

THIS WILL/WILL NOT KILL THAT

Yeah/No:

Demarcating Conceptual Practices

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In a 1971 article entitled "Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition", Peter Eisenman attempted to define the parameters by which architecture might be remade following the model of conceptual art without at the same time erasing the distinction between art and architecture, conceptual or otherwise. During the succeeding decades conceptual art itself came to implicitly rewrite this question, asking not what happens if architecture is remade *following* conceptual art practices *but as a conceptual art practice*?

Central to Eisenman's maintaining the distinction between art and architecture was his immutable and *a priori* definition that architecture - unlike art - must be responsive to function and "the idea of an object presence."¹ According to Eisenman, whether in built form or not, there can be "no conceptual aspect in architecture which can be thought of without the concept of pragmatic and functional objects, otherwise it is not an architectural conception."² This definition, designed to draw an absolute and unquestioned boundary between an art located outside of the confines of use and object status, and an architecture defined by both of these, points to the paradoxical position Eisenman was constructing for any potential conceptual architecture. Unable to fully define such a practice, Eisenman devoted the closing lines of the article to challenge architecture to produce work that follows art's shift to conceptualism without copying its specific re-coding procedures.³

The task for a conceptual architecture as opposed to conceptual art would be not so much to find such a sign system or a coding device . . . but rather, . . . to investigate the nature of . . . formal universals which are inherent in any form or formal construct . . . A more difficult task would be to find a way of giving these conceptual structures the capacity to engender more precise and complex meanings merely through the manipulation of form and space. This would require some form of transformational method - where the universals of the conceptual structure are transformed by some device to a surface structure and thus capable of receiving meaning. Whether it is possible to develop such transformational

*methods and at the same time to reduce both the existing semantic and cultural context of any architecture to produce a structure for new meaning, without developing a new sign system, seems to be a central problem for a conceptual architecture.*⁴

Eisenman's challenge conjoined with the attributes that he deemed essential components of architecture, however, construct a dilemma that pits the desire to follow the model of conceptual art against the (unstated) understanding that the advent and influences of conceptual art (really conceptualism) present a threat to the independence of the arts and therefore to the integrity of architecture.⁵ The specifics of Eisenman's challenge with its insistence on the autonomy of architecture, added to his goal of a conceptual architecture produced solely through formal and spatial manipulations, furthers this dilemma. With architectural practice seemingly at stake, Eisenman's response is to shore up the art/architecture distinction thereby containing any transformation of the object and whatever meanings such transformations engender.

Thirty years after the publication of Eisenman's text, the success of the production of conceptual architecture remains unclear. Conceptual art, however, has produced second and third incarnations, a striking number of which appropriate a vast array of architecture's methods and practices. These appropriations, beginning in the late 1960's range from the work of Robert Smithson to interests in site specificity to a direct appropriations of architectural forms from artists ranging from Rachel Whiteread and Siah Armajani to more recent additions from Glen Seator, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Jorge Pardo. Pardo's work in particular produces art as architecture in a form indistinguishable from the products and services of the design arts, including furniture design and architecture. It is this seeming indistinguishability that I want to examine.

With Pardo architecture's appropriation is seemingly complete. While others employ architectural elements to refer to and talk about the museum as institution or the manner in which architecture functions in society, Jorge Pardo's work collapses any remaining distance between art and architecture. This leaves his work - whatever its success otherwise - to lie fully within the scope of architectural practice so that *architecture supercedes conceptual art to become the framework for the work's functioning*.

Pardo's works incorporate a wide range of design and architec-

tural practices in their production and resulting discourse. Beginning in the early 1990's, Pardo completed a series of installations that erode the disciplinary distinctions between art and architecture, explicitly raising the question of the potential demise under conceptualism of the division between art and architecture. Within this context Pardo's work takes two fundamental forms. The first type incorporates such objects as chairs, tables, and lamps in installations. The second group enters more typical architecture territory by conforming to a model of practice and production central to the discipline. These include the pier Pardo designed as part of the Munster Sculpture Project, his furniture and lighting design for a museum reading room and what amounts to a renovation of the ground floor space of the Dia Center for the Arts in NY.

