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BALANCE OF POWER

Cynthia Davidson on *ReActor*

THE RITUALS OF DOMESTICITY have long been a focus for cutting-edge practices in both art and architecture. Examples abound: Architects Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio slyly subverted the politics of gender and labor underpinning household chores in their *Bad Press: Housework Series*, 1993–98, which included a set of men's dress shirts pressed into bizarre shapes according to "Instructions for a Dissident Ironing"; artists Arakawa and Madeline Gins literally recalibrated the topography of the domestic landscape in their 2008 Bioscleave House (Lifespan Extending Villa), which sought nothing less than to challenge humankind's acceptance of its own mortality. Over the past ten years, the artists Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley have made a significant contribution to this ongoing and cross-disciplinary inquiry, teaming up to test the relationships between architecture and domestic inhabitation in four performance projects, the most recent of which is *ReActor*, 2016, a boxcar-like structure balanced on a single column and set on a hilltop at the Omi International Arts Center in Ghent, New York.

Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, *ReActor*, 2016, wood, concrete, steel, vinyl, rubber, household items. Installation view, Omi International Arts Center, Ghent, NY. Alex Schweder. Photo: Richard Barnes.

Omi, about a two-and-a-half-hour drive north of New York City, is a three-hundred-acre spread of rolling fields for sculpture and architecture installations founded by arts patron Francis Greenburger. *ReActor* stands in Field 01, a sixty-acre parcel overseen by architect and planner Warren James, whose mandate is to explore the intersection of architecture and sculpture through temporary pavilions, landscape pieces, and experimental constructions that introduce new forms, materials, and ideas. Each work remains in place for two years.

In Omi's natural setting, the rectilinearity and position of *ReActor* command the eye. With its flat roof, black structural frame, and long window walls, the forty-four-by-eight-foot rectangle vaguely recalls Philip Johnson's modernist midcentury Glass House. But if at first it seems to be more building than sculpture, the object is certainly not a typical work of architecture; where Johnson's seminal vitrine tightly hugs the ground, *ReActor* is perched on a single concrete column, fifteen feet tall, and is engineered both to rotate in the wind like a giant weather vane and to seesaw up and down.

Movement is at the heart of Schweder and Shelley's collaboration. They met in 2005 when they were fellows at the American Academy in Rome. Schweder, trained as an architect, was then exploring what he calls "performance architecture," based on the notion that both spaces and the subjects occupying them are in a constant state of mutability. These investigations included a series of inflatable rooms, such as *The Hotel Rehearsal*, 2013, a mobile piece composed of a van, a scissor lift, an inflatable room, and guests (in its second iteration, later that year, the work was renamed *Rehearsal Space* and installed alongside the Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut for two weeks, with Schweder as the guest). When he came to Rome, Shelley, a sculptor, painter, and performance artist, was already known in part for his 2004 performance piece *We Have Mice*, in which he lived for a month behind and between the walls of Pierogi gallery in Brooklyn to draw attention to the plight of artists in then-gentrifying Williamsburg. His solo practice also involves diagrammatic paintings that investigate the structure of language and narrative. When working together, Schweder and Shelley explore the spatial and social conditions embedded in architecture by occupying forms of their own design. Prior to *ReActor*, they had performed a series of "social relationship architecture" pieces in which the artist-occupants' daily routines were determined by their respective relationships to their inhabitable objects, which in turn were complicated by the movement the artists set off in the objects themselves. Both object and subject were, in fact, caught in a conundrum of control.

In a 2009 joint experiment, called *Stability*, the artists lived for one week in a twenty-five-foot-long open wooden structure suspended from the ceiling at its central point, like a swing. Minimally furnished as a live-work space—the project's components were listed as "various construction materials, household appliances, two people"—the structure would swing or tip like a seesaw if either man moved from his respective end space toward the center without signaling the other to do the same. In *Counterweight Roommate*, 2011, the artists built a narrow, thirty-two-foot-tall tower that each could climb or descend only by using the other as a counterweight. This required them to be tethered to the ends of a long rope throughout every activity—sleeping, bathing, eating—of their five-day inhabitation. The final work in the series was *In Orbit*, 2014, a thirty-foot-diameter circular form—essentially a giant hamster wheel—furnished as a live-work space and suspended from the gallery ceiling. In order to occupy the object

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Left: **Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, *ReActor*, 2016,** wood, concrete, steel, vinyl, rubber, household items, 16 × 44 × 8'. Kitchen. Alex Schweder. Above: **Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley, *ReActor*, 2016,** wood, concrete, steel, vinyl, rubber, household items. Installation view, Omi International Arts Center, Ghent, NY. Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley. Photos: Richard Barnes.

together—Schweder at the base of the inner circle and Shelley at the top of the outer rim—they had to coordinate every movement, even one as simple as that of going from a desk to a bed, in order not to endanger themselves or each other as the wheel turned. In all of these pieces, the two men had to be of approximately equal weight or otherwise be in a constant state of disequilibrium; without that balance and communication, the architectural form would have proved impossible to inhabit.

