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ICAM 15, Paris, session 5 • 3rd of June 2010

DÉFENSE DE RIRE: TACTICS FOR INSTALLATION AND TEXT

When Eileen Gray constructed E.1027, her house with Jean Badovici on the South of France, she was able to realize a Modernist Gesamtkunstwerk intended for pleasure and relaxation. A code in letter (E for Eileen) and number (10 for Jean; 2 for Badovici; 7 for Gray), E.1027 integrated architecture, furniture, fixtures and – in a series of subtle, ostensibly impromptu gestures – text.

Approaching from the north, where the house appears closed and opaque, the visitor first noticed a small, cubic porch with the entreaty, **entrez lentement**. He or she then proceeded, slowly, into a tight hallway staggered in plan, a kind of miniature labyrinth, before glimpsing the expansive living space open to sun, sky and sea. Here Gray stenciled the words, **défense de rire** – No Laughing! – as visitors took in the unorthodox complexity of the interior.

Throughout the house, Gray stenciled text ranging from the pragmatic or factual to compact, poetic invocations. Hence **couverts** (Table Settings), **oreillers** (Pillows) and **choses légères** (Light Things – above a cantilevered soap dish). Hence also the splendid navigation chart of the Caribbean, an item of mass-production amid Gray's custom furniture and rugs, to which the Anglo-Irish designer added **invitation au voyage**, a phrase from Baudelaire, and, in the bottom right-hand corner, **vas-y-totor** (Let's Go, Totor). Totor was Gray's nickname for her trusty 1920s motor car.

Through this intimate and intuitive process, Gray curated her own private world, using words as exhortations and clues as to how this new domestic world might best be experienced and explored. When installing several galleries dedicated to Gray in 2002, the National Museum of Ireland appropriated these phrases, or building user instructions, to focus visitors' attention and guide them from one group of objects to the next. Graphics less as command, more a mode of spatial seduction.

Ireland is of course a bilingual country, which mandates exhibition designers to duplicate text, often to somewhat ludicrous effect. Museums and galleries in, for instance, Belgium, Canada, and autonomous regions of Spain may also be subject to such regulation, creating a reign (and rain) of textual confetti – object labels repeating themselves – and a system of parallel universes within a single exhibition.

In one of these Spanish regions, the Comunitat Valenciana, the young Madrid-based practice, Mansilla + Tuñón, realized a smart, strategic design for the Fine Art Museum of Castelló. The project has subsequently been signified by a photograph of the letters spelling "museum" in Catalan – M, U, S, E, U – proceeding in perfect syncopation along a curving motorway. If contemplating the role of text in museums, then consider (initially?) the institution's own identity, its brand, its self-presentation.

In Early Modernism, architecture and exhibition design was often overtly polemical and didactic. Pavilions for World's Fairs, trade promotion and international art exhibitions were in many cases a kind of constructed propaganda. Typology and typography acting in unprecedented union. One new union, the Soviet empire, was fortunate in being able to edit its name to the letters U, S, S, and R; or, on occasion, CCCP.

As with Melnikov's pavilion at Paris's Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in 1925, the best Soviet designers were able to realize a dynamic fusion of envelope, structure and message. To appropriate Venturi's dueling categories, such temporary structures were both Decorated Shed and Bony Duck.

Also at Paris in 1925, the young Austrian architect Friedrich Kiesler built his extra-ordinary installation, *City in Space*, a kind of neo-Plastic cage appearing to float in ether. Although Kiesler did stencil a set of titles or themes (the word THEATRE cantilevered out to attract visitors from an adjacent gallery), *City in Space* was essentially abstract. The exhibition as object, like an experimental test or proof.

Kiesler's design for Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century (New York, 1942) raised the game for installation, creating micro-architectures in which the relationship between art object and viewer was paramount. Photographed by Berenice Abbott, the Surrealist gallery in particular banished text to prioritize decentered space; paintings supported and projected into space on baseball bat armatures; and furniture modules that served as pedestals, tables or chairs.

The role of text was subservient to the art and to the visitor's free interaction with that art.

In 2008 the Drawing Center in Downtown Manhattan presented *Frederick Kiesler: Co-Realities*. The installation – designed by the young New York practice, nArchitects – consisted of a single contiguous, skinny and sinuous tabletop in which drawings and printed matter were encased; some sections propped upward for closer viewing. The exhibition was a social construct – you invariably recognized (or re-recognized) fellow visitors across the ribbon-like display case.

