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PRAXIS 7 extends the journal's ongoing commitment to the dissemination of knowledge and stimulation of debate. Presented through twelve projects and essays, each considering a different intersection of architectural and exhibition practices, the issue will surely contribute to the intensification of multiple perspectives as it becomes an essential point of reference.

COMPLEX¹ / MOMA P.S.1:

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While presenting our competition proposal in a crowded conference room at P.S.1, Glen Lowry asked, "Why is it so simple?" It was a question I wasn't prepared for. I never thought it was simple. But then again, I didn't think of it as complex either. Looking back, that moment has achieved undeniable prescience. That simple question was fundamental to the MoMA/P.S.1 competition, revealing an unspoken criterion: complexity.

It began like a lot of competitions; there was a meeting; there was an overload of coffee and directives: our proposals shouldn't require engineering. They need to be easy to install and remove, while providing a public amenity as an urban-beach.² They should be hassle-free, affordable, eco-friendly and "fun."³ For legal reasons, the architectural installation must technically be considered art.⁴ And finally, it must be interesting or "emerging."⁵ Yet, given that the competition requirements were interpretive and exceptionally open-ended, the question arises when surveying the past MoMA/P.S.1 proposals: Why is the "emerging young talent" so similar?

SHoP, Lindy Roy, Bill Massie, Tom Wiscombe, nARCHITECTS, and all respective finalists proposed matrices of repetitive elements that were scattered, folded, fluid, or stretched out and distorted. Formal hierarchies were absorbed into the episodic rhythms of a unified field. Geometries were interconnected and transformative. Closed containers were replaced with indefinite systems (think: networks or nonlinear infrastructure). Iconography was challenged through the systemic.⁶ P.S.1's School of Complexity teaches its students to produce overwhelming transparency⁷ and lightness—or a kind of transformational legibility in order to comprehend as many elements and relationships at once. Simultaneous readings engender complexity through an understanding that each individual element is located within a larger field of relationships, patterns, and effects.⁸

Complexity, as you can imagine, is complex.⁹ There are three types: things that appear complex, things that result from complex processes, and things that engage complex discourse or meanings.¹⁰ Generally, P.S.1 favors the literal variety—a complex complex of elements (or quality produced through quantity). Establishing architectural complexity with purely objective criteria instead of subjective mystification is difficult at best.¹¹ If complexity is the perception which derives from

a frustrated comprehension caused by overwhelming organization or alienation from a complicated logic, if complexity requires adjudication, then what happens when complexity is no longer complex?¹² Can complexity be reconciled with simplicity, especially in a time where any bored computer-savvy teenager can produce the world's most seductively elaborate apparition of kaleidoscopic organization with animated-non-Euclidean-hyperbolic geometries, easily organize staggering amounts of information, and create elaborate self-organizing patterns with "simple" formulas of cellular automation? If architecture is a two-party system, the simple and the complex,¹³ what happens when you can no longer distinguish the difference?

Once the polarized game between simple and complex loses value, the only viable position is in the establishment of new categories.¹⁴ Throughout history, magnetic shifts occur periodically when polar reversals take place, where positive becomes negative and negative becomes positive (or in our case), where the complex appears simple and the simple complex.¹⁵ The only escape from seasickness caused by transpositional or dialectical categorization is in the homologous moment in-between, when form is embraced through the rejection of form, content is provided with no content, aesthetics are created with the destruction of aesthetics, and negative and positive become obsolete distinctions (i.e., neither/nor, both/and, etc.). In that brief moment without qualities or position, distinctions are nonexistent, abstract and real are inseparable, organic and artificial are the same, and the familiar is estranged.¹⁶ And when questioning these distinctions only produces further questions (Why? Oh Why!), the Architect's Instruction Manual suggests to temporarily press the pause button on the spiraling self-conscious recursion into architecture's infinite interior—gilded with its psychedelic array of mirrored surfaces, disciplinary jargon, and fragmented theories.¹⁷ Warning: too much self-consciousness can cripple you; or even worse, you might become a historian/theorist. (Not enough self-consciousness and you're inhuman.) Ultimately, architects have to rely upon disciplinary expertise, optimistic naivete, and faith to construct anything.¹⁸ We're all forced to submit to architecture's ephemerality, its shifting nature, and the realization that for better or worse, architecture is always complex, even when it's simple.¹⁹ =

YOUNG ARCHITECTS

NOTES

1. As it looks very, trapped within, and suffering from.

2. MoMA/PS.'s championing of young architects is an amazing rarity, especially in America. Within a museum complex it can make the "urban-beach" pavilion appear either like a rare-caged and dangerously beautiful beast-at-the-zoo or an overly elaborate gazebo transplanted from the Hamptons.

