

le Journal Spéciale'Z n°04

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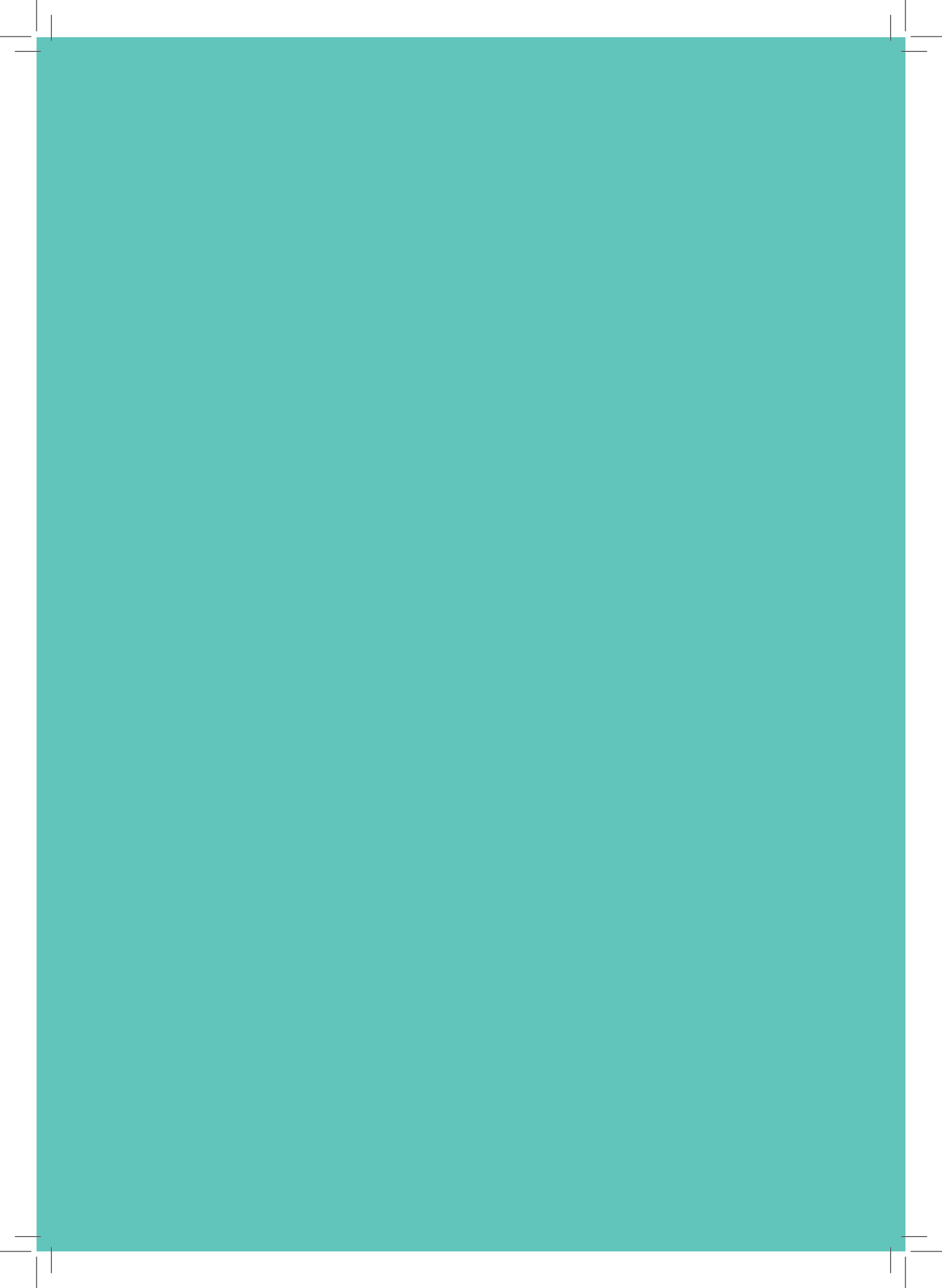
*les Thèmes*  
Diagram  
the Spatial Turn  
Perform

ÉCOLE  
**SPECIALE**  
D'ARCHITECTURE

# le Journal Spéciale'Z

*questions critical to the  
built environment*





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*I had to retouch the space shared by human beings, heat and cool the earth, tame the elements, become the master of air. I attempted to obtain industrial backing by filming, in my kitchen, proof that my air roof would work. A stream of compressed air would keep the water from falling onto the tiles.*

*Yves Klein, in Yves Klein: The Blue Revolution (MK2TV, Pompidou and France 5, 2006)*

*Each floor is a separate installment of a complex intrigue ... the planning of the choreography of mankind through experimental techno-psychic apparatus designed by themselves to celebrate their own design*

*... Eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on the 9th floor.*

*Rem Koolhaas, from "Life in the Metropolis" or "The Culture of Congestion" (August 1977)*

# Perform

*The term 'performance' remains elusive even within well-delineated disciplinary contexts. The bursting of performance art in the sixties provided a new framework and an alternative set of rules through which artists could articulate their relationship with society. Durational at its core, performance seems set to become the twenty-first century's most influential intermedium. As budgets are slashed, attention spans shorten and professional activities become eventalized; the cultural object – no longer preeminent – veers into product, turns into activity, de-materializes into performance. Cultural production as process.*

*Of course, just as Klein was leaping into the void to affirm that performance is 'the evolution of art towards the immaterial', he was also dreaming up and indeed prototyping a similarly dematerialized, performative architecture. This 'air architecture' set the stage for the experiments of Superstudio, or indeed for Haus-Rucker-Co's explorations of the performative potential of architecture through the use of viewing structures and prosthetic devices that activated a critical perception of space. Emergent and as yet under-investigated, performance architecture is an architecture that is enacted as much as it is built. Notions of building performance, performance as construction, the rendering of the socio-political experience of the individual in space, or the architectural program as an urban script reaching beyond the specification of typologies to prescribe behavioral patterns are all converging to formulate new paradigms of spatial practice.*