Such design does not (force-) feed the visitor information. It encourages consideration of the objects on display. It presents many, often disparate things as part of a greater whole. We might call such exhibition design Maximalist Minimalism.

One of the great father figures of Minimalism was of course Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. And one of the most successful – we might even say, seminal – uses of Miesian space were the exhibitions curated in the 1960s at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston by its then director, James Johnson Sweeney. Sweeney exploited the potential of Mies's Cullinan Hall, allowing large artworks – as in *Three Spaniards: Picasso, Miró, Chillida* (1962) – to literally hang in space.

Text was limited or reduced to exhibition titles in clear letters positioned high on a rear wall.

Kolumba, the new museum in Cologne by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor follows a similar policy. Its distinguished yet eclectic collection of ecclesiastical treasures and contemporary art (including, again, Chillida) is organized in suites of rooms with no text whatsoever. As at the nearby Insel Hombroich, where pavilions are distributed about the countryside, visitors are asked to make up their own minds vis-à-vis the art on view. At Kolumba, the visitor is also given a small book, a pocket-sized guide or breviary supplying thoughtful information about the contents of each room.

For the 2002 Venice architectural biennale, its *direttore*, Deyan Sudjic, asked London Minimalist John Pawson to design that exhibition's main installation in the daunting, 316-metre-long

Corderie, the former rope works for the Venetian navy. Architectural models were presented with flair, as if sacred artifacts illuminated on an archipelago of orthogonal altars. Again text was substantially banned.

This commentator may himself be guilty of a certain tasteful obscurantism at the 2002 biennale, as Commissioner for the Irish Pavilion. Architects Merritt Bucholz and Karen McEvoy displayed building components and construction material from their Limerick County Hall, then on site. However the small, concertina-like brochures proved to be all-too-portable, especially with shoppag-toting students, and the wall text – in particular the key signifier, 'Ireland' – so discreet as to be missed by the biennale throngs.

In 2006 Pawson choreographed a sequence of real architectural experiences at Le Thoronet, the twelfth century Cistercian abbey in Provence, an altogether calmer locale. Pawson selected fourteen vantage points, both interior and exterior, drawing attention to principles of built form and natural light. Each became the site for a robust bench designed for the occasion. A slim publication helped elucidate what the visitor (sitter) could see and, rather cheekily, twinned such views with vignettes from Pawson's own *œuvre*.

For the 1928 International Press Exhibition in Cologne, El Lissitzky produced another Modernist Gesamtkunstwerk wherein image, word and logo could mutate, a pavilion with one large, three-dimensional Soviet star, oversize conveyor belts with kinetic text, and a 24-meter-long photomontage depicting the education of the masses.

Competent in both architecture and typography, Lissitzky designed a 16-page guide book and an 18-page fold-out to illustrate the montage. He also made a monoprint, now in the collection of the Carnegie Museum of Art, measuring in total 14.8 x 12.5 centimeters. Dedicated by Lissitzky to J.J.P. Oud, this print reveals the plan of the Cologne pavilion with its myriad parts. We may perhaps classify it as Minimalist Maximalism.

The role of text in exhibitions is not only to supply information, to allow visitors a better sense of what they are looking at. Text also acts as wayfinding, as a directional guide. As in the U.S. road signs photographed by Berenice Abbott, decades after her Paris portraits of (amongst others) Eileen Gray, simple commands can guide the exhibition visitor's way.

For *The Un-Private House* exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1999, vanguard Dutch architects MVRDV invited visitors to disobey the normative museum protocol and to touch or move their model of infill houses designed for Borneo Sporenburg in Amsterdam. MVRDV wanted visitors to understand the sectional complexity of each house yet surely also took pleasure in violating museum regulations.

Jeffrey Inaba, another architect from the Koolhaas orbit, has designed several exhibitions and installations – *Human Game: Winners and Losers* (Florence, 2006); *Donor Hall* (The New Museum, New York, 2007) – that wrap surfaces in stimulating matrices of images, objects, and text. Given this architect's role as Features Editor of *Volume*, Inaba manifests an almost uncanny sense for eclectic visual display: the exhibition as magazine, and vice versa.