Central to much of the discussion of Pardo's work, however, is the 1998 house that LA MOCA commissioned⁶ him to build. The house was open to the public for an initial period during which it contained an exhibition that Pardo curated - a show of his lamps. Only following the exhibition period did Pardo move into the house. The house itself is a flat roofed, single story, wood clad structure occupying a sloping site in the Mt. Washington section of Los Angeles. Beginning with the garage and ending at the bedroom, the rooms of the house form a long curving chain that follow in sequence, each overlooking the other, as the house turns inward. Movement through the house is along the street, parallel to the rooms. All glazing (largely floor to ceiling) faces onto the inner courtyard formed by the house's faceted curvature. In all, the house contains a garage, a glass study, an entry area, a kitchen with a sunken sitting area (often referred to as a conversation pit with many noting that discourse itself is the content of the house), two bathrooms and a bedroom.

Despite the specifics of the objects themselves, because these projects were undertaken by a conceptual artist, the work is not discussed primarily around architectural constructs. Instead, the work is seen to raise a series of (usually) dichotomous issues about the status of art in relation to life, the museum as institution, the relationship between public and private, art and architecture and the everyday as opposed to, variously, art exhibitions, aesthetic experience and aesthetic objects. The terms of this debate as they arise around Pardo's appropriation of architectural practices or their incorporation into his conceptual art, however, recall and challenge Eisenman's quest for a conceptual architecture by focusing on the boundary drawn by function that Eisenman insisted separated art from architecture and prevented the production of a conceptual architecture in direct accordance with art based procedures.

The threat that Eisenman perceived to architecture's integrity - that which threatened to turn architecture into art by robbing it of its object presence and its utility - comes from the transformative po-

tential of conceptualism itself. While conceptualism in art has become an umbrella term offered to cover a range of production from the linguistic and dematerialized versions to various forms of process art and institutional critique⁷, in general terms, conceptual art practices work to de-emphasize the aesthetic object in order to shift focus away from a mute and medium based formalism to practices potentially explicitly based in "outside" content. These practices question art's epistemological status or potential. Conceptual art thus raises the issue of the limits of the content of art more than it does the limit's of art's formal boundaries. As a result, the transformations produced under conceptualism do not simply open the door for wide-scale appropriations of methods and practices from other disciplines, but, such appropriations become the basis for conceptual transformations which cannot be limited to the appropriating field of art - but extend into the disciplines appropriated.

The question, then, of a conceptual architecture modeled on the idea of conceptual art, with its certain transformation of the aesthetic object and its potential toward the dematerialization of it, escalates the difficulty of maintaining the art/architecture distinction as frequently defined. The threat of the dissolution of the art/architecture boundary - always at least latent within architectural discourse - is heightened by conceptualism's opening up of aesthetic practices to a new range of content including philosophy, linguistics and psychoanalysis. Eisenman turned to linguistics in order to reconceive architecture, thereby heightening the competing allures and threats of conceptual practices for architecture.⁸

Through its incorporation of outside content, conceptualism threatens architecture's autonomy and resituates the disciplines and methods it appropriates. In so doing, conceptualism not only redefines any architecture based in objecthood and function, but, further, the logical implication of this boundary shift challenges the twentieth century's priority on function defining that boundary. While this situation can be understood as a disciplinary territorial battle, that debate serves to mask the premises upon which those territorial lines are drawn. Whereas the question can be what distinguishes the functional from the non-functional arts, the more interesting concern lies around the mechanisms whereby utility is set up - and repressed - as the unrecognized and unquestioned criterion of evaluation.

While conceptual practices pose a renewed threat to the independence of disciplines by constructing outside content as internal, architecture in the twentieth century has internalized that threat, defining itself in a continual search for an autonomous practice that will assure a clearly defined territory. In this search art has frequently been declared to be on the opposite side of the functional divide from architecture. Although architecture has a history of association with specific contents, such as the social ideals attributed to modern-

ism, much of that has been suppressed under the overarching epistemological demands of twentieth century functionalism and the philosophical tenets of logical positivism. This coupling of functionalism and positivism itself the product of a shared epistemology that requires a one-to-one correspondence of form to meaning. In other words, by an epistemology that demands – and attempts to furnish – sharp distinctions.

