



ALEX SCHWEDER

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Stability and Other Tenuous Positions
March 21 - May 2, 2009

Lawrimore Project, Seattle

Cover: Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley. *Stability.*, 2009. Various building materials, 2 people, 1 week. 25' x 5' x 16'

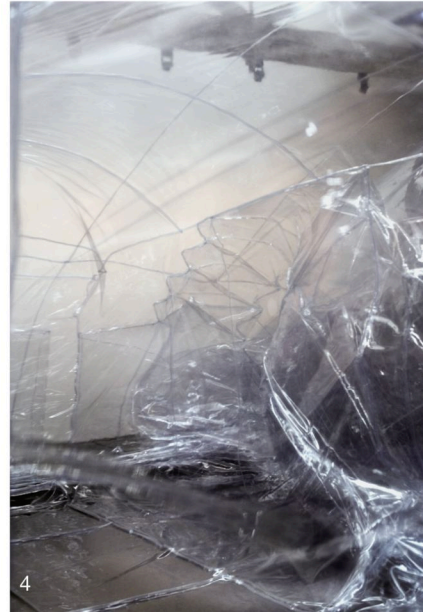


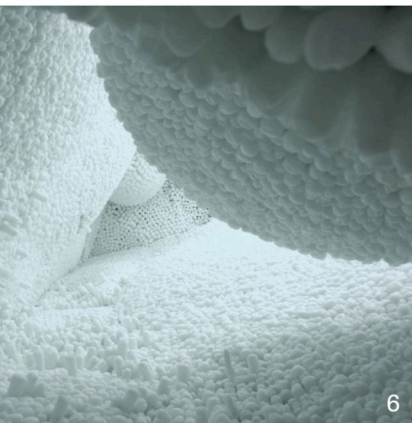
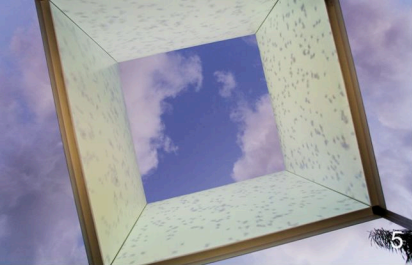
Bodies and Buildings

With each object and expression, Alex Schweder reveals a tangential relationship poking holes in assumptions we might make about what determines the form and function of architecture. He suggests a return to ancient questions about the relationship between body and building, asserting the concerns of the classics through his performative sculpture, installation, and architectural interventions. While we understand that architects make buildings for people to occupy and use, Schweder wants to confront these buildings and bodies to destabilize the way bodies greet each other, how they move through built space, and the way architecture idealizes, activates and represents bodies.

Shown for the first time at Lawrimore Project, *Our Weight Around Us*, 2009 (fig. 3) is Schweder's most recent performative sculpture that posits a physical system to link otherwise unrelated bodies. The work is two inflatable sofas that are conjoined. They are plush and white and inviting when left alone and untouched. From a distance the puffy pillows and tubular shape invite you to rest a while. But there is only enough air in the two forms to fill a little more than one of them. If one person is sitting on either sofa and the other gets up, the seated person will sink to the floor. In order for a body to remain comfortably seated objects from around the room need to be piled onto the unoccupied half. There are books, a coffee table, a television.... all available to the sitter. You cannot sit alone.

Inflatables figure prominently in Schweder's portfolio. Made of a heavy weight vinyl and fans, *Snowballing Doorway*, 2008 (fig. 2) and *A Sac Of Rooms Three Times a Day*, 2007 (figs. 1, 4) aggravate tensions between body and building. These sculptural interventions simultaneously confront visiting bodies and the architecture, acting as an interface highlighting the way buildings and bodies negotiate space in time. At first look, *Snowballing Doorway* appears a hermetically sealed visual and physical exercise. Two arches exchange a finite amount of air, which forces the form to rise and fall, from the shape of an archway into the arch's mirrored image, an impassable U-shape. The sculpture presses against the architecture that houses it, grasping at the building. Bodies decide how to approach, view, and pass through the arch, as it feels the extent of its reach at its top, bottom and sides. These sculptures intervene to stress the exchange between body and building. A tension is palatable.





Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* comes to mind. Limbs outstretched mark the points of a perfect circle. The classical notion of an ideal volume that Vitruvius developed weighs heavily for Schweder who addresses time and again the process of determining a form's proportions. Do we build to generate or to accommodate the dimensions of an ideal human body. Da Vinci's drawing suggests more than an interpretation of Vitruvius's "objective" coordinates for construction; something electric happens when the man, the male body, reaches as far as his hands and feet will take him. It is more than joining the dots his hands and feet articulate. This body conducts a circular energy field. Schweder's inquiry taps into this. Whether he generates pools of water through activating ice blocks as architecture (*Melting Instructions*, 2008) or controls a swarm of swallows (*Folded Murmur*, 2006 (fig. 5)), the forces of the universe are at work here. However, they do not always accord with the dimensions perfection would prescribe.

This sometimes alchemist proposes we reconsider the form and structure of things. His saliva transforms biodegradable packing peanuts into building material (*Spit Skin*, 2006 (fig. 6)). His body intermingles with the building to create something new. These transgressions are especially powerful because they occur with attention paid to a rich historical lexicon. Overflowing with art historical reference, he's explored urinals since his first residency in 2001 at the Kohler factory in Wisconsin. He began making a series of urinals with *Peescapes*, 2001 (fig. 7). These finely manufactured objects made from vitreous china relate the male and female body. Both produce urine that needs to be removed. *Plumbing Us*, 2008 (figs. 8, 9), his most recent urinal, shown in this exhibition, suggests a problematic division between inside and outside, and the lines between the genders male and female. The form of *Plumbing Us* instructs a man and a woman to straddle the wall that usually separates them. They both use this urinal that is designed with two bowls to suit the specific biological needs of male and female. While their difference is accommodated, their urine is directed to mingle together into one body of liquid that travels the same drain.

Gender has surfaced in some of Schweder's earlier work. *Plumbing Us*, however, taps into a very raw idea about gender. "Post-Gender" is a term that is starting to creep up in public conversations about desire and sexuality. It is a word that attempts to grasp at a way to signify a global kind of desire, one not circumscribed by this or that genitalia. While at this moment the label "post-gender" seems an unconvincing way of re-casting bisexuality to include transgendered folk, Schweder might be moving to make objects that will elicit the language we are searching for.

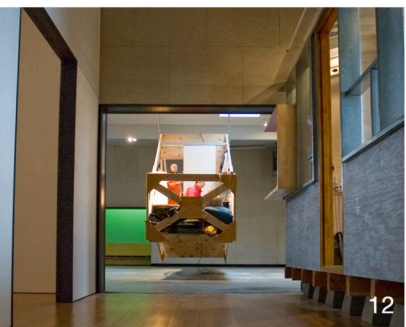
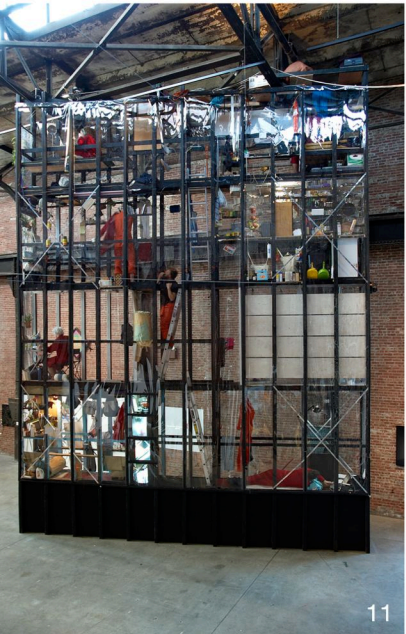




Using sculpture and installation to perform and problematize some of the ideas Elizabeth Grosz has put forward, Schweder questions how the body's surface and form constructs for it a psychical interior. He points to how inner dialogue informs reactions and responses to the objects and architectures we use and inhabit. Schweder playfully jostles with aesthetic, architectural systems to prod and provoke us to grapple with the impact of inscribing social behavior through design. His work triggers a kind of wonder and curiosity about our bodies, and the way they negotiate each other and the built environment.