*Performance crystallizes the potential of architecture as a form of critique. Heterotopic in the Foucauldian sense, it renders visible counterarrangements and discontinuities. But could architectural practitioners lift methodologies and ideas from the realm of performance art to reassess how the environment affects our movements, habits and gestures and is in turn affected by them? When does performance become productive of architectural space? Could the traditional architectural object be supplanted by architecture as a process? Could an architecture of gesture – not of objects, nor of discourse – be envisaged, and what forms might such an architecture take? Crucially, could we begin to articulate a proto-history of Performance Architecture?*



*Claude Parent & Paul Virilio,  
maquette for Pendular Destabilizer, 1968  
© FRAC Centre collection*

# *Performance Architecture*

Alex Schweder

Consider the image on the opposite page for a moment. Many of you will have already glanced at it and thought it was documentation of modernist sculpture. Others will recognize it as the maquette for a visionary architectural proposition. Surely it can be seen as both; this is part of its appeal. Another reading I want to posit is that it could show a diagram made of wood illustrating fragments of two inharmonic sine curves at a point of intersection. As long as I am taking liberties, I will say one sine curve fragment represents architectural discourse and the other the conversation around performance. Since these are fragments of sine curves, we can imagine them both extending in either direction with crests and valleys that intersect from time to time. For now, though, I want to focus on this particular intersection and claim that it is representative of our moment's discourse. Architectural and performance practices are converging and exchanging a bit of energy, perhaps even enough to alter one another's trajectory.

We have been here before; the waves representing dialog about performed and built space have met many times. One could easily argue that they share a common source.<sup>1</sup> What is different about our moment, however, is that for the last half century the conversations around performance and fine arts have harmonized to form a new wave called performance art. This caused a radical move away from representing bodies in painting and sculpture and toward working aesthetically with live subjects as a medium so potent that we are still rethinking both categories. Now, carrying this different energy, the wave of performance that intersects with architecture produces a new light in which we can examine the architectural field.

Architecture, like performance, has always contained the energies of live bodies. Both fields structure the behavior of their participants, but until this time architecture had always named the bodily actions and relations it contains and constructs 'program'. For example, the program



architects call ‘house’ uses its built form to instruct occupants where to enter, eat, sleep, fornicate, wash, socialize, et cetera. The partitions in our buildings are built to script the actions of those who inhabit them. Architectural cues let people know what to do where, when, and for how long – much like the script for a performance. In this way, subjectivity and our built environments are intimately bound; the potential in broadening research in this area holds the promise to use architecture as a way of facilitating who we want to become. Take as an example the doors to men’s and women’s rooms, passing through either facilitates our performance of gender<sup>2</sup> both for others and ourselves.

Because performance already exists within architecture, those of us who think about the topic do not need to introduce the kind of new genetic material (the live body) that fine arts turned to in the early moments of performance art. The effects of understanding architecture as performative are therefore subtler – experiential rather than visual – than they were when sculpture and painting were layered with performance. To bring this change about, we have to dislodge our habits of thinking about the way architecture works with the subjectivities that occupy it, from proscriptive (program) to exploratory (performance). At stake in this re-signification is the development of a region in our practice that has been undervalued. Indeed, if we were to become as playful with behavior as Frank Gehry is alleged to be with form, the limits of our practice would expand into territories where architecture can be more socially and politically engaged, give more agency to occupants, and open up new aesthetic territories.

In this essay, I will be discussing selected works from my own practice, which for the last seven years has been focused on investigating possible connections between architecture and performance. During this time, categories of production have emerged: Architect Performed

Buildings, Buildings That Perform Themselves, Bodily Performances in Architectural Time, Re-Scored Spaces and Its Form Will Follow Your Performance. My practice draws explicitly from the history of performance art and the title of this essay acknowledges my debt to the thinking of those who pioneered and continue the production of this category.

#### *Pendular Destabilizer*

Before discussing my own efforts, though, I want to ground them in a history. My description at the beginning of this essay of the opening image as an illustration of two conversations converging is more accurate than the above text might have initially disclosed. As mentioned, this image shows a maquette for an architectural experiment. It is called *Pendular Destabilizer n°1* (*Instabilisateur Pendulaire n°1*, otherwise referred to as *IP 1*) and was to be built and lived in during the spring of 1968 at the University of Paris-Nanterre. Were it to have been realized, its two occupants’ only communication would have been through a small slit through the common wall in the middle of the structure. Its authors, Claude Parent and Paul Virilio operating under the name Architecture Principe, were planning to occupy the structure suspended sixteen meters above the ground for a month.

The experiment was intended to test aspects of the Oblique Function. The theory posited that an architecture comprised of inclined walls, ceilings and floors would trigger social change. Influenced by the phenomenological philosophy put forward by Merleau-Ponty,<sup>3</sup> it saw that the increased physical exertion necessitated by inhabiting raked surfaces would have the effect of also increasing mental activity. In this heightened cognitive state, it was the hope of Architecture Principe that a new society would emerge that would be in contrast to what they saw as a population lulled into complacency by the ease of post-war consumerism

aided and abetted by the ‘labor saving’ devices that were restructuring domestic space.<sup>4</sup>

During the month that they had scheduled for the occupation of *Pendular Destabilizer*, medical and social researchers were to chart the impact of oblique living by monitoring Parent and Virilio as they experimented with different modes of occupation. However just as the two were about to begin construction, the push for social change occurred through the re-performance of an existing space. Virilio took over the Odéon Theater with Jean-Jaques Lebel, Julian Beck, and the people from Living Theater.<sup>5</sup> This act ended the collaboration between him and Parent as their philosophical differences were brought to bear by this historic moment.

