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Introduction: Against Metaphor (construye en lo ausente)

Stanzas: little rooms for words.

A few years ago, among poets, all the talk was about architecture. A trend, perhaps, and not without some obvious attractions — developments in the field of architecture had brought together the artistic credentials of the creative arts with an increasingly sophisticated critical literature *and* commercial success. Smart and hip and stylish and able to buy the drinks — what more could poetry ask?

But one might still ask of poetry: why *architecture* rather than some other field? The soul of poetry has transmigrated before; in recent memory it fled from the corpse of verse to the body of critical and theoretical writing (one might think of Jacques Derrida's *Glas*, Susan Howe's poetical essays and investigatory poems, the verse essays of Charles Bernstein and Bob Perelman, or the philosophical inquiries of Lyn Hejinian, for just a few examples), and after that metempsychosis it shows signs of what is at least a new infatuation with haunting the virtual body of the internet and digital media. Were those architecturally attuned poets simply following a trajectory of intellectual interest that has kept a tradition of critical poetry restlessly on the move and in search of new proving grounds?

In asking these questions, I do not want to imply that poetry and architecture have ever been too distant or estranged. There are obviously a number of traditions that have long negotiated between the two spheres. From the imagined structures at the heart of the classical art of memory to the minor genre of the Elizabethan country-house poem, architecture has informed poetry to a greater or lesser extent. One need only recall Pound's *tempio*, Rilke's *Kathedrale*, Blake's tabernacle, or Crane's bridge to recognize the important role that architecture can play *within* the poem, or think of Ruskin's treatise on poetry and architecture, the forms in Keats' Hyperion poems, or the dialogue between Buckminster Fuller and John Cage to remember that the conceptual and theoretical discourse of the sister arts has a long history of correspondence between the poem and the building. Indeed, all of those intellectual movements with interconnected concerns — the baroque and the gothic, cubism and futurism — have left buildings and blueprints in dialogue with contemporaneous linguistic structures and manuscripts. Less direct affinities might also be sketched between the distinctly urban poetry that emerged from Charles Baudelaire's Paris and Vladimir Mayakovsky's Moscow. Like many, Mayakovsky was also impressed with the architecture of New York City, which had made a similarly strong imprint on the work of the Romantic

Romantic writer Sousândrade (pen-name of Joaquim de Souza Andrade [1833-1902]), in his extraordinary "O inferno de Wall Street [Wall Street's Hell]," and which might be felt as well in the work of the native contemporary Walt Whitman — not to mention subsequent revisions in its guise as the capitol of the 20th century by Federico Garcia Lorca, Louis Zukofsky, and Frank O'Hara among many others.

Beyond such thematics, architecture has also served as the "metaphoric" model for structuring poems, from the inclusive urban and suburban imaginative spaces of William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* to the organization of Ronald Johnson's *Ark*, another late modernist long poem in which individual cantos take the part of "beams" and "ramparts," "spires" and "foundations." That metaphorical valence has also gone further to shape the structure of the poem itself, as in works as varied as George Herbet's *Temple* and Vasily Kamensky's *zhelezobetonny*: [ferro-concrete] poems, which modeled their hard-edged constructivist inspiration on advances in steel-reinforced concrete building material. Moreover, projects like Fiona Templeton's 1988 *You, The City* and the *Streetworks* events organized by the Architectural League in the late 1960s pushed the text closer to street-theater by actually incorporating the city as a integral aspect of the realization of the written work itself.[1]

One could multiply examples along any of these lines, but what strikes me about the essays in this collection are the degree to which they refuse to take "architecture," or "poetry" for that matter, in a merely figural sense.[2] At their best, they work to investigate the quite literal architectures of poetry. The literalization of metaphor can be the model for a methodology: a willingness to take the unintended suggestions of language as reality and to pursue a figural and subjunctive hypothesis with a quite literal, demonstrative logic. Such a methodology — what we might call the literal wager — is an investigatory strategy familiar from the *plateaux* of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and one played out in many of the essays included here. Such a speculative extrapolation, in fact, is one way to understand the three essays that formed the kernel from which this collection grew: all written by participants at "Transgressing Boundaries: Strategies of Renewal in American Poetry," a conference held at the University of Salamanca in the summer of 2000, and all focusing on the work of Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins.

Recognized as integral to the canon of 'conceptual art,' the work of Arakawa and Gins applies a distinctly phenomenological torque to conceptual art in order to gain a purchase on the body's relation to the systematicity of knowledge — its cleaving function of simultaneous states of separation and unification. In the process, they have undertaken sustained

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[1]   Although Templeton's project was presented as a dramatic work (an "intimate play"), and the various streetworks projects were pursued under the sign of the nascent genre of performance art, it is worth noting that the documentation of Templeton's work was published by a poetry press (NY: Roof Books, 1998), and that the 1969 streetworks were documented in the final number of the journal *0-9*, which was edited by the poets Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer.