The 2006 Venice biennale, directed by Ricky Burdett of the London School of Economics, focused very much on data pertaining to the contemporary reality of 16 mega-cities from four continents. Fascinating in parts (the relative densities of Cairo and Los Angeles, for instance), Burdett's biennale risked appearing less as a witty magazine, more as an enfilade of statistics.

Exhibition design and text must necessarily be conscious of the difference between data (or statistics) and information, and between information and knowledge. This is a key difference between exhibitions of art and exhibitions about architecture.

Luckily some participants in the 2006 biennale introduced humor and nuance into this, the vastest of all architectural exhibitions. Nigel Coates, with students from London's Royal College of Art, included ersatz urban graffiti to catch visitors' attention for their installation *Babylon:don*. (Read it twice). One imagines Coates and Gray, could they meet, would have fun with words, not to speak of the corporeal possibilities of furniture.

More recently, Jürgen Mayer H. has made installations as an architect, as a spatial artist, as a designer (Soft Mosaic Collection, 2008), and as an interior architect to showcase the work of others (Calvin Klein, Berlin, 2010). Many of these temporary or temporal projects present numbers as seemingly random data. Mayer is intrigued by data, text and encryption as forms of contemporary ornament, and by the potential of the German word 'Vorwand' meaning both 'pre-text' and 'in front of the wall'.

Curiously, Mayer may be working toward a resolution of Victor Hugo's famous lament, 'Ceci tuera cela', the fear that print and mass-produced text would negate the communicative power of architecture. Could it be that Mayer somehow does this by omitting information from the classic trinity of data, information and knowledge?

The 2008 biennale had the theme *Out There: Architecture Beyond Building*, a means by direttore Aaron Betsky to include phenomena concerning architecture yet normally considered superficial or peripheral to architecture itself. This included wallpaper by Mayer, the depiction of architecture in movies, and the dissemination of the exhibition through the city via graphics and bags for the invariably weighty biennale catalogs.

Catalogs and websites can today provide considerably greater quantities of information, and speculation, than any normative wall text. Thus seating areas and the provision of computers are especially important – as observed in the lounge designed by Wendy Evans Joseph for *Frank Lloyd Wright: Renewing The Legacy* at the Heinz Architectural Center in 2005.

Shopping bags have also been used by London practice FAT {Fashion Architecture Taste} to infiltrate the civic realm. Inversely, FAT bring everyday artifacts and a semblance of life into designated exhibition space, as with their 2004 re-presentation of suburban Feltham in a window of Selfridge's department store. There FAT assembled a crew of children's toys brandishing placards with slogans to provoke window-shoppers and metropolitan flâneurs: 'London Without Landmarks', 'Planning Without Planners, and 'Nostalgia Now!'.

This notion of both consumer and museum visitor as a semi-attentive wanderer informed the exhibition titled *Gritty Brits: New London Architecture* at the Heinz Architectural Center in spring 2007. It was momentarily imagined that the buddleia that spring from cracks throughout London's built fabric might be strategically located in the galleries. The exhibition as realized featured street maps and contextual photographs by David Grandorge of London away from the tourist sights, a city experienced on foot, by bicycle or public transport. Decals of the iconic red Routemaster bus coaxed visitors out through the museum, a kind of treasure hunt in search of London-related artwork.

Static text can only do so much by way of stimulating movement and suggesting interconnectivity. New technologies, from complex virtual worlds (galaxies of gaming) to our contemporary cell

phones, offer a plethora of possibilities for removing text entirely from the museum wall and supplying it directly to each visitor.

Messages both to those present in the galleries and at remote locations.

Eileen Gray's E.1027 was a domestic world, one sadly threatened with total dereliction. Lebbeus Woods is a very different architect, one capable of divining promise in the most derelict or war-torn contexts. For *Lebbeus Woods: Experimental Architecture*, curated by Tracy Myers at the Heinz Architectural Center in 2004, the usual text items were essentially abandoned in favor of customized architectural elements including aluminum floor plates emblazoned with words as a kind of industrial textual carpet.

The visitor walked across or through the text in a resonant cognitive experience.

As we move into the new millennium, new technologies offer the prospect of actual and virtual exhibitions occurring simultaneously. Thus the intimate experimentation of Gray's stenciled messages to herself and a few friends may not only co-exist with multi-layered sources of information but be informed, inflected even, by the input of gallery and website visitors. And thus Minimalist and Maximalist tendencies may no longer be in (artificial) opposition.