We will never know what new thinking *IP 1* might have produced. From my own experience of occupying experimental structures, I can imagine that Parent and Virilio would have learned things that neither might have anticipated. I will begin a discussion of my own work where the *Pendular Destabilizer* ended, just prior to construction.

#### *Architect Performed Buildings*

In 2007, nearly four decades after *IP 1*, Ward Shelley, Pelle Brage, Eva La Cour, Douglas Paulson, Maria Petschnig and I began construction on the first building that we would perform: *Flatland*, at the Sculpture Center in Long Island City.<sup>6</sup> Shelley and I had met at the American Academy during a year-long Rome Prize Fellowship in 2005; and this work became the starting point for a collaboration that continues today.

Springing from discussions about Edwin Abbott Abbott’s novel of the same title, *Flatland* began as a drawing by Shelley. Like the shapes in the novel, we were curious about how different personalities would interact given an environment of unusual dimensional parameters. After many attempts at

more visually complex designs, we decided that structural repetition would best frame the irregular activities inside.

At only 0.6m wide, *Flatland* was just as its name suggested very thin; and the six of us were to occupy it for three weeks. The script for our performance was to live life as normally as possible. There was only one rule: once we entered the building, we could leave at any time but would not be allowed to re-enter. Four stories gave the group 19.2m to share. Each of us had a 1.6m<sup>2</sup> sleep/work space. There was a fully plumbed bathroom and a kitchen. Food was ordered online and the venue’s staff picked up trash. Internet and cell phones were permitted. We were thus fully contained.

Though we could talk to people about our experiences from inside, visitors were excluded from entering the building. We felt that allowing too brief an experience of this compressed space would compromise its reading. Rather, it was important for the audience to watch the effects of tightness on those of us who were experiencing it in a sustained way. For this reason, the building skin was transparent vinyl, rendering all but our actions in the bathroom completely open.

My interest in *Flatland* was in the ways that occupying subjects and occupied objects construct one another. We build a building based on subjective desires and then occupy it. In line with the Oblique Function, I speculated that an extreme space would have an impact on our psyches and we would then alter the structure physically. What played out was quite different. Working in a space only as wide as your shoulders proved frustrating to construction and the prospect of making a mess with building debris in the place where we slept was unappealing. Rather than having our building envelope move outward, our subjectivities moved inward and many of us occupied ourselves with activities that required very little movement like reading or drawing.

By the third day, we felt the space was constructing our intersubjectivity as well. We six began dividing into groups that had to do with the ways in which we occupied space through the objects in it. Roughly half divided along lines in relation to order. The frustrations of working in tight spaces made half the group feel as though it was too much effort to even clean their surroundings. When a meeting was requested to discuss this, the 60cm wide space made it impossible to face one another as we spoke. Nothing was resolved and relations continued to divide. By the end of the seventh day, half the group stopped bathing because they disliked cleaning the bathroom after showering more than the derogatory comments from the others. On the tenth day, the first person departed *Flatland* and was followed four days later by the other two who were struggling with the restriction of movement. Efforts were made to keep shared areas free of stray things but their personal spaces had gotten even tighter with disorder and packed with materials for artworks that were never made due to the tight space. It seemed that the materials themselves held value in what they could potentially be. After their departure the last week felt pleasant and there seemed to be more space, though we never moved into the personal spaces of those who had left *Flatland*. These reflections are my own; others will likely have different stories to tell.

The experience of *Flatland* was an essential turning point where I realized the potential of the unpredictable occupant. What I imagined prior to inhabiting the work was not nearly as strange as what actually occurred. Though none of these changes were visual, they have had lasting effects on the lives that experienced the space. For this reason, the most accurate documentations of *Flatland* are the divergent and immaterial oral histories, rumors, grudges and friendships. Through *Flatland*, I came to understand architecture as a series of social relations intimately constituted by and tied to an object.

Stepping out of *Flatland*, I walked away with questions about how I could work with relationships in aesthetic terms, and with the unfulfilled urge to make a building that would change in direct relation to its occupation, thus making visible the interconnectedness of architecture and its inhabitants. With these thoughts, Shelley and I began working on ideas that ultimately became *Stability* and performed in 2009 at Lawrimore Project in Seattle. Though we were unaware of *IP 1* at the time, *Stability* does echo its use of inclined surfaces and human mass as a factor of architectural occupation. Unlike Parent and Virilio's theory where people traversing inclined planes would struggle against their own mass, Shelley and I were occupying the space in relation to one another's mass. If we did not synchronize our distance from the center point, the entire building would incline toward the person furthest from the fulcrum. It was only when we did not coordinate our activities that we would experience the oblique living surfaces that Parent and Virilio were researching.

This structure was built for two and suspended by chains from the ceiling with a work/sleep space to either side of the kitchen and bathroom. Initially, Shelley and I were going to try to keep the structure balanced, and we often did; but by the end of the week living on an incline was something that we had gotten used to. Our decisions to coordinate our distance from the center became more about which was less convenient, our need not to be interrupted or our need to stay level.

The possibility that banal daily actions and routines could be the medium for a work of art was introduced by artists like Trisha Brown. Her *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* first performed in 1970 involved the unremarkable task of walking without affect down the face of a building. The action was only modified by the shear vertical context that it was deployed in. As the performer exerted himself to endeavor an utterly familiar

action, it became clear how he was constructed by the environment.

While *Stability*'s maximum gradient of 15 degrees was not as severe as Brown's 90 degrees nor *IP 1*'s 25 and 40 degree living spaces, Shelley and I did experience life on an incline. As in Figure 5, when Shelley was cooking or in the bathroom, I was often engaged in work thereby not wanting to join him at the center to keep the building level. So as not to sit at a sloping desk, I would move to a place at the far end of my living space that I adapted to be like an easy chair when tilted. Situations like this were about comfort and I tend to speculate that Parent and Virilio would have ended up making adaptations to *IP 1* for similar reasons. When Shelley and I perform this work again, we will likely increase the possible incline so that there is more at stake, making parts of the building only accessible when inclined.