[2]   One might recall Guy Debord's caution to those interested in a free architecture that the new buildings would not be founded on "poetic" forms, in the sense that contemporaneous painting was considered to be "lyrically" abstract ("Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste international [Report on the construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organisation and Action]" (privately circulated, 1957); translated in Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), pp. 17-25.

critical explorations of the indexical thrust by which we understand and navigate a world shot through with signs, and the ways in which categories of knowledge are shaped by language. To a degree equaled only perhaps by Adrian Piper, theirs is a decided *philosophical* practice of art and architecture, or an architectural art which provokes and records a philosophical investigation. Working out to architecture from the degree zero of the "I" in much the same way that the grammarians of The Port Royal worked out the ontology of the *je* from the mere inscription of the copulative verb "to be" in a sentence such as "Le ciel est bleu [The sky is blue]," Gins and Arakawa have developed a linguistic phenomenology.[3] In part, their work is a study of "the area of perception created, located, and demonstrated by the combining (melting) of languages."[4]

There is obviously much more to be said about the seriously playful language games of Arakawa and Gins' collaborations, and the essays at the center of this volume argue eloquently for the importance of their work. Since there is not space in this brief introduction for the extended discussion that would be necessary to give other aspects of their work the attention it deserves, I want to instead briefly note one topic that has been conspicuously *absent* from the critical discussion of their architectural interventions. Where Arakawa and Gins pitch their conceptual geographies toward philosophy, such investigations could equally incline toward politics, as demonstrated by the "new urbanism" integral to the Situationists. Moreover, the constructed situations and psychogeography of the Situationists resonates — sometime harmonically, and sometimes with telling patterns of interference — with the roughly contemporaneous work of Arakawa and Gins. Both remind us that we are not simply given a world, but that we construct one, and that any system — perceptual, cartographic, classificatory, architectural — can be used in other ways. The philosophical precedent for such propositions can be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein's later writing, where "the point is," in mathematics, for instance, that "we can think of more than *one* application of an algebraic formula," and where the insistence falls again and again on "the fact that there are other processes, besides the one we originally thought of."[5] But the political force of such realizations should not be elided; even before any hint of an assertion that the world *should* be otherwise, they manifest the revolutionary force of remembering, quite simply, that the world *could* be otherwise.

More specifically, one might compare the goals of Gins and Arakawa's "reversible destiny" with Guy Debord's "reversible connecting factor":

> Reprendre ainsi le radicalisme implique naturellement aussi un approfondissement considérable de toutes les anciennes tentatives libératrices. L'expérience de leur inachèvement dans l'isolement, ou de leur retournement en mystification globale, conduit à mieux comprendre la cohérence du monde à transformer — et, à partir de la cohérence retrouvée, on peut sauver beaucoup de recherches partielles continuées dans le passé récent, qui

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3   For more on the implications of the "je," see Louis Marin's discussion (*passim*) of Antoine Arnauld and Émile Benveniste in the first part of *Détruire la peinture* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977); for the statement on the architectural implications of the "I" see Arakawa and Gins, 'The Tentative Constructed Plan as Intervening Device (for a Reversible Destiny)', *A + U* 255 (Tokyo: December, 1991), 48.

4   'Notes on My Paintings: What I am Mistakenly Looking For', *Arts Magazine* 44: 2 (November, 1969), 29.

5   Sections 146 and 140: *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

accèdent de la sorte à leur vérité. L'appréhension de *cette cohérence réversible* du monde, tel qu'il est et tel qu'il est possible, dévoile le caractère fallacieux des demi-mesures, et le fait qu'il y a essentiellement demi-mesure chaque fois que le modèle de fonctionnement de la société dominante — avec ses catégories de hiérarchisation et de spécialisation, corollairement ses habitudes ou ses goûts — se reconstitue à l'intérieur des forces de la négation.

[To revive radicalism naturally also involves considerable research work, with a view toward all the earlier attempts at freedom. The experience of their failure, which ended in isolation or fell back into global mystification, leads to a greater understanding of the continuity in the world that must be changed — and by means of this understanding it is possible to salvage many of the partial results that the most recent research has obtained and which can thus be verified. This understanding of the reversible connecting factor in the world exposes — to the extent that it exists and is possible — the false character of halfway measures, and the fact that there are essentially only half-measures each time that the model of the functioning of the dominant society — with its categories of hierarchy and specialization, correlating its habits and its tastes — constructs itself at the center of the forces of negation].[6]