3. "Fun" was an actual descriptive requirement. At the first meeting, we were told that Bill Masse brought vodka-Jello shots to his presentation and that we should think of tying our project to a product campaign—a "fun product."

4. The artificial borders between the glorious nation states of Art and Architecture have been erased and redrawn many times. That quintessential architect Frank Lloyd Wright called himself an Artist-Architect. Note: Artist is the first of the two; he knew art typically trumps architecture. Le Corbusier was even more confused.

Architectural pathologists can trace this neurosis back to the moment when someone decided that architecture was distinct from building. That distinction created the monumental muck in which we are still wading. From that moment on, architecture has been as much an effect (and affect) as it has a construction, and a cultural value as much as a physical artifact. That moment marked the end of any objectivity on the subject. Yes, this means that 99.9% of architects do not produce grade-A architecture; they produce mere buildings, sycophantic post-architecture, and architecture-lite with no calories and that bittersweet aftertaste.

5. This was an unspoken assumption on our part. "Emerging" was a word that came up multiple times in the competition description. Emerging architecture is an oxymoron. Architecture is neither new nor old. It's always caught in-between. Once a building is labeled architecture it is a death sentence (death by euthanasia). Architecture occupies that moment right after it's new and right before it's extinguished. See also ¹⁴

6. The significant exception to this is Wiscombe's Light-Wing, which is the only project to propagate symbolism—a stealth bomber or sci-fi spaceship. The design was submitted when America invaded Iraq. Coincidence?

7. Regarding transparency, the best work from the competition reads as an intensification of Terence Riley's influential "Light Construction" exhibition at MoMA (1995).

8. The majority of work reads like diagrammatic illustrations of Pierre Bourdieu's complex social systems and self-regulating fields of competing forces. The obsessive focus on internal legibility is also the potential criticism of these complexities. At times they appear solipsistic; offering an illusion of formal legibility within their own internalized organizations—a catalogue of meaningless effects that only makes sense in reference to itself.

9. Architectural complexity is a difficult thing to define, but defining "complex" is not. Complex adj: complicated in structure; consisting of interconnected parts; "a complex set of variations based on a simple folk melody"; "a complex mass of diverse laws and customs" [ant: simple] n 1: a conceptual whole made up of complicated and related parts; "the complex of shopping malls, houses, and roads created a new town" [syn: composite] 2: a compound described in terms of the central atom to which other atoms are bound or coordinated [syn: coordination compound] 3: (psychoanalysis) a combination of emotions and impulses that have been rejected from awareness but still influence a person's behavior 4: a whole structure (as a building) made up of interconnected or related structures [syn: building complex] (WordNet 2.0, 2003 Princeton University; <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=complex>)

One of complex's synonyms is knotty; another is tangled.

10. These aren't mutually exclusive categories—though complex meanings, narratives, or signifiers are unlikely to be discussed. In general, the P.S.I. School is postsignification, postsymbolism, pro-process and performative: with the desire to make architecture do something. (As if.) Architects constantly put words in the mouths of buildings in order to hear them speak. Oh the glorious pathos! See also ¹²

11. In the aim to avoid subjective mystification, the relationship between quantity and quality is an interesting question. Regarding complexity, perhaps quantifying an overwhelming number of elements is the exception. Only at infinity are quantity and quality inseparable. Otherwise complexity is a problem of a subjective definition; what is a substantial quantity to one may seem trivial to another. Simplicity and complexity are not an a priori property of things; they are simply descriptions of the way we interact with them. It depends upon the cultural context. Only in the very extreme cases everyone agrees. But even our definition of extreme or shocking is being transformed weekly—dulled by gross-out TV shows like Fear Factor. Do extreme sports really seem that extreme anymore?

