Innovation as Loss?
In Dialogue with Three Contemporary Practices

Commentary
–
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Abstract
Accepting the challenge launched by this issue of *Ardeth*, this commentary is conceived as a short interview with three innovative architectural practices involved in the last Shenzhen Bienniale, namely: Sara Dean (VUCA), Seiche and Nicholas Korody (Adjustments Agency). By means of four questions, the three practices quickly portray how the wider issue of loss influences their way they work and the way in which a contemporary architectural practice is supposed to work nowadays. At stake are reasons behind their approach to architecture proving the deliberately overcoming of disciplinary borders as well as more general remarks about their acknowledgement of loss as an event involved in the process of legitimation of their practices.

Does innovation embed loss? Sometimes innovation appears as an alibi, an elegant and non-explicit alibi, that hides an intention of release from the past. In other cases, actually to those cases to which we are committed in the domain of this commentary, the issue is more complex and perhaps less specious; this time, the ways in which loss occurs are more related to phenomena that are exogenous to the discipline and to biographies, conjunctural mechanisms and job opportunities. Accepting the challenge launched by this issue of *Ardeth*, we confronted ourselves with three young architectural practices involved in the last Shenzhen Bienniale: Sara Dean (VUCA) (Fig. 1), Nicholas Korody (Adjustments Agency) (Fig. 2) and Seiche (Fig. 3).

Fig. 1 - Sara Dean's workspace.

Fig. 2 - Nicholas Koro-dy in his workspace.

Fig. 3 - Seiche team co-working interface.

Among our three interviewees, Seiche has already contributed to *Ardeth* by means of an essay exposing research achievements. This time, however, we feel that a commentary would be useful to take a step back and ask them along with other two practices about their relationship with the discipline (openly problematic for everyone), or rather (in less orthodox terms), with the rules of the game. By means of four questions, this commentary attempts to portray how the wider concept of loss influences such practices. The first question, 'on diaspora', concerns the opening of the field, and the reasons behind their intention to overcome disciplinary borders. The second, 'on sacrifice', raises questions about loss as a sacrifice, or something that is lost with the aim to obtain something else, something promising. The third, 'on Verlust', relates to a German concept used by Hans Sedlmayr in his famous books *Verlust der Mitte* (1948), to draw about loss as a condition embedded in the turn of the discipline from modern to contemporary. The last question, 'on lie', raises the concept of the loss of truth and legitimate uses of lies with or without hesitations.

1 On diaspora

Do you think that overcoming disciplinary boundaries and broadening its field of action features your way of practising architecture? Can disciplinary diaspora become a way through which to discover innovative sources and models for practice?

Nicholas Korody: Yeah, I'd say so. In particular, my collaborative practice with Joanna Kloppenburg Adjustments Agency, which we describe as an "architecture of architecture studio," is concerned with excavating and pushing against the circumscription of architecture and architectural thinking. This takes on a variety of forms, sometimes explicitly institutional critique, while other times it involves pushing against more insidious and unstated disciplinary norms, such as the prohibition against the personal in architectural criticism. My independent research practice Interiors Agency is also attempting to put pressure on disciplinary boundaries. In a way, simply by focusing on interiors and quotidian spatial practices like decorating, it's already invested in a strand of feminist and queer critiques of architecture as itself a product of the gendered division of labor. So, yes, I think it's important and fruitful to take aim at disciplinary norms in your work. Then again, one might venture that all architectural practice is already in a dance with norms, oppositional or otherwise, intentional or otherwise.

Seiche: Architecture has always been considered an amalgamation of different disciplines – a harmonizing way of seeing, thinking and, ultimately, structuring life in space. But architecture is by no means the only discipline entitled for this unifying and territorial claim. The term diaspora implies the non-voluntary resettlement and distribution of a group away from its origin. This is exactly what is happening to architecture as

IT industries colonize the city, and established architectural practices fail to catch up to or even acknowledge the evolution of the means through which spatial organization takes place today. Seiche is a multidisciplinary practice. There's a lot of different backgrounds additionally to architectural in our team, including programming, graphic design, journalism and law. At this stage we see this input diversification not only as a fuzzy path for innovation, but ultimately as a struggle for relevance.

Sara Dean: Architecture for me is design in the civic space of the city. Historically that has been a scale of buildings; now physical structures are not the whole story. I'm still in search of civic space. I think an architectural inclination has led me to broader spheres of work, searching for scales of action and technologies of impact in cities today.

One of the ways that I broaden my practice is through collaboration with other disciplines. A discipline is a vantage point, a framework for seeing and engaging the world. But from that locus, I'm looking for possibilities at its edges. I don't think we do that by being less architectural in our thinking, but by designing in ways we can't accomplish on our own. The idea of the lone, charismatic genius has done a lot of damage. I prefer a practice that is built on momentum and collective action.

On sacrifice

In your practice, the building seems to be investigated, because of the effects it can produce. Effects that are sometimes more ambitious and far-sighted than the building itself. Bataille employs the expression of 'sacrifice', to depict a similar condition by which objects shift from the order of productive consumption to something else that transcends rational thought. For Bataille, such 'something else' is the Sacred (with a capital S). What 'something else' do you think is worth investigating about buildings?

