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Extracts from **Art's Use of Architecture: Place, Site and Setting**

Art and architecture are frequently differentiated in terms of their relationship to 'function' or 'use'. Unlike architecture, art may not be useful in pragmatic terms, for example in responding directly to social needs, providing shelter or somewhere in which to perform open-heart surgery, but we could say that art provides a place for other kinds of function – self-reflection, critical thinking and social change. If we consider this expanded version of the term function in relation to architecture, we realise that architecture is seldom given the opportunity to consider the construction of critical concepts and spatial relations as its most important purpose. Architecture's potential is most often realised in contemporary art, especially in current works that, in reworking architectural forms within the gallery setting, decontextualise architecture. In this way, they allow a new way of responding to architecture, one that draws attention to those qualities that are often overlooked.

There are many possible ways of framing an exhibition such as *Psycho Buildings*, which comprises architectural works by a diverse range of international artists practicing today. This essay looks backwards to the 1960s in order to draw attention to a number of architectural themes that emerge in the art of that period. These include architecture's role in producing place, critiquing site and imagining settings.ⁱ These interests figured as key aspects of the art of the 1960s, but also continue to preoccupy contemporary artists engaged in architectural investigations, albeit in ways that are being continually revised, reworked and rethought.

Sculpture as Place

In February 1966, in his essay 'Notes on Sculpture, Parts 1 and 2', artist Robert Morris argued that, unlike pictorial work, sculpture was not illusionist but had a 'literal nature', and that clearer distinctions needed to be made between sculpture's 'tactile nature' and the 'optical sensibilities involved in painting'.ⁱⁱ In June of the same year, art critic David Antin wrote that sculpture was 'a specific space in which the observer is thrust, namely it is a place.'ⁱⁱⁱ Again, in October the same year, critic David Bourdon quoted artist Carl André's account of the development of modern sculpture from form, through structure, to place, and noted André's statement on *Cuts*, his show in March 1967 at the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles, 'I now use the material as the cut in space.'^{iv} For artist Dennis Oppenheim, 1967 was *the year* when the 'notion of sculpture as place was manifest'.^v In the same issue of *Artforum* in Part 2 of his 'Notes on Sculpture', Morris, following

sculptor Tony Smith, took up the question of scale and located minimalist work at a human scale between the private object and public monument, as one term in an expanded situation.^{vi}

[...]

Architecture as the Site of Institutional Critique

Robert Smithson described the shift in his own artistic practice at this time from an interest in specific objects to a more relational way of 'seeing' the world, where the works 'became a preoccupation with place'.^{vii} Exploring architecture through his interest in entropy, his *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) was intended to demonstrate this principle of disintegration through the dumping of earth on top of an empty shed until it collapsed. Smithson also documented entropy in existing architecture in works such as *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967) and *Hotel Palenque* (1969).^{viii} The former, a photo-essay, describes the material qualities of entropy in enormous industrial structures that at the time of their construction were already deteriorating. The latter, originally a lecture to architecture students, now a slide installation and sound recording, outlines Smithson's concept of a 'ruin in reverse', through his visit to a Mexican hotel which was decaying while also being renovated, enacting 'places of little organisation and no direction', as Smithson described the space between site and non-site.^{ix} Smithson's consideration of the dialectical relation between the site of the work and the non-site of the documentation of the work in the gallery presents the spatial aspect of his art as key to understanding his critique of art and architecture.^x

[...]

The Setting

Art critic Claire Bishop has argued that installation art is best understood in terms of its treatment of the viewing subject – perceptually, politically and psychologically.^{xi} For this reason, it might be that *Psycho Buildings'* predecessors lie in the use of the gallery as a performance space that dissolves the boundaries between subject and object. In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), Walter Benjamin differentiated between concentration as the optical mode of viewing a painting, in which the work absorbs the viewer, and distraction as the tactile experience of architecture, in which the viewer absorbs the work.^{xii} The insertion of structures, objects, sounds and texts into the gallery context has produced complex architectural scenes, which both absorb and are absorbed by the viewer. They invite a viewer to move through the

work, drawing out meanings over time. And, through varying modes of interaction, they involve activities that draw on personal memories, cultural references and imagined scenarios.

[...]

Artists in *Psycho Buildings* explore architecture's psyche, through the production of places, sites and settings, which engender spatial experiences that connect the viewer psychically, as well as perceptually and conceptually, to broader social issues and cultural phenomena.

ⁱ In developing the concept of critical spatial practice in art, I discuss the difference between the terms space, place and site. See Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2006. In my forthcoming book *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*, I explore criticism itself as a critical spatial practice, where interaction between the critic and the work operates as a form of setting. See also Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT, Cambridge, Mass., 2002; and the discussion of place in Claire Doherty (ed.), *Thinking of the Outside: New Art and the City of Bristol*, University of the West of England and Bristol Legible City in Association with Arnolfini, 2005, pp. 9–10.

ⁱⁱ Robert Morris, 'Notes on Sculpture 1–3', in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 814. Part 1 was first published in *Artforum*, February 1966, pp. 42–44.

ⁱⁱⁱ See David Antin, 'What is an Environment?', in *Art News*, April, 1966, referenced in Suzaan Boettger, *Earthworks: Art and the Landscape of the Sixties*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 2002, p. 211.

^{iv} David Bourdon, 'The Razed Sites of Carl André', in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimalism: A Critical Anthology*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1995, pp. 103–108. Reprinted from *Artforum*, October 1966, pp. 103–104.

^v Germano Celant, *Dennis Oppenheim*, Charta, Milan, 1997, p. 29.

^{vi} Robert Morris, op. cit., p. 816. Part 2 was first published in *Artforum*, October 1966, pp. 20–23.

^{vii} Robert Smithson, 'Interview with Robert Smithson for the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution', (1972), in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, University of California Press, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1996, p. 296.

^{viii} See Robert Smithson, 'Entropy and New Monuments', (1966), in *ibid.*, pp. 10–23, and Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', (1967), in *ibid.*, pp. 68–74.

^{ix} See Robert Smithson quoted in Neville Wakefield, 'Yucatan is Elsewhere: On Robert Smithson's *Hotel Palenque*', in *Parkett*, 43, 1995, p. 133. See <http://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/palenque.htm>.

^x For specific descriptions of his site/non-site dialectic see Robert Smithson, 'Towards the Development of an Air Terminal Site', (1967), in *ibid.*, p. 291, Robert Smithson, "'Earth" (1969) Symposium at White Museum, Cornell University', in *ibid.*, p. 178, and Robert Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty', (1972), in *ibid.*, pp. 152–153.

^{xi} See Claire Bishop, *op cit.*, pp. 6–13.

^{xii} Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', completed in 1936 and translated by Harry Zohn, in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, Fontana, London, 1992, pp. 231, 233.