



# OPEN HOUSE

*Agnieszka Gratza*  
on the evolution of 'performance architecture'

The annals of every discipline are full of unsuspecting twins somehow hitting upon an idea concurrently and yet independently. One such concept is ‘performance architecture’ – a phrase that started being used at roughly the same time by two different people, both of them practising architects who happened to have a foot in the art world and a particular interest in performance art. Back in 2007, when Pedro Gadanho and Alex Schweder each Googled the term, their searches yielded meagre pickings: allied with architecture, performance had everything to do with efficiency, sustainability, cost-effectiveness and the like, and nothing to do with performance art. Six years on, owing to their joint proselytizing efforts, performance architecture is a rapidly emerging field.

Unlike Gadanho, for whom this has become essentially a research activity since he joined the Department of Architecture and Design at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in a full-time curatorial capacity, Schweder is a practitioner and even calls himself a ‘performance architect’. After ten years of practising a more traditional brand of architecture in New York and Seattle, Schweder became fascinated with performance art around eight years ago. This was during a fellowship at the American Academy in Rome, where he got to know several performance artists, including Laurie Anderson and Ward Shelley, the latter of whom he went on to collaborate with on a number of projects, starting with *Flatland* in 2007. Based on drawings by Shelley, this habitable structure was four-storeys high but only 60cm wide, yielding a total of 19.2m<sup>2</sup> living space shared between six occupants that dwindled to three over the course of a three-week performance staged at SculptureCenter in New York. Physically and emotionally challenging for the performers, who were free to leave at any point but couldn’t then re-enter the building, this piece made a deep impression on the audience who watched them go about their daily routine as best they could within the punishingly narrow confines of *Flatland*.

It was while working on this piece that Schweder came up with the term ‘performance architecture’ to describe what they were doing. The first in a trilogy of ‘Architect Performed Buildings’ on which Schweder and Shelley worked in tandem, *Flatland* was followed by *Stability* (2009) in Seattle and *Counterweight Roommate* (2011) in Basel. Reminiscent of works by Erwin Wurm such as *Fat House* (2003), which unlike *Flatland* could be entered and experienced by visitors (though not in any sustained way), these ‘extreme caricatures of buildings’, as Schweder puts it, were intended to ‘take things that are more subtle and make them large enough for people to see’ – namely how architecture draws implicit boundaries and constructs relationships between us.

By the time Gadanho and Schweder met in 2010, both had been working on this subject and referring to it as ‘performance architecture’ for some time. Gadanho, who had written extensively about it from 2007 onwards in essays posted on his blog, Shrapnel Contemporary, started noticing architects such as the French-Portuguese Didier Fiuza Faustino or the

Italian collective Stalker using the body to activate urban space in their walking practice and making connections to performance art at the turn of the millennium. If the late 1990s and the 2000s were marked by a return of Minimalism in architecture, Gadanho surmised, then maybe the next artistic movement to have an impact would be performance art which reacted against it by questioning the status of the self-contained art object. As Gadanho said: ‘There was this term “performance art”, so I thought let’s talk about “performance architecture”’.

The genealogy of performance architecture might be traced back to the Utopian proposals of Russian Constructivists, such as Georgy Krutikov’s *Flying City*, in the 1920s. It flourished in the 1960s and the early ’70s, exemplified by projects including the British architecture group Archigram’s temporary ‘living’ architectures (*Living City*, 1963; *Plug-in City* and *Walking City*, both 1964), the ‘underground architecture’ of the San Francisco practice Ant Farm, the playfully radical experiments of Superstudio in Florence, and the inflatable living units of the Austrian collectives Coop Himmelb(l)au and Haus-Rucker-Co.<sup>1</sup> After something of a lull, during which avant-garde architectural firms such as Diller + Scofidio or Vito Acconci’s Acconci Studio were the vital connection to New York’s performance art scene, it picked up again in the 2000s with what has become known as the ‘performative turn’.