Logical positivism refers to forms of linguistic and conceptual analysis simultaneously based in the empirical tradition and in logico-mathematical theory. Formulated as an attack on metaphysics, central to much of positivist thought is some form of verification theory which deems meaningful only that which is either directly verifiable through experience or that which is the product of mathematics and logic.⁹ Everything else - ranging from metaphysical and ontological propositions about the nature of reality to aesthetical and ethical propositions – is understood to be unverifiable, and therefore meaningless. Meaninglessness here often refers to an indeterminacy of meaning. And, it is around the problematic status of the indeterminacy of meaning that the anti-metaphysical virtues of positivism become entangled with a too limited view of the functioning of language. And that is where functionalism enters this discourse.

Functionalism was a product of the same view of meaning as positivism. By arguing that the requirements of function serve as the necessary and sufficient determinates for the production of architectural form, functionalism had attempted to define a determinate position by which to analyze and produce meaningful architecture. The operative assumption behind this approach was that by constructing a detailed and precise description of the programmatic intent of a given project, including space, light, mechanical, and adjacency requirements and by adhering to that program and method throughout the design process, the architect should be able to directly transpose functional constraints into a formal solution.¹⁰ In this view, the demands of function translate directly into built form.

Within functionalist methodology, function is understood to be both primary cause and content of architectural form. This means that a specific content is associated with a specific form in a one-to-one relation transforming a design approach in to a method of producing meaning. In a manner akin to a logical positivist theories of language, in order for functionalism to be successful, the function of an element of the architecture must be unquestionably legible. To achieve legibility, the form needs to act as a direct or transparent sign of the building's various functions: entrance, circulation, gathering, and service spaces are all meant to be self-apparent along with the placement of doors and windows. These built signs are understood to transmit meaning without need of any outside interpretant, thereby realizing the architect's idealist dream of a self-

explanatory architecture, one neither in need of critical interpretation nor of the literal 'intrusion' of the linguistic in the form of signage.

While functionalism is offered as rational, neutral and natural - and therefore not in need of legitimation - the goal of producing a transparency of use to meaning - or more importantly of understanding a building's meaning as its function - is neither neutral nor natural. Functionalism operates by in effect naturalizing specific forms, programs and relations. This transparency of form to function was fused early on with the social democratizing dimension of modernism. Not only was form then to be transparent to its function, but the meaning - as a product of that association - was to be a direct translation of the needs of a more democratic and modern society.

While functionalism and positivism succeeded in rejecting many problematic constructs, advancing architecture and philosophy as a result, their legacies – direct results of their successes – have created new problems. Taken together, the dual epistemologies mark most aesthetic practices as nonfunctional twice over: functionalism through its priority on a determinate form of utility and positivism through its declaration that aesthetics are meaningless.¹¹

Conceptual practices challenge this one-to-one relation of content and form. Through the de-emphasizing of form, the relation between form and content is itself redefined in more complex and ambiguous terms, terms that frequently focus on the range of relations between the visual and the verbal. While the requirements of functionalism make content and form inseparable and a product of the priority of utility, the constructs of conceptualism upset that power structure by allowing for the possibility of eradicating the distinction between content and form, or between being an artwork and a piece of philosophy, a logical axiom or a professional service. In so doing, distinctions, such as those between art and architecture, are themselves brought into question.