By the end of our week-long 24 hour a day performance of *Stability*, we found that we had become hyper attuned to one another. We could anticipate what the other was going to do kinesthetically and were no longer communicating future movements verbally.

Unlike *Flatland*, *Stability*'s audience was able to grasp our subject/object/subject relationality immediately. However, we wanted to go further in ensuring that the coordination of our bodies and habits was made necessary by a building. This led us to performing *Counterweight Roommate* at the 2011 SCOPE Basel art fair for five, 24-hour days.

*Counterweight Roommate* is an extremely vertical living environment: five stories, with one room on each floor measuring 0.6m by 2.0m. A rope that passes through a pulley at the top tethers Ward and I to either end. Both movement and location in this vertical habitat for two depend on the opposite movement: for one person to move up a floor, the other must move down a floor. Each floor

contains a single function and the sidewalls are transparent to reveal the functional amenities and the action unfolding within. The bottom floor, with self-contained sanitation facilities, is the bathroom – closed from view when in use but otherwise open for visual inspection by the audience. Since the kitchen is on the top floor and the lavatory is on the bottom, when one person wants to cook, the other person must climb up to the bathroom. Levels two and four are personal spaces for each artist where they will work during the day; they convert to sleeping spaces at night. On level three is the living room where the two ends of the rope meet and the performers can socialize and eat together by way of two facing chairs.

Despite the fact that our occupation of this work was necessarily interdependent, Shelley and I experienced it quite differently. Unlike performance art practices such as that of Chris Burden where a sense of personal danger was central, my intention was not to terrorize myself with a building. That said, I have had a fear of heights since childhood and may have unconsciously sought to experience the most extreme building that would also eloquently visualize the intersubjectivity produced by architecture. Inevitably, this fear produced a higher emotional state. We experienced both volatility and care. Shelley volunteered to do all the cooking, I would only need to go to the kitchen when he needed to use the bathroom. He nonetheless thought me resentful of his need to change rooms.

Experiencing what happens when tied to another person for five days brings but a taste of Linda Montano's and Tehching Hsieh's *Art / Life: One Year Performance 1983–1984 (Rope Piece)*. Here the two artists were tied together for a year, never touching but always negotiating one another. *Counterweight Roommate* will eventually be performed by others. What is important in the selection of future performers is equal weight; beyond that it will be for them to interpret the

structure and make it habitable – psychologically and physically.

Of course, architectural situations have so many components that it is difficult to isolate one aspect and point to it as the cause of a change in subjectivity. Through this trilogy of Architect Performed Buildings, we have found immaterial performative factors such as duration, emotional predispositions, and interpersonal chemistries are what most impacts our experiences of a space. I have come to understand that these factors are as inextricable from architectural space as bricks and steel. The work of Performance Architecture is to find ways of not only working with these qualities aesthetically, but also developing methodologies for disseminating them to both architects and occupants so that these roles are no longer thought of as discrete.

My appreciation of the audience also became more nuanced through the conversations we would have. The terms ‘spectator’ and ‘viewer’ are used to describe a visitor who comes to see a traditional performance or a fine arts event. Both terms connote passivity and a privileging of the visual over other senses. Performance artists have focused explicitly on changing the relationship between the event they engender and those who come to experience it. This turns those who attend into active producers of content and meaning. In architecture, we call this person an ‘occupant’ or ‘inhabitant’ which implies a fuller sensorial range and gives them permission to insert themselves into a building. This injection of ‘self’ into a space has been explored in the previous three works. However it was the subjectivity of the authors rather than the visitors’ that was examined. This territory, the incorporation of both author’s and visitors’ subjectivities into a performed/performative architectural space became the departure point for *The Rise and fall*, made for the 2012 Marrakech Biennale in collaboration with Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll. We have been

working together for a number of years on how audiences are conceptualized by performance artists such as Critical Art Ensemble, Valie Export and Rirkrit Tiravanija. To describe that moment when a viewer changes their relationship to an event from interpreting the work through their gaze to producing its content and meaning with their actions we coined the term ‘performing viewers’.

This conceptualization of an active public seemed an especially appropriate idea to explore within the socio-political context of Morocco at that moment. A few months prior, the most open elections in their history were held; and the Biennale was re-sited to an opera house whose construction had been stopped in the late 1980’s, the building finished except for the auditorium. In this space, no seats were installed, the floors or walls remained unfinished and the stage slab was never poured. The auditorium was like a half written script to be completed. An opera house is steeped with cues for how one is to look, and how they are to act toward both spectators and thespians. With the stage (thespians) and the seating (spectators) both palpably absent, our completing the existing spatial composition took the form of a bridge between the two. It allowed visitors to cross it thus breaking the opera house behavioral conventions by occupying the stage’s locus.<sup>7</sup>

A wall separated the stage proper and the opera pit – with an 8m drop on the stage side and a 3.5m drop on the side of the orchestra pit. The bridge was balanced on this wall. As with *Stability*, it tilted as one moved across it. However, the script for this building’s performance was radically different as it involved inviting the audience into the structure. The bodily sensations of negotiating one another were no longer the artists’ prerogative. Also part of the scripting of the space were two record players placed at either end of the structure that played Rimski-Korsakov’s opera *Scheherazade* on one end and a libretto written by von

Zinnenburg Carroll set to a musical composition by Tamara Friebe on the other. These vinyl recordings needed to be reset every four minutes and the prompt encouraged people to move within the space. As the building tipped, the styluses would slide off making a loud scratching sound ending the music.