12. Two quotes come to mind: "Everything is simpler than you think and at the same time more complex than you imagine."—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe "The more closely you look at a word the more distantly it looks back"—Karl Kraus

Architecture is an effect (see also ⁴). Some effects are subtle yet others unavoidable. And while the quality of an effect may be measured by its duration and intensity, those effects determined to be architecture are momentary cultural concentrations, reflections, and eventually discourse. Architecture is a figment; a fleeting mass-self-consciousness. Like Viktor Shklovsky's description of poetry in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique," architecture seen as a cultural construction exists by clogging the machine, or slowing down perception:

In studying poetic speech ...we find everywhere the artistic trademark—that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism of perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized perception. A work is created "artistically" so that its perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. As a result of this lingering, the object is perceived not in its extension in space, but, so to speak, in its continuity.

This momentary pause allows critical engagement through difference. It allows the figment of architecture to invade orphaned buildings. The persistence of these figments constitutes our architectural history. Wouldn't it be awful if every building was architecture; urban experience would be stuck in slo-mo; we wouldn't be able to move. Walter Benjamin's statement—"Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction"—is continually abused to say that architecture is received in a state of distraction. Nothing is further from the truth.

13. It is impossible to discuss complexity in architecture without mentioning **Complexity and Contradiction**, in which Robert Venturi categorizes architecture into two opposing types: simple and complex. For Venturi, simple is moral, puritanical, straightforward, and "either/or." Complex is hybrid, messy vitality, non-straightforward, and "both/and." It is a binary relation, built on dialectical opposition. In retrospect, the irony is that Venturi's buildings—produced with his ideology—appear relatively simplistic by today's standards.

14. The only real categorical distinction we currently have in architecture is between interesting and boring. If it keeps you awake, it's art; if it puts you to sleep, it's a drug. Said another way, architecture disturbs the comfortable and comforts the disturbed and, in the broadest sense, it is about transcending the normative. This is not a grunting postcritical rant. (By the way, there is no such thing as postcritical. It, like silence, just doesn't exist. Everything is suspended within a field of referents. Postcritical should be renamed "postboring." Of course the problem is that even postboring will eventually become boring, unable to sustain discourse.) Criticism can be interesting; intelligent discourse can be interesting; boring can be interesting; semiotics can be interesting; ugly can be interesting; but pretty can be too.

15. Essentially everyone (yes, everyone) who plays the dialectical game becomes victim to it. Architectural ideologies are constantly simplified, made edible, and subverted. The transformation of negation into a positive is just the queasy pulsating transpositional theater of dialectical construction (position/counterposition). Those trying to destroy dogmatic ideological positions only become the thing they tried to obliterate. Modernism—the subversion, negation, or homogenization of dialectical construction—could not escape the thing it was trying to destroy. At the same time, all positions (though flawed) are necessary for disciplinary discourse, forcing each of us into an architectural version of the game theory conundrum, the Prisoner's Dilemma.

16. It is this impossible moment we search for—before work is indexed and absorbed into architecture's field. See also ⁸

17. Architecture's interior is like Georg Cantor's establishment of the infinity continuum in set theory. The measured distance between zero and one, using real numbers (rational and irrational), represents an infinite interior. Parmenides, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, who established both the dialectic and metaphysics, can also illustrate architecture's interior. He stated that reality itself is a thinking thing and the object of its own thinking. (Replace "reality" with "architecture" and re-read.)

18. Too often the means become the end. If architects aren't materialists, master builders, or technicians; if all we do is provide ideas with no knowledge or expertise to support them, then what do we offer? Ideas aren't enough. Building is an epic struggle against competing forces. Within a self-regulating field of competing forces, the architect's paradigm for action should be karate—working with the opposing force and using it against itself.

George Bernard Shaw suggests that "the reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man." (Therefore, all first-rate architects need to persuade "reasonable" or find sympathetically "unreasonable" clients.) See also ¹⁶

19. Architecture's figment is elusive. It is our air, our atmosphere. Architecture does not require one to believe in buildings, but only in the interconnected relationships within and between them. See also ⁷

AND THE FINALISTS

