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Presenting Another Profile of Architecture

Alternatives to Museographical Canonization

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To develop the study of alternative architecture and the counterculture in North America and elsewhere, as I did for my doctoral thesis and the book based on it¹—and to exhibit this kind of architecture—requires a departure from the usual historiographical approach. Traditional art history depends on research into the great names: the monographic book and exhibition. But the counterculture resists tradition. For example, the archives that collect around canonical architects are notably absent in the case of the counterculture. Many of the publications most often used at the time were ephemeral and are hard to find. On the other hand, because the history is recent, most of the key figures are still alive. The researcher can interview producers and consumers of the alternative built environment of the 1960s and 1970s. In my own work, I have relied on visiting important sites and interviewing participants.

Likewise, compared to painting or sculpture, the museographical canonization of architecture is technically difficult. Few museums present a credible architectural canon in their permanent collection. If this is true for canonic architecture, it is even truer for “alternative” architecture, the outcome of non-establishment processes—self-build, for example. The pieces are rarely formal compositions based on a set of drawings.

Nevertheless, in the last three or four years, a number of exhibitions have attempted to present another profile of architecture. They have used magazines, ephemeral documents, documentaries, films, and photos. At the root of the problem is the counterculture’s emphasis on lived experience as opposed to the production of works of art. Films, photographs and a bulletin-board approach can, in part, mitigate this challenge. But it is notable that art critics and historians have begun to estheticize the counterculture.

How does a museum go about showing work based on defying the establishment? In 2004, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive staged an exhibition of the work of Ant Farm, the experimental architecture collective founded by Chip Lord and Doug Michels. The show illustrated how hard it is to transfer the spirit of a time into the present day.² It consisted chiefly of two-dimensional documents, whereas Ant Farm’s work at the

1 Caroline MANIAQUE, *Les architectes français et la contre-culture nord-américaine, 1960-1975*, PhD dissertation under the supervision of Jean-Louis COHEN, Université Paris 8, Saint-Denis, 2006; Caroline MANIAQUE-BENTON, *French Encounters With the American Counterculture 1960-1980*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.

2 The exhibition *Ant Farm 1968-1978* curated by Constance Lewallen was presented at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 21 January–26 April, 2004. The exhibition toured widely and was presented at the Institute for Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (8 September–12 December, 2004).

96 | end of the 1960s centered on live events and happenings. True, the exhibition did include a full-size fifty-by-fifty-foot inflatable, but in a much less dramatic context than in an Ant Farm performance. For example, *Air Emergency* (1970) featured the inflatable in action at a happening staged for the Earth Day Teach-in at the University of California, Berkeley. Dressed in lab coats and gas masks, Ant Farm architects captured the escalating sense of the destruction and militarization of the environment. In *Media Burn* (1975), members of Ant Farm, dressed as astronauts, drove their “Phantom Dream Car” through a wall of burning television sets. *Air Emergency* was a “survival event” in which those who did not seek shelter from pollution by entering the inflatable were told that they would die rapidly.³ *Media Burn* was a media-oriented performance in a parking lot (far from museum walls). It was videotaped “on the rented Sony Trinitron.”⁴ The 2004 Berkeley Museum exhibition, on the other hand, presented textual documents, faithful to the museographical principle of authenticity. Original typewritten and collaged documents challenged the spectator to read and learn.

It helps if the original conditions surrounding a body of work are repeated at the time of the exhibition. The exhibition *Sorry, Out of Gas*, presented at the Canadian Center for Architecture (CCA) in 2007, understandably played on the relevance of the oil crisis of 1973 to that of the present day. In the exhibition, films of countercultural lifestyles, as well as recent interviews with leading proponents of appropriate technology, brought to life various solutions people have found to deal with the crisis.

Writers of contemporary history draw upon a broad range of sources: graphic, written, and oral. Recorded interviews are often a good feature of an exhibition, for their ability to communicate to the audience the character of the people who were involved at the time. I made a personal contribution to this exhibition in the form of two filmed interviews with Steve Baer and Mike Reynolds. Steve Baer began inventing passive solar energy devices in 1968. Architect Mike Reynolds pioneered the construction of dwellings that recycled automobile tires and soft-drink cans in 1972. Both can claim a place in history because of what they have produced, what they have built and written, and what others have written about them.⁵ Two key aspects of the alternative culture of the 1960s emerged from these contemporary encounters: the emphasis on personal experimentation and the desire for autonomy from the state and its infrastructure. For example, Steve Baer is still opposed

3 See Ant FARM, *Inflatocookbook*, Sausalito, CA: Aunt Farm, 1970, n.p. A reworked page from the *Oakland Tribune* covering the event, 22 April 1970, was renamed “Faculty Urges U.C. Control of Air Labs” and postdated 22 April 1972. See Felicity SCOTT, *Living Archive 7: Ant Farm. Allegorical Time Warp: the Media Fallout of July 21, 1969*, Barcelona, New York, NY: Actar, 2007, note 111, p. 76. For more information on Ant FARM, *Inflatocookbook*, see Caroline MANIAQUE, “Searching for energy,” in Constance LEWALLEN and Steve SEID, *Ant Farm 1968–1978*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004, p. 14–21.