Safety is one of the central emotions buildings are designed to instill in those who enter. Wood buildings are clad in brick in part to provide reassurance of their fixity. Movement was slow inside *The Rise and fall*, the building's precarious position astride the wall gave participants the bodily sensation that their safety might be at stake. Many people who entered knew instantly that their movements must resemble those of a butoh dancer. Visitors described being aware of the location of each part of their bodies in space and of feeling intimately connected with those having the same experience.

#### *Rescored Spaces*

Moving from the operatic to projects focusing on the quotidian, the theme of negotiation threads through. Projects in the Rescored Spaces category begin with common architectural scripts. Familiarity with objects allows people to feel a confidence that they know how to interact with the work, and commonplaceness engenders a sense of permission to interact. Once people engage these things, however, they find a rupture in the script. Where they thought they were endeavoring an isolated activity, they realize they have become social.

Throughout this article, I have intermittently referred to the scoring of spaces. What I am calling the 'score' of a space Parent referred to as 'social paramaters'. In a recent issue of *o32c*, he describes the typical home as follows:

Consider how boring it is within our homes. The kid stays in the assigned kid's room while the grown-up sits on an inherited couch in another room. We're completely overfurnished. What would it be like on the other hand, if space were understood more playfully, more free, if movement and being in a space also could mean climbing, reclining, sliding?<sup>8</sup>

Parent's frustration with the rigidity of habits imbued in the occupational cues our environments present to us through furniture and partitions led him to a radical proposition for refiguring the typical home. His imperative was to remove all furniture and replace it with undulant surfaces that can be interpreted by the inhabitants. My approach is also based on interpretation and the subversion of existing codes, although in *Rescored Spaces*, people will enter a space and think – if only for a moment – that they know where to begin.

In *Plumbing Us* (2009), I work with two scripts, that of the bathroom which prompts us to perform a set gender and that of a urinal to 'pee here.' Those with a penis will follow the urinal's script without notice, while those on the other side of the wall using the conjoined female urinal take notice of the introduction of an object that is usually used to reinforce the actions of a male. When used by either gender though, people take notice of the fact that this object rewrites the normative script of the wall between the two rooms from 'separate women from men' to 'mix a woman and a man' – this is done through a shared drain in the middle of the urinal.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Buildings That Perform Themselves*

Buildings function on a number of levels. Architect Performed Buildings and Rescored Spaces act on our minds phenomenologically – in the sense that the immediate bodily sensations produced by a building stimulate the occupying subject's psyche. Architecture also operates symbolically for its beholder; in many cases buildings operate as effigies of our bodies.<sup>10</sup> For example, when we see a symmetrical building we are reassured by the order in so far as we are about to become part of that



order.<sup>11</sup> When we see a building that is in ruins we experience a chill similar to the witnessing of a dead body.<sup>12</sup> Buildings That Perform Themselves began as an exploration along symbolic lines of how the imagery of a building – transient like our ephemeral bodies – might be productive rather than unsettling. I had begun to understand this in performative terms when I became familiar with inflatable technologies in 2005.

Beginning as an unarticulated configuration of lines and plastic on the floor, filling with air, becoming an engorged recognizable image, deflating, returning to a formless state, over and over and over, inflatables presented a way of making architecture that most accurately symbolized the way we experience our bodies as both in the moment, alive, and in the future, dead. Scoring this sequence of interaction between vinyl and air to occur over the course of a day rather than a life (either human or architectural) was a way to speed up formation and decay to a timescale that we understand to be that of a performance.

*A Sac of Rooms All Day Long* (2009) begins as a nine by six meter puddle of clear and black vinyl on a museum floor. As the air from four independent blowers slowly fills the four room-sized chambers, the black lines that once lay in a jumble start to become recognizable architectural elements. After an hour of fans turning on and off, the volume of a house emerges, yet the imagery from two houses remains. The outer sac, depicting the exterior envelope of a 50m<sup>2</sup> 1950s house, is filled with four other sacs articulating with the rooms of a 90m<sup>2</sup> 1920s bungalow. In this sense, *A Sac of Rooms All Day Long* is something too big inside of something too small. Each room (a living room, dining room, entry and kitchen) is separate and inflates with its own independently timed fan. At a certain point, the skin from the 1950s bungalow can no longer contain the swelling rooms inside of it. The

rooms start to steal space from one another; the living room sac might slip under the entry sac; the kitchen and dining room press against one another, each gaining ground from time to time. Slowly, almost as if exhausted, the frequency of inflation diminishes until it completely stops. At the end of six hours, the houses have again returned to the floor, where they await until the next day, to toggle between landscape and building.

While this work marked a significant milestone in my thinking, soon after its completion I wanted visitors to be able to enter the work. In its exhibition they would see themselves symbolically in the performance but never embody the experience of the shifting forms. Since the outset of my independent practice, I have always been interested in finding holes in the boundaries between subjects and objects, places where the two become difficult to tell apart. Most artistic experiences rely on visual and symbolic connections between people and things, moments where the image you see captivates your imagination. While lingering at the *A Sac of Rooms All Day Long* opening at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I overheard people expressing their desire to go inside of it. The soft squishy environment created tactile desires that were left unfulfilled.

Hence *Roomograph* (2011) works as much through tactile appreciation as it does visual. The piece consists of equally sized (4 x 4 x 3m tall) inflatable forms. Within it, zones covered in chenille dimpled like sofa cushions communicate the architectural instruction 'sit down'. People who accept this invitation are engulfed in pillow-like suspension.

After a three-minute exposure, the lights and fans shut off and the piece starts to collapse at a rate just slow enough for the occupants to leave their mohair-like surroundings. Looking back in, they see their afterimage lingering on the surface which

they now realize to be photo luminescent – an architecturally scaled photogram. Then their own image moves from something recognizable to a fractured shape intertwined with architectural surface.