Returning to Eisenman's challenge; the production that he calls for requires a transformation in accordance with the demands of a conceptualism that we have seen contains the potential to disrupt the very understanding of what constitutes architecture. This is Eisenman's paradox: a conceptual transformation of architecture threatens to turn what was believed to be essential aspects of architecture into contingent ones. Whereas formal and spatial issues might seem the first elements challenged in such a transformation, at greater risk are such potentially definitive traits as objecthood and utility. Writing about Eisenman's work in the mid 1980's, Robin Evans noted that despite the challenge constituted by the transformative processes that Eisenman exalts (such as topological geometry), these processes are kept in check through the rectilinear frameworks of the grids and cubes synonymous with rationality that continually dominate all aspects of Eisenman's work.¹² This domination serves to reaffirm quint-

essential architectural properties despite what challenges to the architectural object his work seems to suggest.¹³ This same pattern of attempting to keep architecture in check through regulative frameworks is evident in the essay on conceptual architecture where, despite the possibilities and challenges that Eisenman sets forth, the definitive framework used to pre-determine what constitutes architecture, impedes architecture's transformation. This is the case not simply by Eisenman's understanding architecture to be responsive to function – but by his reiterating that function is the primary characteristic separating architecture from art.

A transformative process, as Evans points out, requires a thorough-going, unified distortion of the architecture object, one that alters the relations between architectural elements rather than simply transforming individual elements. Such a transformation is akin to the transformative processes found in the shift from a formal to a conceptually based art. What this means is that the function relation itself – *if essential to architecture* – must itself be subject to this thoroughgoing change. By being inherent to architecture *function itself is subject to transformation*. As such, a (conceptual) architecture might in some manifestations be indecipherable from art or language, a possibility that threatens the defined field of architecture at least as much as the object itself.

What happens then when architecture is appropriated within an established conceptual art practice as it is in the work of artists such as Pardo? This question is not typically asked regarding Pardo's work. Instead, the questions surrounding Pardo's work are ontological ones formulated in the guise of aesthetic, discursive and institutional concerns that are offered as determining what is and is not art. The house Pardo designed, for example, has been described as "an ontological oddity: a private space with public aspirations, an art object with blatant use value, a museum exhibition in the absence of a museum, if not of its institutional procedures and ritual objects".¹⁴ But what is offered as an ontological instability regarding art's status, emerges upon close examination as a particular epistemology. In other words, the suggestion that the work is unstable, is itself a product of a view of art that is all too stable. The resultant situation paradoxically pits the success of the work against the criticism that defines it. Consequently, as much as Pardo's work is described as questioning the traditional boundaries of art, the discussions of the work are strangely reaffirming of those precise categories.

If Pardo's work is defined by or coincident with the discourse it produces, then the success of the work is tied to its ability to effect that discourse. Yet, discussions of Pardo's work repeatedly reiterate that art is art by virtue of context, intent, discourse, institution, temporality or afunctionality. Consequently, despite praising the ability of the work to challenge these standards and categories, those bound-

aries are left undisturbed, art is returned to its place, aesthetically, ontologically, epistemologically and linguistically. Initially this return suggests two main possibilities: the first is that work perceived as challenging must be subjected to the curtailing forces of criticism, institutional or otherwise, while the second suggests that the work must be understood as failing in its challenge to definitions of art. Failure, however, in either location, is not simply because the boundaries and barriers in question were not eradicated or otherwise dismantled, but because the questions set forth and the discourse around the work (or said to comprise the work) typically do not fully describe the revised problematics at play. That is, they do not fully embrace the ramifications of the conceptual shift to the entire category of aesthetic and other discourses. As a result, the content of conceptual practices is repeatedly suppressed to disguised formalist and essentialist concerns with the goal of maintaining existing disciplinary discourse and debates.

For example, while Joel Sanders points to the potential of Pardo's work to challenge architectural practices, the focus of his critique is based on the understanding that Pardo in the end is functioning as a sculptor (Pardo a sculptor?) - with a traditional sculptors' focus on perception, light and the body in contrast to a traditional architecture focus on use and construction. Sanders thus while acknowledging the possibility for one discipline to challenge and positively affect another - ignores the conceptual focus of Pardo's work. In this way, Sander's critique is functionally equivalent to Eisenman's intent nearly thirty years earlier to remake architecture without changing its "essential" definition thereby reinscribing the work into traditional views of art and architecture without considering how this and other work may have changed those disciplines.