For Lamis Bayer, who – together with Schweder – devised a series of playful instructions inscribed on the walls of Tate Britain’s Duveen Galleries at a ‘Performing Architecture’ event in February 2013, two ‘linchpin moments’ in the pre-history of performance architecture were Yves Klein’s *Leap into the Void* (1960), which inaugurated a new era of immaterial architecture, and Gordon Matta-Clark’s iconic work of ‘anarchitecture’, *Conical Intersect* (1975), an unsolicited cut piece in two abandoned buildings on the future site of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Matta-Clark could be considered – to use architectural historian Jonathan Hill’s expression – an ‘illegal architect’ *avant la lettre*.

‘Performance architecture’, like all new terms, has met with a certain amount of resistance, especially from performance or live artists, who see it as an arrogant move on the part of architects co-opting the discipline to their own ends. Others take issue with the use of the noun (as opposed to ‘performing architecture’, say, which is deemed to be more neutral), arguing that it reifies something that essentially amounts to acting out or performing a space, and thus reverts to an outdated notion of architecture as an object or a building rather than a process or an event.

Call it what you will, the practice of ‘performance architecture’ is gaining ground. Since his appointment at MoMA last year, Gadanho has raised the institutional profile of this field, not least through the acquisition of recent works illustrating the trend by Faustino (*Double Happiness*, 2009; *Stairway to Heaven*, 2002) and Andrés Jaque Architectos (*IKEA Disobedients*, 2011). The latter, which was the first ‘architectural situation’ to be acquired by MoMA, was premiered in November 2011 at Madrid’s La Tabacalera building (a former cigarette factory turned squat), before a new version was included in Gadanho’s MoMA exhibition ‘9+1 Ways of Being Political: 50 Years of Political Stances in Architecture and Urban Design’.

Though the two iterations both featured a makeshift installation kitted out with hacked IKEA pieces, each came with its own local crew of ‘disobedients’: people whose unconventional domestic approaches challenged the apolitical ideal of ‘the independent republic of your home’, as well as demonstrating the richness of social interactions that straddle the public–private divide. In the Madrid iteration, a Spanish woman called Candela cooked for elderly men, mainly widowers whose wives used to prepare their meals. In New York, Maddy from Queens turned her front room into a hairdressing salon, which was replicated at MoMA PS1, where visitors could avail themselves of her services. In *Techno-Geisha* (2003), another one of Andrés Jaque Architectos’ performative projects doubling as an architectural manifesto, the firm created a host ‘hyper-equipped’ to act as a mediator between people. The Techno-Geisha character dons a variety of portable, bubble-like environments, as if they were outfits, designed to make people feel at home in the metropolis.

For Andrés Jaque Architectos, fostering associations between people is exactly what architecture is about. To them, architecture is less to do with buildings and spaces than with the actions and gestures that take place within them, which may be why architecture and performance strike them as a natural alliance. Operating out of their Madrid-based ‘Office for Political Innovation’, the firm perceives human relations – and, by extension, architecture – as political in the broadest understanding of the term. Performance lends architecture the critical edge it lacks or cannot afford precisely because it often remains tied to corporate interests. Performance architecture invites a playful and, at times, subversive behaviour that questions the ideological motivations behind architectural ‘programmes’. Architecture is by nature prescriptive: a building comes with a set of cues or implicit rules that ‘programme’ the occupants to behave in a certain way. Performance architects such as Jaque or Schweder aim to offer a more permissive space as an alternative. ‘We invest walls and spaces with rules,’ says Schweder. ‘Since we made the rules we can also break them and perform differently in that space.’

The economic crisis has created a receptive ground for temporary, reversible and affordable projects that make do with little and avail themselves of vacated sites as Matta-Clark did. For Nicolas Henninger, one of the members of the French collective EXYZT, founded in 2003, making ephemeral projects opens up doors. The collective became known after transforming the French Pavilion into their home and allowing the public to enter at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale. Henninger sees the construction process itself – in which the architect fully takes part, living on site so as to get to grips with the local social and economic realities – as a performance. Programmed in consultation with local user groups, gathering places such as the fleeting Southwark Lido (2008) or the Dalston Mill (2009) in London, though not built to last, create a precedent for the communal occupation of a space and invite future (re)uses. (Both spaces have, in fact, been re-occupied and turned into other like-minded community-based projects.)