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SD: The System. Buildings and objects are representations of the systems they enable or disenable. I'm much more interested in a building as a node in a network than as an enclosed, singular thing unto itself. Buildings are components of systems of economy, infrastructure, shipping, publics, physics, and politics, even as latent objects. My work is concerned with how a building or object can deliberately activate or manifest large, less-tangible systems; a compass for changing environments, a house that builds more equitable housing, emoji for better disaster response. These are not fix-all solutions, but ways of accounting for externalities in systems, deliberately connecting designs with their larger contexts.

NK: Well, to be frank, I don't really care much about buildings in and of themselves. I have my own aesthetic preferences but I don't think they matter much. The only thing I really care about is the "something else" of buildings – specifically, how architecture is always put to use, put in service of some force beyond itself. The appearance of architecture as something autonomous from that which enables it helps disguise the often violent politics at play. And so I'd be cautious against a transcendental ori-

entation, which might reify pretenses of architectural autonomy. I'm much more interested in the imminent 'something else''s of architecture, so to speak: ie., how architecture is deployed as an instrument of finance capital, a technique of subjectivization, a mechanism of statist violence, etc.

S: To Bataille, discontinuity is part of our experience of normal, mundane, everyday life. In his conception of both 'the Sacred' and 'the Erotic', there is a notion of scaping 'discontinuity', which is also interpreted as an escape to controlled market consumerism. The commodified production of 'the building' is sacrificed in our practice, not because it lacks interest, but because it is sometimes a charge and handicap to other ways of thinking and structuring space. In our practice, 'the Built' is not studied as a discontiguous object but as switch, connector and interface of broader systemic abstractions such as states, jurisdictions or trade zones. It is not a visible or tangible object, but a distributed, enabling infrastructure that equals the process it executes, and contributes to the effective materialization or decomposition of abstractions, that rule what we can or can't do in space. And there is nothing sacred about them.

3 On Verlust
Which features of your contemporary architectural practice do you think could be lost (or are inevitably destined to be lost) in future?

S: Our practice is a test, a game and a process of inquiry. It hasn't been solidified yet and we don't expect it to survive, at least, not as it is now. It's the fruit of combining an unexpected array of interests and backgrounds in a very specific time and space. There is an accidental factor to it. It makes sense to think that if we killed the building as part of our practice, the techniques used to depict it are to be replaced as well. Bi-dimensional and three-dimensional representation tools might not be the best suited to depict systems. This doesn't mean we are neglecting form, as form is always there, except this time it is embodied in abstract models of reality. We see synthesis and diagrammatic thought as both a strength and illness of architectural practice – equally useful and insufficient. Not everything can be synthesized, not everything can be structured, organized and positioned. Therefore, we depict these models by using both their structures and implications.

NK: I find the question somewhat difficult to answer because the field is increasingly scattered and heterogenous. I don't want to be reductive and treat my own bubble as paradigmatic. That said, in my experience, I do find that there's increasingly a tendency to either abandon theory or instrumentalize it for the sake of form, which I believe is detrimental to architectural thinking. One might venture that politics is going the same way but, again, I'm not sure of that, and don't want to dismiss the real political work that is happening.

SD: I hope the shallow, constant deliverables involved in maintaining contemporary practice are lost in the future of architecture. I mean two things by "shallow constant deliverables." The first is the social and operational maintenance of practice: the email, brand management, texting

streams, and Slack pings. These things erode deep focus and change what the work of architecture involves to responses and reactions. The second is the worldview that is shaped by investor cycles, moving business models of production to business models of growth. The modern history of late capitalism can be traced through venture capital and shareholder metrics placed on businesses, with grave consequences for society to address deep, slow problems. Boosting returns on a quarterly cycle to impress shareholders and turning society into the creation of shallow constant deliverables, is something I hope is destined to be lost.

On lie

What kind of meaning do you attribute to the act of lying in the domain of your practice? Is lying a legitimized device for narration?

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SD: I don't think lying is legitimate. But narration and storytelling are legitimate forms of creation. Lying implies deceit. In contrast, telling stories is deliberate, and often optimistic. Speculation is an intrinsic part of architecture – working forward, in projective timelines, in uncanny environments or cities, on buildings that don't yet exist. By creating narrative and scenarios, social interactions, or new value systems as a basis for work, it allows us to work towards new ways of being, new social structures, or new forms of equity and empowerment. This type of lying is productive in developing design in conjunction with its context. I think what is deceitful is the notion that the implications of our work are outside of our scope. It is a lie to believe that architecture is neutral. This is a lie I'm trying to overcome through my work.
S: Every projective practice deals with uncertainties associated with the future. To do so, they rely on non-binding models and visualizations. This is true for architecture as much as for insurance companies or financial markets. As a practice, we model systems that do not exist yet and depict their implications. Speculative storytelling is only one of our working methodologies. The use of fiction in our practice is not a means to hide but to reveal what otherwise might stay unseen. With this idea in mind, we have made a very clear choice to stay away from far-fetched fiction and very close to plausible reality. This proximity makes speculation confusing, but also touching, relevant and potentially real. Some models work as risk pre-emptive mechanisms, to ensure the present status quo is elongated into the future, while ours work as mechanisms to showcase or create alternative possibilities. They all give biased and simplistic accounts of reality; still, they are useful and legitimate, too.
NK: Lying? I've never done it.