At the deCordeva Museum in Massachusetts, visitors began ‘posing’ for their photogram. Couples stretched from end to end holding hands so that they could see an image of their togetherness imprinted on the architecture. One visitor interpreted the green afterglow to be the result of radiation and re-enacted positions common in cinematic depictions of nuclear attack. This is nothing new. Civilizations have been using architecture to re-present images of who they would like to be back to themselves for millennia. The Greeks did this through architectural devices such as the caryatids; the Romans through Vitruvian proportioning systems based on an ideal human body; the Medieval cathedral’s cruciform plan evoked the undying body of Christ; and Le Corbusier invented the Modulor. The difference between affixing idealized human imagery to a building at its conception and allowing a transient occupant to see their own imagery in the building is similar to the previously discussed difference between program and performance. The former proscribes the ideal image of themselves that they should aspire to (with exceptions like the caryatids most of this imagery depicts a youthful symmetrical male body) and the latter allows the occupant to construct their own self-representation through enacting different selves.

The way a performance is documented impacts the way it will be historicized.<sup>13</sup> For those who do not experience the performance live, visual documents coupled with the oral history of the original performance take on a life of their own. Photographic documentation of architectural performances can play a large role in the way that we use architecture to construct our subjectivity. Thinking about how people use buildings in their

performances for the camera is having an impact on the way I make new works, as we will see in the next two categories.

#### *Bodily Performances in Architectural Time*

“If Buildings That Perform Themselves speed up the rate at which a building changes, then Bodily Performances In Architectural Time slow the actions of occupants down to the time of a building.”<sup>14</sup> This was the original thinking behind my next category of performance architecture. These works were started as a kind of reaction to the discrete object/viewer relationship in early experiments. Now, I characterize these works as text based instructions written directly on the building in which they are installed that, when followed, implicate bodies and buildings in a more intimate exchange. Often these exchanges are already occurring but their impact is so subtle or slow that they go unnoticed. Take for example this work that was developed with Cynthia Davidson and Tina DiCarlo for *Log #20* (2010) and is now installed in the Wasserman collection in Dusseldorf:

#### **Listen to walls until you hear them dividing**

Another such work was developed in 2009 while on a residency established by Donald Judd at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa. One of my studios was an old butcher’s shop and meat storage facility. The shop had a large south-facing glass storefront that became quite hot under Texas’ fabled big sky. The locker where meat was kept had one door, thick walls, and no windows. Even on my hottest day there, this room was several degrees cooler. As one of several renovations I made for the space, I installed the instructions:

#### **Inhale this warmer room, exhale it into this cooler room, until their temperatures are the same**

This text was affixed to the floor at the threshold connecting the two rooms using large vinyl letters.





*Alex Schweder, Ward Shelley, Pelle Brage, Eva La Cour, Douglas Paulson & Maria Petschnig  
Flatland, New York, 2007  
photo © Mark Lins*



*Alex Schweder, Ward Shelley, Pelle Brage, Eva La Cour, Douglas Paulson & Maria Petschnig  
Flatland, New York, 2007  
photo © Mark Lins*



*Alex Schweder & Ward Shelley  
Stability, Seattle, 2009  
Photos © Scott Lawrimore, edited by Ward Shelly & author.*



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*Stability, Seattle, 2009*

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*Alex Schweder & Ward Shelly*  
*Counterweight Roommate, Basel, 2011*  
*photos © [www.kefalias.ch](http://www.kefalias.ch)*



*Alex Schweder & Ward Shelly*  
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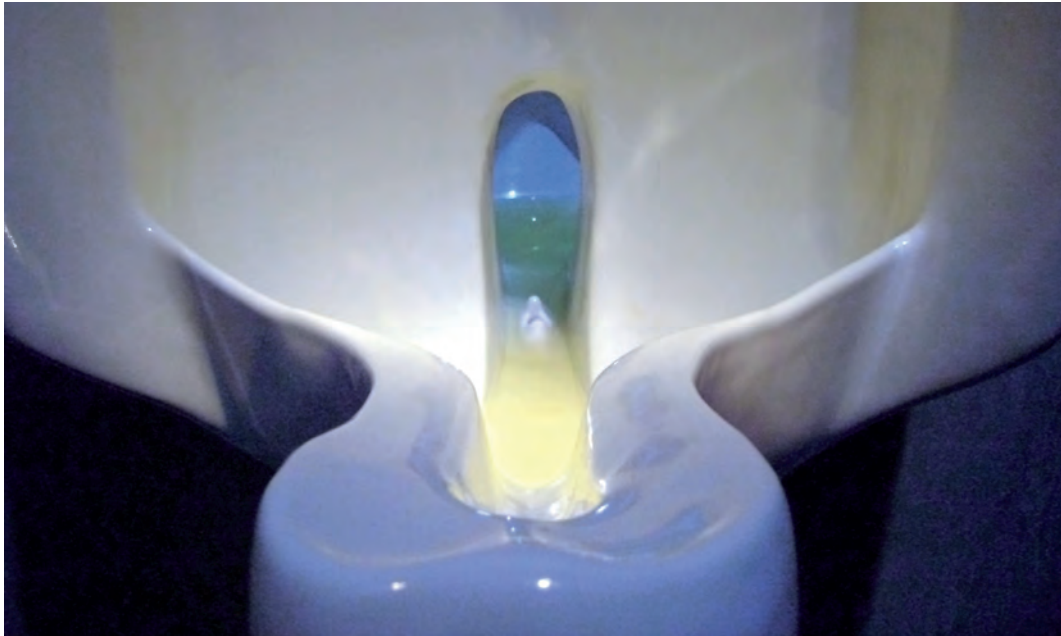