ReActor is a continuation, even a conflation, of this trilogy, but as Schweder and Shelley's first outdoor piece it required more architectural details, such as a weatherproof roof and operable windows. Inside, a central core, painted light blue on one side and soft yellow on the other, holds kitchen and bath equipment, neatly stowed as if on a sailboat. To either side of the core is a symmetrical progression of beds, then studies with desks and stools, then porches outfitted with red Adirondack chairs. The image is distinctly domestic and architectural, especially because the colors recall the design and architecture of the rigorously minimal De Stijl movement. But on closer inspection the architectural associations are confounded. There is no front door and no front facade, only equal, parallel sides. The artists must enter *ReActor* from below, where the column meets the floor slab, via a ladder they pull up behind them and fasten to the underside of the structure. The only doors, one at each end, simply lead to the porches.

Like Schweder and Shelley's earlier works, also detailed symmetrically, *ReActor* is perfectly balanced prior to human occupation. But where *Counterweight Roommate* and *In Orbit* required explicit communication before either man could change position, *ReActor* does not. If Schweder moves, Shelley becomes aware of him through the new angle of the floor plane. He may be surprised by the change, but he is not put in any danger by it. Schweder and Shelley lived in situ for two five-day public performances in 2016, in July and in October, which consisted of the rituals of daily living and conversations with observers. On one October Sunday, for example, as the temporary dwelling lazily spun in a brisk wind, Schweder suddenly left his porch and walked toward the core. His shifting weight caused Shelley's end to dip dramatically toward the ground. This drop also changed the way the wind caught the structure, causing it to rotate faster on its central column. Shelley adjusted his stance to the tilt of the floor plane, then adjusted again when Schweder returned to his own porch, having done nothing but move a few feet inside to open a window.

What is revealed by this game of balance and counterbalance? Does the configuration of an architectural structure, and in this case its movement, influence the relationships of architecture's inhabitants, or is it the other way around? The name *ReActor* is itself ambiguous. Who is the actor? Who or what is reacting to whom or what? And because it is outdoors, the work also specifically registers the forces of nature. As it drifts in one direction, then back the other way, the object responds to the wind rather than resisting it, making visible an invisible element that architecture is generally built to withstand. As such, *ReActor* directly addresses the ways in which static architecture is traditionally shaped by dynamic systems—both natural and social—and the ways in which those systems, in turn, may produce architecture that reinforces our expectations for human behavior and habitable form. Schweder and Shelley wear brightly colored jumpsuits in all of their performances, conjuring sites of incarceration. They seem to be prisoners not only of their physical constructions but also of the social protocols required to maintain domestic harmony. Ironically, though they must occupy their pieces together, their mostly solitary confinement at the edges is what keeps *ReActor* (and all of their structures) in balance.

When occupying *ReActor*, both artists keep diaries chronicling their experiences. (They will take up brief residence again May 5–7.) Shelley has written of an ever-evolving relationship with the structure: "My experience in Reactor is that it really is pleasant, sheltering, even nurturing. But very controlling. A substantial amount of my energy is spent dealing with its capricious nature. . . . It's not overly burdensome, but it is a big reduction in my sense of autonomy." Is this a complaint about the limits imposed by architectural form or an acknowledgment that despite all of the social expectations it inevitably inscribes, architecture still allows for individual autonomy?

ReActor deliberately makes visible the forms and rituals that structure our lives, but it does not, as Diller + Scofidio and Arakawa and Gins did, suggest specific alternatives to those rituals. On that Sunday in October, visitors walked alongside the rotating dwelling, chatted with the artists, and expressed their desire to spend a weekend in *ReActor*, bobbing in a "house" that moves with the breeze. Shelley believes this is because his experience, seen from the outside, looks quite pleasant, a quality most people expect from a house in the country. Perhaps this is the ultimate conundrum: Schweder and Shelley are not just grappling with the ways in which social relationships are shaped by architecture; they are subverting the all-too-mundane expectations of nurture, shelter, and service that the public tends to bring to the field. In those moments when *ReActor* escapes these expectations and asserts itself as art—through its unpredictable movements and sudden periods of imbalance, whether initiated by its inhabitants or by a force of nature—it allows us to question our expectations of architecture, just as architecture can reframe the role of art. □

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ReActor *is on view at Omi International Arts Center, Ghent, NY, through July 2018.*