The house that Pardo designed is seen to initiate this series of disciplinary debates due to its standing as a private dwelling and a public exhibition venue. This framing of the discourse is all the more interesting as Pardo moved into the house only following its exhibition period, thereby displacing social norms with familiar aesthetic codes. Which is to say that the house on view was not yet his (or anyone's) private residence, a point emphasized by the fact that exhibition objects were on view.

Pardo's work is discussed as placing its utilitarian aspects in dialogue with or in contrast to its aesthetic aspects, with that distinction often seen as the defining aspect of the work. As one reviewer wrote that: "it is precisely the space between art and not, between furniture and not, that Pardo's art occurs". While Pardo's objects do challenge the concept of utility, some because of their context in exhibitions, others because they themselves seem only marginally functional, utility plays another role in Pardo's work – one beyond the art/not art debate.

Part of the problem with the split between art and the world directly issues from the question of utility which operates as a strong determinant in the division that leaves art on one side of the divide and the world of everyday objects and operations (including architecture) on the other. Useful objects, that is, objects with specifically and explicitly delineated purposes, are understood to be part of the world until they are removed to within the confines of an exhibition space where their utility is vanquished and their role becomes that of exhibition, their status that of art. Although the white walls of the museum, are described as the usual culprits in this, they are only part of the story, one that operates with an epistemology akin to both positivist and functionalist requirements that an object's 'use' be determinate and transparent.

Although the art/world split understands that art may be useful (socially for example) it also frequently suggests art's removal from the world provides the (critical) distance deemed necessary for the work's function as art. But, in either approach the question and privileging of use (social, functional, everyday, etc.) is presented as an unquestioned and unquestionably rational construct. What this does is suggest that use itself is a construct without history and in need of neither validation nor explanation. This pervasive privileging of function operates by instituting a criteria for judgement – utility – that seems unquestionable. This framework leaves the object, concept, discourse defined around the construct of use as though it provided the one criteria in need of fulfillment. Use thus offers itself as an uncontested rationality definitive of the object in question.

Added to the initial demand that something (or someone, some discourse) be functional to be part of the world, is the operative epistemology regarding use, the belief that an object's use be transparent and legible, and that that use provides its meaning or value. This transparency does not as much require the use be immediately obvious to the observer, but rather it requires that, once revealed, the object's utility be determinate – and definitive. And this is the crux of the problem, the place where the functionalist and positivist demand for determinant meaning *seemingly banished by post-structuralist thought* is shown to still be operative.

Returning to Pardo, the potential of his work lies in its ability to place the pervasive issue of function in a state of suspension where we are not sure whether it is privileged or not, whether it is active or not. The work's content is derived from the continual oscillation between the museum and the everyday thereby straddling the art/life boundary as it is constructed. This makes the issue of utility palpable while leaving its actual operation latent. Caught between these two poles, the question of function, in and of itself, becomes Pardo's work's foremost content. The effect at once makes apparent and removes the usual footholds and premises upon which the question of func-

tion rests. The work, which operates by employing twentieth century art's history of questioning its own boundaries succeeds not in the manner it seemingly prescribes. That is, it succeeds not by redefining art's disciplinary or the museum's institutional boundaries. Instead, it succeeds in examining larger concepts implicit in the formation of the art/not art boundary in society. Of the constructs that form that boundary, utility is the foremost one at play in Pardo's work.

By placing the work variously on the border between art and architecture or art and service, the issue of function is continually brought to the forefront as the criterion by which we make these designations. That said, the designations can be placed in question around the utility of these objects and services. In other words - not being certain what the objects are - furniture or aesthetic objects, say, or to what discourse they belong - does not have to be seen solely as concerning the definition of aesthetic practice. Designating the work as art or not, is neither the only nor the most interesting issue involved. Instead, Pardo's appropriation of various design practices and objects employs aesthetic practice as a way of raising the issues and concerns which the work constructs. This means entering into the content of the discourse of the work rather than solely understanding it to be focused on discipline defining discourse that can only refocus the content back onto the boundaries of aesthetic practice as if caught in some ever widening perpetual loop. This shift instituted by conceptualism requires seeing how a work functions rather than what it functions as. To simply recategorize the work and make its content about its ontological standing by attempting to designate on which side of the boundary the work lands - misses the fundamental potential of the work by disregarding the specific content by which the aesthetic boundaries are formed. If we want to accept work as conceptual we need to not continually discuss it as though it were a formalist undertaking with its main focus directed inward at its own standing in the discipline. For conceptual aesthetic practices to be meaningful, their content cannot simply be ignored or made secondary to their relation to the history of aesthetic practices.