Schweder's work, from his urinals to his inhabitable structures (*Flatland*, 2007 (figs. 10, 11) and *Stability*, 2008 (fig. 12)), rattles the biological order of things, leaving them unhinged. He reexamines the distinction between biology and culture to pinpoint moments when culture constructs the body in its own image, and the way the psychosocial simulates and produces the body. As Grosz explains, this is a relationship born of a complex feedback in which neither the body nor its environment can be understood as something organically, holistically unified. Schweder has figured out a multitude of ways to destabilize this radical idea. He can shift our perceptions by articulating that what occurs between body and building is much more fluid, erratic and unpredictable than is generally understood.

Yasmeen M. Siddiqui
Storefront for Art and Architecture, Curator at Large

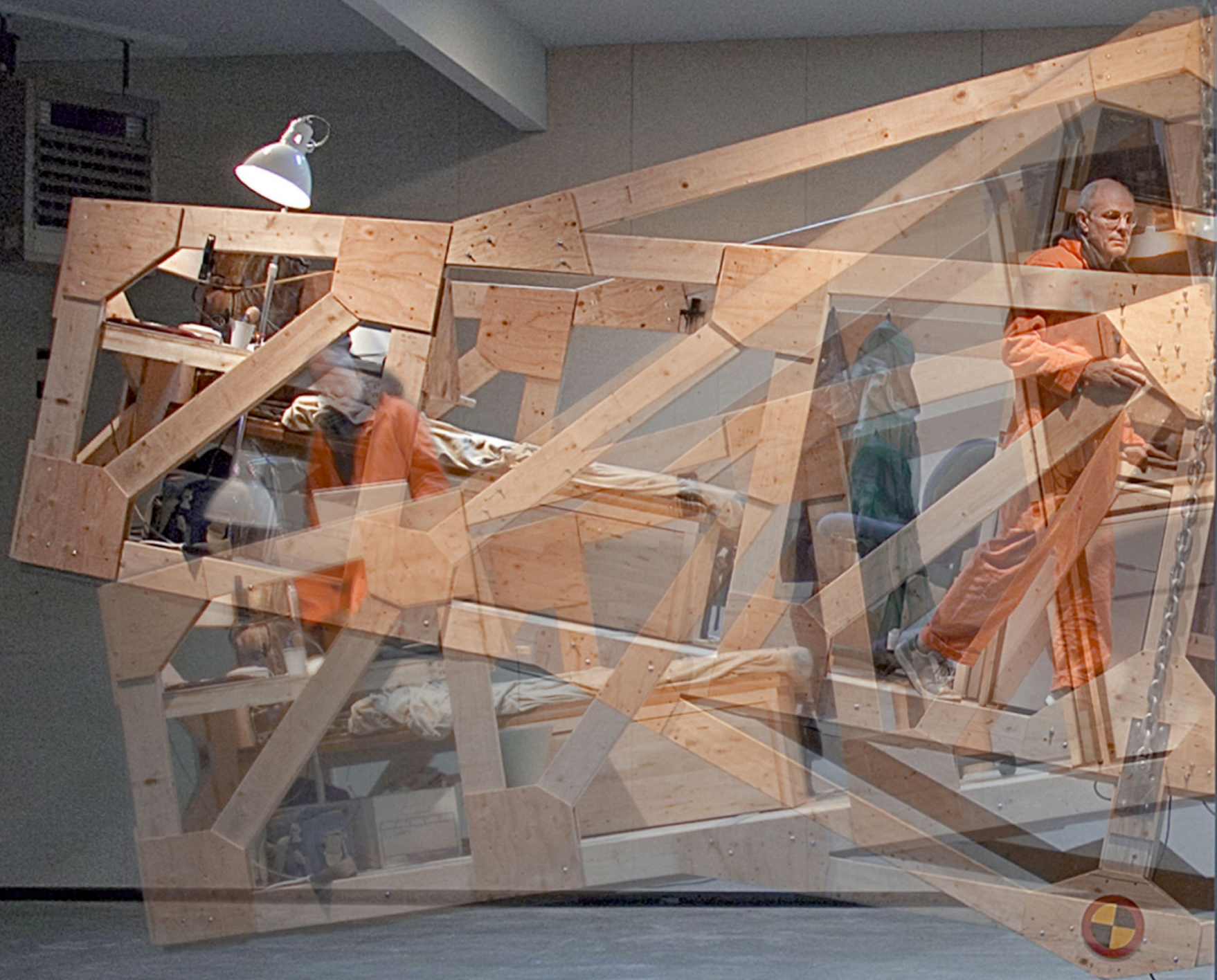


Opposite and next four pages: Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley. *Stability*, 2009. Various construction and household materials, two people, one week. 24' x 5' x 10'. Installation and performance views Lawrimore Project.













Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley. *Flatland*, 2007. Various building materials, six people, three weeks. 2' x 32' x 24'. Installation and performance views Sculpture Center, NY.





Spit Skin, 2006. Saliva and biodegradable packing peanuts. Dimensions variable.
Installation view American Academy in Rome (right); Post-installation (above) [photo: Richard Barnes].





Plumbing Us, 2009. Vitreous china, conjoined male and female urinal with common drain. Installation view Lawrimore Project.





Homing MacGuffin, 2008. Living room, furniture, carpet. 23 x 19'6" x 12'. Installation view Home Base III, Harlem





Our Weight Around Us, 2009. Heat-welded vinyl, air for one sofa, one or two people, various furniture . Dimensions variable.



Biography