4 Ant FARM, *Automerica: A Trip Down U.S. Highways from World War II to the Future*, New York, NY: Dutton, 1976, p. 136.

5 Steve BAER (Albuquerque) and Mike REYNOLDS (Taos) interviews with Caroline MANIAQUE, August 2001. These interviews were part of the exhibition *Sorry, Out of Gas: architecture's response to the 1973 oil crisis*, curated by Mirko Zardini and Giovanna Borasi (Montreal, Canadian Center for Architecture (CCA), 7 November 2007–20 April 2008).

to high-tech solar solutions, such as photovoltaic panels, just as he was forty years ago. A proponent of passive solar energy, he prefers simple, common-sense applications (such as skylights for single-story buildings) to expensive technical devices, even if they offer tax benefits. Baer's distrust of state-funded research reflects the attitudes of the 1960s counterculture. He clearly admires people who are actively experimenting with new ways of life—be they hippies or not.

Another attempt to capture the ephemeral world was the exhibition *Clip/Stamp/Fold 2: The Radical Architecture of Little Magazines 196X–197X*.⁶ The aim was to juxtapose around seventy independent publications from the 1960s and 1970s. These DIY publications, cheaply produced with the means at hand, mimeographed or printed, clipped, and stapled, are now valued, paradoxically, as extremely rare objects. Seemingly, an exhibition dedicated to preserving the fanzine as an information medium, mainly featuring facsimile copies of the covers, is another example of the transfer of knowledge into formalism. But part of the point of the exhibition was to show how the style of the avant-garde fanzine was adopted by professionally produced journals such as *Architectural Design*.

An annotated timeline wrapped around the gallery walls charted the evolution of some innovative publications such as *Oppositions* (New York), *October* (New York), *Archigram* (London), and *Melp!* (Paris) into more stable form. There is something fascinating about seeing the full set of covers of AD (*Architectural Design*) from 1960 to 1970. One could visualize the disappearance of articles about conventional architecture, replaced by writing on such topics as the conquest of space, hippie nomads, inflatables, or very lightweight structures. The covers, featuring the vibrant and shocking graphics of the time, do communicate the story of the 1960s effectively. Interviews with some of the magazine editors, recalling stories in following years, replaced to some extent the lost content of the magazines.

The exhibition *Environnement total: Montréal, 1965–1975*⁷ was about the influence of the concept of Total Environment in Montréal from ephemeral architecture in the 1960s and 1970s. On the wall, screens of moving images demonstrated that “today, everything is environment,” a term which dominated at the time in the discourses and practices of many artists, architects, and activists. Once again, the message was that the artists and architects of the late 1960s were breaking free from the studios and trying to recreate old forms of performance—circus, dance, musical events, poetry readings, and so on—using public spaces and other spaces not specifically designed for such events. The exhibition evoked this atmosphere with large moving images, objects, printed material, and archives.

To imagine a continuity between art practice and its representation in an exhibition, the recent show at MoMA, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, is a fascinating example.⁸

6 This exhibition was a collaborative research and design project by a team of PhD candidates at the School of Architecture at Princeton University led by Professor Beatriz Colomina.

7 The exhibition *Total Environment: Montréal, 1965–1975*, curated by Professor Alessandra Ponte and a group of students from the Université de Montréal, was presented at the Canadian Center for Architecture (Montreal) from March to August 2009.

8 Exhibition *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* was presented at MoMA (New York) from 14 March to 31 May 2010.

98 | Marina Abramović did not limit herself to documenting her work over forty years with video, installations, and photographs. Rather she used volunteers to recreate happenings and confrontations with the public. She presented herself, also, seated at a table all day every day, inviting members of the public to share this exposure. Live collaborators, naked women framing the entrance, further conveyed the message that artistic practice is a way of life. The sense of confrontation and the risks of vulnerability were stimulated through full haptic experiences in a way that no documentation could reproduce.

Although the study of recent history presents the problem that much of the significant output of the counterculture was ephemeral and experience-oriented, it is alleviated to some degree by the fact that many groups were obsessed with documenting their actions with photographs, videos, publications, and exhibitions. It is important not to allow groups such as Ant Farm, exemplary in this regard, to dominate the historical representation of the 1960s and 1970s.

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