NOTES

¹Peter Eisenman, "Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition" < in Casabella no.359-360, Dec. 1971, p.51.

²Ibid.

³The attempt to remake a discipline by following the advances made in another field (related or not) is not something new. In the late 18th century for example, the philosopher Immanuel Kant, bothered by the manner in which philosophy had become mired in a set of self created problems and responses, turned to the advances made in the sciences by Newton as a model to regenerate philosophy. "This attempt to alter the procedure which has hitherto prevailed in metaphysics, by completely revolutionizing it in accordance with the example set by the

geometers and physicists, forms indeed the main purpose of this critique of pure speculative reason." In the late 20th century structuralism has perhaps been the foremost example of a methodology progressively developed from one field to the next, from linguistics to anthropology to literary criticism, art history and finally to architecture itself.

⁴Eisenman, Op.Cit. p.54.

⁵This is all the more interesting as the art which Eisenman discusses (Morris, Le Witt, Johns and Noland) does not in anyway seem to impinge on the category of architecture. Le Witts' grids may come closest as architecture tends to think that it owns the grid but none of these touch upon the necessity of object presence and pragmatics.

⁶MOCA contributed ten thousand dollars to the approximately \$350,000 cost of the house.

⁷See for example Rosalind Krauss' essay "Sense and Sensibility", in *Artforum*, vol. XII, no. 3, November 1973, pp. 43-53, or Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", in *October* 55, winter 1990, pp. 105-143.

⁸Eisenman's essay does not make this explicit, however, instead it operates under the threat without making clear its operatives or implications.

⁹Logics and mathematics are only accepted as meaningful, however, at the cost of being declared tautological.

¹⁰Hannes Meyer for example put forth a functionalist practice.

¹¹In the early 1970's on the heels of conceptualism's rise in art, structuralism provided both architects and architectural theorists with a revitalized critique of functionalism that succeeded by transposing functionalism into specifically linguistic terms. For architecture theory, structural linguistics and particularly Saussure's concept of the arbitrary nature of the sign provide a systematic way to

both criticize functionalism and to develop alternative methods of signification. That is, structuralism offered potential grounds upon which to base both theory and practice.

In linguistic terms, functionalism had, in effect, argued that signifiers and signifieds were necessarily related as in the definitive form follows function adage. Structuralism formed an extremely effective critique of this functionalist position by understanding the signifier/signified relation (form/content) to be an integrally arbitrary and deeply conventionalized relation, thereby declaring in functionalist terms that the relation of form to function (as the content) is not natural but is historically constructed.

Significantly, the success of the structuralist critique of functionalism rests on its re-introducing, at a different level, the idea of the arbitrary that functionalism had attempted to exorcise. Structuralism as a model, declared the construction of signs - exactly what architecture was defined to be under functionalism - to be a process without a pre-existent or natural relation of form to meaning. In other words, declaring the signifier/signified relation to be arbitrary, dismantles the one-to-one correspondence of form to meaning that functionalism had instituted and with it the idea that function is a sufficient condition for form.

¹²See Robin Evans, "Not to be Used for Wrapping Purposes: A Review of the Exhibition of Peter Eisenman's Find'Ou T HouS" (1985), in Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 119-15

¹³Evans notes one remarkable exception to this, in the final stage, House X, produced an axonometric model that occupied a place between drawing and model.

¹⁴Susan Kandel, *Artforum*, v. 37, no.3, (Nov. 1998), p.92.