accusations of what she felt was Eisenman's opportunistic use of form and ideas. Given the nature of this attack, it seems correct to have ignored it, but many of the responses she provoked from Eisenman's supporters seemed mostly autobiographical or, like the original text, attempted to dismiss by name-calling or misinterpretation. Blanket dismissals of "formalism," "elitism," and "exclusivist theory," flawed Ghirardo's challenge and claims of "more-political-than-thou" emanated from both sides of this argument. All in all, this was a battle of missed targets and blind fusillades, in the midst of which some very pertinent points were presented but not engaged. By calling Eisenman's avant-garde "bogus," Ghirardo implied that there is a "real" one within her grasp, possibly embodied in what Michael Hays identifies, in his response, as "the sort of criticism we have come to expect from the liberal humanist camp." This may be the most interesting, if ignored, agenda in her piece: to reappropriate for her brand of theory and for the West-Coast morality that it seems to represent, the mantle of the progressive that has hung so long in the mostly Northeastern salons of Eisenman and his associates.

More clearly and with less manners than usual, two camps of architectural discourse make their internalized concerns and paradoxes evident, and make it clear that, in this culture that tends to embrace binary oppositions and facile conclusions, a third position, simultaneously more interpretive and more engaged, needs to be identified. The energy of the *PA* shoot-out seemed so emphatic due to the delicate circumnavigations of much of the rest of current debate. Perhaps this is a sign of the state of architecture in America today: that the radical is removed from the discipline, that the progressive has cleansed itself of the mess and incongruity that should be the fuel and interest in an alarmingly vacant field, that a disengagement of ideas and form allows most of the community to dismiss what is, or could be, essential work, while the property rights to the avant-garde are fought over in the corner.

Historically jeopardized revolutionary postures desire recognition in academic institutions and from a cautious professional community. As this discourse simultaneously challenges conservative criteria and tries to live up to those criteria, the incongruities become ungainly. This is a symptom of Modernity itself. Victor Burgin writes, "There is nothing new in insecurity; it is the very condition of subjectivity, just as it is the condition of representation to be in crisis."<sup>15</sup> But it is a condition that must be recognized, either as a productive if apparently difficult paradox, or as a prime subject for change. This quandary is most profound in architectural theory and erupted into conflict between "bogus avant-garde" and "liberal humanist camp."<sup>16</sup>

The concept of the avant-garde and its application as both form

and ideas are clearly contributing to the essential advancement of architecture. That this contribution is compromised by the historical dilemmas revealed by intense study of the modern is equally clear. In this appears to lurk a strong counter-argument for ethics, internal criticism and exactitude. It seems a tangible goal, to move, as Tafuri suggests, "from analysis of the ideology of innovation to direct intervention in the real processes of innovation."<sup>17</sup> The field of architecture is enlarging and must do so. It will invade other disciplines and plunder necessary material to sustain and redefine its own. The relation of these conditions to the avant-garde is pertinent but not automatic. The role of critic is to chart the crossovers and historically understand their implications, strengths, weaknesses and contemporary possibilities, calling the bluff of culture and its practitioners. As Gianni Vattimo writes "it is a way, however 'weak' of experiencing truth, not as an object which can be appropriated and transmitted, but as a horizon and a background upon which we may move with care."<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

- Robert Smithson, "Response to a Questionnaire from Irving Sandler, May 25, 1966" from *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: University of California 1996). p. 329.
- In the "Young Architects" feature of the July, 1993 issue of *Progressive Architecture* (the last I could find in any major magazine entertaining the topic) the 33 individuals or groups that were listed under "alternative careers" outnumbered the combined architects, 25 of whom were listed as "self-employed" and 13 described as "employed by firms." The alternative crowd were involved in laminate design, book-making, the law, festival organization, clothing, furniture and set design. Within this group more than half were listed as involved in a wide range of enterprises grouped under the term "activism."
- The most venerable of all of the "alternative" architectural endeavors, furniture and industrial design, have classically beckoned to the architect with Pastoral connotations of labor and the tangible while offering a relatively barren discursive field. Due to the irrevocable lure of craft and materiality, making in general appeals to a segment of the community despite the clear problems connected to nostalgia for both craft and materiality.
- see Michael Stanton, "Redemptive Technologies" in *Archis*, 1997 1 January (Rotterdam: Nederlands Architectuurinstituut): 26-31.
- Paul Virilio, *The Art of the Motor*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: U of Minn., 1995). p. 88.
- Architects often refer to the works of minimalist or land-artists from Turrell to De Maria and Heizer. In fact this group of sculptors, in the purity and abstraction of their gestures and the nature of the media — landscape or monolith — may have less relevance to a field as compromised as architecture than the installation artists who deal with artifact and sign and to whom Diller + Scofidio are indebted.
- Elizabeth Diller, in "Eisenman and Company Respond" *Progressive Architecture* (Stamford: Penton, January, 1995): 91.
- Hamilton, Richard, "For the Finest Art try - POP" in *Collected Works 1953-1982* (London: Thames and Hudson), p. 42.
- In the end an enormous amount of effort seems to go into designating and patenting the new, one of the least productive aspects of avant-garde practice. Novelty and influence are inevitable and, in the best of creative worlds, work off each other.
- Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT 1996). p. XII
- Currently in architecture, conservatism seems to come from most political and cultural poles. From the puritan correctness of the apparently liberal political wing to the blatant strategies of the New Urbanism, also couched in liberal rhetoric, to the one-issue left who seem to avoid the complexities and contradictions inherent in all contemporary positions, to the concerted retreat

from engagement by the theoretical avant-garde, to the pragmatic dismay of the profession — all these end up in tacit collaboration with a climate of development and image that can only increase the marginalization of architecture and accompany a political swing to the right.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Doxa and the Common Life" interview with Terry Eagleton in *Mapping Ideology* ed. Slavoj Zizek (London: Verso, 1994), p. 273.

<sup>13</sup> *Progressive Architecture* (Stamford: Penton, November, 1994): 70-73 and (January, 1995): 88-91. *PA*'s anti-institutional stance and the righteousness with which that stance was adopted allowed Rosalind Krauss to write in the second volley, "Eisenman is thus holding a mirror up to *P/A*, one in which will be reflected the kind of reasoned debate *P/A* itself had tried to foreclose." This led to *PA* closing and diminished by one-third the major publish-

ing presence in the enormous American architectural community. However this occurred, it bled even whiter journalism that was already seriously anemic.

<sup>14</sup> Eisenman's questions to his supporters were, "In the discourse and practice of architecture, can the formal ever be defined politically?" and "Have previous definitions of the formal become problematic in today's historical condition?" *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Vicotr Burgin, *In/different Spaces: place and memory in visual culture* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1996), p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> *Progressive Architecture*, *op.cit.*

<sup>17</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia — Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. B. La Penta (Cambridge: MIT, 1976), p. 160.

<sup>18</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. J. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1988), p. 13.