Even before the urbanist critiques of the Situationists and what Guy Debord would come to term their "architecture sauvage [wild architecture]," the radical artistic left was taking the architecture of poetry quite literally.[7] In opposition to the functionalist New Bauhaus and Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, Asger Jorn and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio formed The International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, taking as their founding inspiration Constant Nieuwenhuys' urbanist interventions and declaring: "for the first time in history, architecture shall become an authentic art of construction […] It is in *poetry* that life will be housed."[8] Similarly, the Lettrist International (which had split from the Lettrists in part because they believed that Isidore Isou's group focused too exclusively on language as such) argued that rather than use the modern urban condition as a model for revolutionizing linguistic experience, the lessons of language would be brought to bear on the urban environment and the revolution of architectural consciousness.[9] Recognizing, as Gins and Arakawa would, that "architecture is a tool that can be used as writing has been, except that it can have a far more extensive range of application" the Lettrists pursued a 'writing from the street' (in the sense that one might conceive of a 'writing from the body').[10] "Poetry," they could flatly assert "is in the form of cities," and Constant Nieuwenhuys would predict that "the new urbanism will find its first facilitators" in the domain of poetry.[11]

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6   "Les Situationnistes et les nouvelles formes d'action dans la politique ou l'art," originally published in *Destruktion af RSG 6* (Galerie EXI: Odense, Denmark, June 1963); republished in *Mille et une nuits*, La Petite Collection, n° 300 (Paris: September 2000); emphasis supplied.

7   Guy Debord, 'De l'architecture sauvage,' in Asger Jorn, *Le Jardin d'Albisola* (Torino: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1974).

8   A. Alberts, Armando, Constant, Har Oudejans, 'First proclamation of the Dutch Section of the SI,' *Internationale Situationniste* #2 (December 1959); emphasis supplied.

9   See Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 95-6.

10 Arakawa and Gins, "Dear Neverending Architectonic Reflective Wherewithal," an open letter to Jean-François Lyotard, in *Reversible Destiny: We Have Decided Not To Die* (NY: Guggenheim Museum, 1997), p. 12.

11 'Réponse a une enquête du groupe surréaliste belge,' *Potlatch*, 5 (Paris: July 1954; and also as a special issue of *La Carte d'après Nature* [Brussels, January 1954].; reprinted in *Potlatch 1954-1957* (Paris: Editions Lebovici, 1985), pp. 37-38; Constant Nieuwenhuys, 'Report to the Munich Conference,' *Internationale Situationniste* #3, (December 1959). An anonymous essay on "Poésie" (*Potlatch* 24 [Paris: November 1955]; reprinted in *Potlatch 1954-57*, 183) connects contemporary poetry and the dissolution of fixed poetic form with the dis-

With that understanding of an urban poetry "written on the faces of adventures," the Lettrists required a legible semiotics of the city. [12] They asked themselves: "what sign could we recognize as our own?" The answer: "certain graffiti, words of refusal or forbidden gestures inscribed with haste."[13] Indeed, the proto-situationist interventions could be quite literal; the *L. I.* wrote in chalk on the streets themselves to "add to the intrinsic meaning" of street names, and graffiti flowered over the walls of Paris during the Situationist-inspired revolution of May '68 as Lautréamont's dream of a poetry made by all was reiterated, in paint, by those who simultaneously realized it.[14] The architecture of the city was reconfigured in that summer of 1968 with decidedly *poetic* ends; with the paving stones pried loose from the street and piled to form barricades, or hurled at police vans, one of those graffiti slogans read: "sous les pavés, la plage [beneath the paving stones: the beach]."

With those stones replaced and our streets now reconstructed as "information highways," this collection is an attempt to catch a glimpse of another — more recent and less politicized — moment when poets once again dreamt architecture. With no pretense to anything like a complete documentation, or even a representative sampling, and with many obvious figures absent, this volume is a snapshot of a skyline that has already, irrevocably, changed. Perhaps the attraction of architecture for poets was always girded by the knowledge that for all its sketches and plans and theories — and for all the disdain that the most interesting architects have had for actual buildings — architecture was, in all senses of the phrase, a serious business. It will be interesting to watch how the architectural turn taken by poetry develops in the work written after September 11, 2001, and whether the newly palpable sense of the literal force of architecture will provoke a strengthened commitment to pursuing the architectures of poetry, or a chastened and sobered backing off.

With all the melancholy of *temps perdus*, Guy Debord ended his extraordinary artists' book *Mémoires*: "Je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle [I wanted to speak the beautiful language of my century]."

Hasn't that always been the dream of poetry? And hasn't that — in the towers it raised and demolished over the twentieth century — been the surprising success of architecture?

"The event preceded the architecture and the poem was the mediator. The story is clearly delineated; poetry and architecture are talking to each other forever."[15]

Language cameras, with little room for words.

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solution of fixed urban forms in modernity. The article suggests, accordingly, that the creation of worthwhile literature, architecture and politics would be found in fluid and dynamic forms.

[12] 'Réponse a une enquête du groupe surréaliste belge.'

[13] Raoul Vaneigm, 'Commentaires contre l'urbanism', *Internationale Situationniste*, 6 (Paris 1961), 33-37.

[14] Anonymous, 'De rôle de lécriture', *Potlatch*, 23 (Paris: October, 1955); reprinted in *Potlatch 1954-1957*, p. 176-177.

[15] Carlos Brillenbourg, qtd. in David Shapiro, 'Poetry and Architecture, Architecture and Poetry', *Bomb*, 41 (1992), 20.