*Alex Schweder & Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll*  
*The Rise and fall, Marrakech, 2012*  
*photo © Alex Schweder*



*Alex Schweder & Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll*  
*The Rise and fall, Marrakech, 2012*  
*photo © Alex Schweder*





*Alex Schweder*  
Plumbing Us, 2009  
*photo © Alex Schweder*



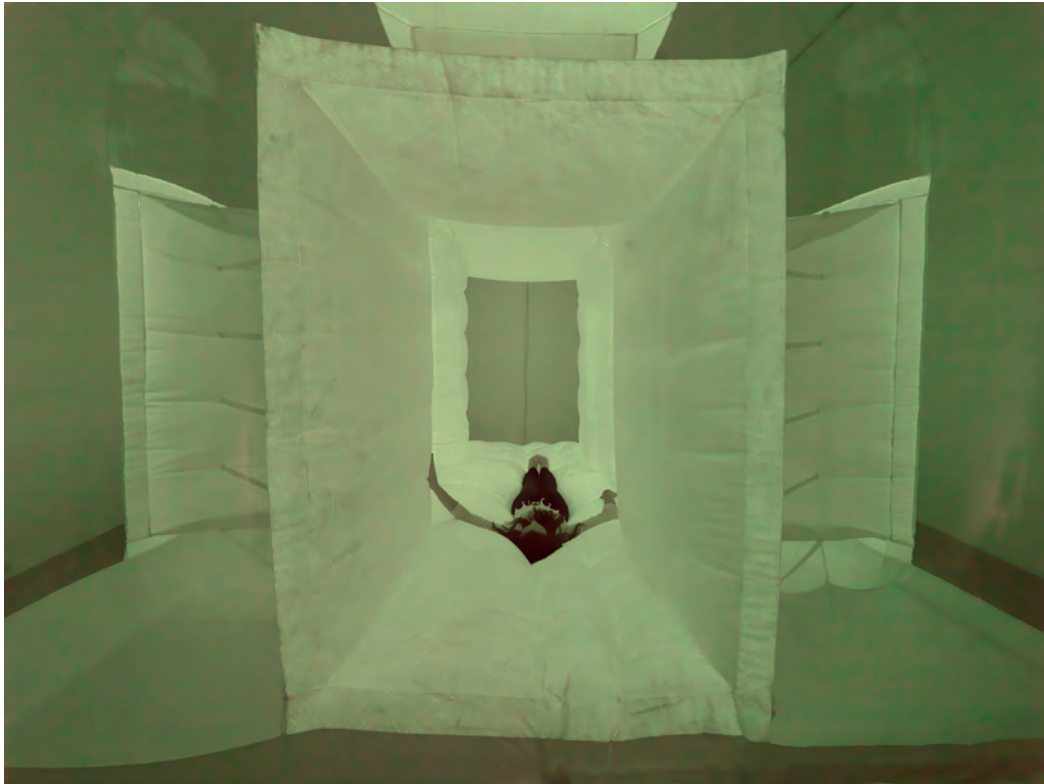
*Alex Schweder*  
*Plumbing Us, 2009*  
*photo © Alex Schweder*



*Alex Schweder*  
*A Sac of Rooms All Day Long*  
*San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 2009*  
*photo © Ian Reeves/SFMOMA*



*Alex Schweder*  
*A Sac of Rooms All Day Long*  
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*photo © Ian Reeves/SFMOMA*



*Alex Schweder*  
Roomograph, 2011  
*photo © clementsphotodesign.com*



*Alex Schweder*  
Roomograph, 2011  
*photo © clementsphotodesign.com*



My intention for these instructions is not to literally complete them, but rather for occupants to observe that simply occupying a space alters that space in some subtle way.

A question springing from these works is how to deploy architectural instructions where no architectonic conventions to communicate them exist. Text also pervades the next category of Performance Architecture. However, as we will see, text has its limits and the need for other media comes into play. The behavior of other occupants, whether live or photographed is less foreign to architectural spaces and can also be used to give permission for alternative performances to engage both space and occupant through mimicry and mimesis.

*Its Form Will Follow Your Performance*

From practicing as an architect in New York, I have learned that home renovations are complex emotional undertakings. Often there are restrictions as to what can be physically accomplished due to economics, building codes, and neighborly prohibitions. If renovations in major cities are thought of in purely physical terms, our palettes as spatial practitioners are quite limited. What I propose through performative means is to reconfigure homes based on the exploration of their occupants' subjectivities.

Practicing architecture through exhibiting in galleries, museums, and biennials had allowed me to think across disciplines, to gauge the response of large audiences. It gave me license to ignore constraints that exist in the quotidian world. In 2009, after a decade in the gallery, I began *Its Form Will Follow Your Performance* at Magnus Muller Berlin,<sup>15</sup> a project that used the gallery as a point of departure but extended into the homes of ordinary Berliners. As a way of starting a renovation, I would meet interested parties at a desk in the gallery. Here, we talked about their apartment for about an hour. I would listen to

them describe the circumstances that led them to occupy their flat, how their expectations met with the reality of occupation, what their ideal flat would be, the relationships that the walls of the flat organize, and other lines of inquiry that give us both a sense of their emotional and perceptual relationship to all aspects of their home. During these conversations, I would listen for peculiar relationships, extreme ideas and information specific to the individual. From there we would delve, trying to understand how an eccentricity relating to their desire for, use of, or frustration with their space could be used to perform their house differently. Our session would conclude with us agreeing on a new way that they would perform their house. This could be as simple as moving a plant into the hall during winter and not bringing it back in or sitting on the roof thinking about potential. An article in the 'Living' section of *Der Tagesspiegel*, Berlin's most widely read paper at the time, described the project outside of a fine arts context, which brought in about 40 new participants. Each received a short set of performance instructions that they were to interpret and enact at home.