Alex Schweder is the 2005 – 2006 Rome Prize Fellow in Architecture. Since this time, Schweder has been experimenting with time and performance based architecture including *Flatland* at New York's Sculpture Center 2007, *This Apple Tastes Like Our Living Room Used to Smell* presented at Western Bridge in Seattle 2007, *Melting Instructions* presented at the Tacoma Art Museum 2007, *Homing MacGuffin* during New York's Homebase III project 2008, *Its Form Follows Your Performance* to be presented at Gallery Magnus Muller 2009, and *A Sac of Rooms All Day Long* to be shown in at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 2009. His work has also been exhibited nationally and internationally including Henry Urbach Architecture in New York, the St. Louis Art Museum, the Netherlands Architecture Institute, and the Museo d'Arte Contemporane di Roma. Schweder's projects have been collected by several eminent individuals and institutions including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Schweder is the author of *Stalls Between Walls* included in *Ladies and Gents, the Gendering of Public Toilets*. He is a three time artist in residence at the Kohler company and will be in residence at the Chinati Foundation in Fall of 09. Schweder has been a guest professor at the Southern California Institute of Architecture in the Fall 07 for the seminar *How to Perform Your Own Building*. Alex Schweder holds a Masters in Architecture from Princeton University (1998) and a Bachelor in Architecture from Pratt Institute (1993).

Acknowledgments

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Credits

Alex Schweder published in conjunction with the exhibition, *Stability and Other Tenuous Positions* at Lawrimore Project, Seattle, March 21 - May 2, 2009. Images courtesy the artist and Lawrimore Project. All rights reserved.

Opposite: *Melting Instructions*, 2007. Melting ice, five days. 40" x 48" x 240". Installtion view Tacoma Art Museum.





Our Weight Around Us, 2009. Heat-welded vinyl, air for one sofa, one or two people, various furniture. Dimensions variable.



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