*'Our architecture revolves, swims, flies.  
We are approaching the state of floating in air and swinging like a pendulum.'*

EL LISSITZKY (1926)



1

previous page  
Gordon Matta-Clark  
*Conical Intersect*, 27-29 rue Beaubourg,  
Paris Biennale, 1975

1 & 3  
Alex Schweder  
and Ward Shelley, *Flatland*, 2007,  
installation view at SculptureCenter,  
New York

2  
Andrés Jacque Architectos  
*IKEA Disobedients*, 2011, performance  
at La Tabacalera, Madrid



2



3

4  
 Didier Faustino  
*Stairway to Heaven*,  
 2001,  
 Castelo Branco,  
 Portugal

5  
 Peter Cook (of Archigram)  
*Plug-In Mews House*,  
 1965

6  
 Haus-Rucker Co  
*Mind Expander*,  
 1968,  
 photographic print



4



5



6

*Temporary, moveable and open,  
'performance architecture' often utilizes substances  
like air and water.*



1



2

Temporary, moveable and open rather than permanent, fixed and enclosed, performance architecture often utilizes substances like air and water, in lieu of the more solid building materials – such as concrete, glass and metal – with which architects generally work. The most spectacular instance of this is the Blur Building by Diller Scofidio + Renfro, an exhibition pavilion erected at huge expense for Swiss EXPO 2002 at the base of Lake Neuchatel. ‘We wanted to make an architecture of atmosphere,’ Liz Diller explained in a lecture: ‘No walls, no roof, no purpose, just a mass of atomized water, a big cloud.’<sup>2</sup> Described in these terms, the Blur Building nods most obviously to Yves Klein’s visionary idea of ‘Air Architecture’, the walls of which would have been constructed of high-pressured air, but also perhaps to the Austrian collective Coop Himmelb(l)au, one of whose mobile structures, *The Cloud* (1968–72), was fashioned of nothing but air and dynamics. Designed to challenge the primacy of the sense of vision, the Blur Building enveloped the visitor in a disorientating cloud of fine mist, channelled from the lake by computer-regulated fog nozzles. The sense of apprehension generated by the optical whitewash was aggravated by the surrounding white noise. One could hear, breathe and even drink the building in a specially designed water bar.

‘The static architecture of the Egyptian pyramids has been superseded,’ El Lissitzky proclaimed in the 1920s: ‘Our architecture revolves, swims, flies. We are approaching the state of floating in air and swinging like a pendulum.’<sup>3</sup> Lissitzky’s vision appears to have been realized in any number of contemporary architecture projects that have an element of performance built into them. But this has come at the expense of architecture itself in its common understanding, since the practitioners of performance architecture tend to be so focused on the body – whether their own, the performer’s or the user’s – as to sometimes dispense with the built structure altogether. The most radical experiments in this respect are works by Faustino and his Paris- and Lisbon-based firm Mésarchitecture, articulating an architecture of gesture that effectively amounts to a degree zero of architecture. ♦♦

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- 1 For the historical antecedents see Chris Salter and Peter Sellars, ‘Performative Architectures’, in *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2010, and Pedro Gadanho, ‘Some Notes on Performance Architecture’, in *Performance Architecture*, Pedro Gadanho (ed.), Guimarães, 2013  
2 Los Angeles, 2007. [tinyurl.com/yj2rnez](http://tinyurl.com/yj2rnez)  
3 *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1967, p. 330

1  
Diller Scofidio + Renfro  
Blur Building, 2002, Lake Neuchatel,  
Swiss EXPO

2  
Didier Faustino  
*Opus Incertum*, 2009, painted MDF,  
1.8 × 1.1 × 1.2 m