I have since been working to develop a methodology for how I, as an architect, can develop client-specific performances that will alter their homes. Aspects of the project that have changed. Photography has replaced the written instruction. After I work with inhabitants to develop their performance renovation, we set up a photo session in their home and I enact the first performance dressed as the client. This document then sits in the home as an image to be re-enacted and interpreted to trigger the performance. This photograph is to the occupant what a floor plan is to the builder. Instead of making an object, however, a subject is being constructed.

I am working currently with Mandie on such a renovation of her Berlin flat. She works as a performer, scriptwriter and director and we agreed

that a performative renovation of her flat would move both of our thinking forward. We began, as I have in all the other sessions, with a conversation about her flat. It is a rented room in a larger flat she shares with two others, a man and a woman who are about her age. It is inexpensive but small and during our conversation outside the apartment she expressed a frustration at not being able to make work in the space. When I asked her about the nature of her current exploration, she said she was researching notions of femininity based on endurance. Her room would not be too small to work in, we agreed, if she were able to use it to think through her current project. We both came up with some performances to enact in the room, but when we got to her flat and compared notes we both felt as though our efforts were derivative of performances that we were both familiar with. In her room, I asked her what she was already enduring in the room. There was little hesitation as Mandie pointed to a poorly constructed loft that pre-existed her rental of the space. The connections to the wall were tenuous and Mandie used the loft only for storing infrequently used items. Somewhere in our conversation, she described the loft as a boyfriend who is 'just ok'. In Mandie's words: "He's not really mean or awful or anything, there is just no ambition there." She continues: "Sometimes he will give you a ride to the airport and that's nice but you have to ask him for it. Sometimes you wake up and are happy to see him, but other times you roll over and think 'Why are you still here?'"

We agreed that Mandie's parallel between a boyfriend (she identifies as a straight female) and her loft was fertile ground for her renovation and her own work. Again falling back into the mindset of an architect and a client we thought of ways to make her loft /OK Boyfriend better. Replace this wood, reinforce that connection, build a proper ladder, all of these would have gotten rid of the thing she was enduring so we decided to make the loft a little worse. We began by moving all of her

stored items to the front of the loft, making a wall that was impossible to exit through; I had boxed myself in. The loft was made of such thin materials, it was easy to pry the floorboard up and dislodge the staples that were holding the ceiling below.

Mandie lived with OK Boyfriend in this state for a little while, from her first email:

OK Boyfriend is awesome in the nighttime. I feel somehow protected by it, and it has changed the light in my room. I feel like it is actually lighter, and I can see the reflection of the wall in my window. I feel protected from the neighbors across the hof by my ok boyfriend. There is a palpable change in the energy of the room. Right now it is somehow comforting and funny, although I somehow anticipate this will not last long...like how you think that your ok boyfriend's weird eating habits are cute and funny at first, quirky if you will, but later on it is just downright annoying.

As Mandie predicted in her note, OK Boyfriend did not last long, this message came a couple of weeks later telling me of her transition to the architectural performance 'NO Boyfriend':

I decided to break up with OK Boyfriend... I really loved the experience of having the installation, of living with it, etc...there is still a remnant in my room...the panel that was torn which you wiggled through...i want to see how long it will take to completely fall off! And, I have decided that in the end I will fix the loft and make it useable space.<sup>16</sup>

This writing has followed the sine curves of my architectural and performative thinking through their cresting and falling bringing us to a place where we can see their projecting into the future. For Mandie, what follows the break up is a year-long performance called *ACTUAL Boyfriend* where she enacts looking for a partner. She and this person will enter into a romantic relationship during which she will rehearse what she describes as 'never being, a girlfriend.' Below is the most recent instruction from the series, still in the making.



Alex Schweder  
OK Boyfriend (detail), 2012  
photo © Alex Schweder

#### Notes

- 1 Which came first, the buildings or the actions they house, is perhaps not the most productive way of asking the question. We build buildings so that we have a place to perform habituated actions, and conversely the buildings that preceded our arrival in part determine our behavior. By 'common source' I mean a collective desire to communicate codes of social performance.
- 2 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Oxford: Routledge, 1990).
- 3 Virilio studied phenomenology with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and was influenced by both his Marxist political inclinations and his theories of corporeality where the body is not just an object to be studied but also the primary site of knowledge where subjectivity is produced in direct relation to corporeal experience.
- 4 Paul Virilio and Sylvère Lotringer, *Crepescular Dawn in Semiotext(e)'s Foreign Agents Series*. Translated by Mike Taorimina, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002), 12-13.
- 5 *Ibid*, 47.
- 6 *Flatland* was incorporated into The Happiness of Object curated by Sarina Basta.
- 7 We were on stage, also performing the piece. Our presence served as a behavioural cue.
- 8 Niklas Maak, "The Supermodernist, Architect Claude Parent", *as2e* # 20, Winter 2010 / 11.
- 9 This work was made and tested for well working during a residency at the Kohler plumbing fixture factory in Sheboygan, Wisconsin as part of their Arts/Industry program.
- 10 George Dodd and Robert Travenor, *Body and Building, Essays on the Changing Relation of Body and Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).
- 11 Lorens Holm, *Brunelleschi, Lacan, Le Corbusier: Architecture, Space and the Construction of Subjectivity* (London, New York: Routledge, 2010).
- 12 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).
- 13 Amelia Jones, "Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal, Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century*, Vol. 56, No. 4, Winter, 1997, 11-18.
- 14 R. Hinkel, *Urban Interior - informal explorations, interventions and occupations*, (Spurbuchverlag, 2011).
- 15 This thinking would not have moved forward were it not for discussions with Tina DiCarlo.
- 16 Both excerpts were used with Mandie's permission.



ACTUAL  
BOYFRIEND

NO BOYFRIEND

OK BOYFRIEND