

**The Aldrich
Contemporary
Art Museum**

**Alex
Schweder
& Ward
Shelley**
Your Turn





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Sometime around the year 422, the Christian ascetic Simeon built a wooden platform atop a stone pillar near what is now Aleppo, Syria. Desiring a simple life of austerity and prayer, Simeon ascended to his perch, where he remained until his death in 459. During his time on the pillar, however, Simeon didn't completely shun the world. He was available every afternoon to converse with visitors, who climbed a ladder to come to within speaking distance. As his fame grew, crowds would assemble to both see the future saint on his odd habitation and have the opportunity to hear him lecture. After his death, other ascetics imitated his durational feat, and it became a common sight to see—and hear—other Christian zealots atop columns in the region.

If one wanted to withdraw from the world into monastic simplicity, the obvious first choice wouldn't be to turn oneself into a public spectacle, and no doubt history would have forgotten the saint if he merely retreated to a cave or mountaintop. Clearly, Simeon's notable asceticism can't be separated from his column and the meaning of his deed has to do with his position in space, the duration of his act, and its very public presentation. Human history is played out in space, and one can't separate events from their location, whether natural or man-made. The most human space is architecture, as it grows out of our physical needs, the imagination, and the constructs of society. We create architecture to fulfill a perceived need (even symbolic buildings, such as the Washington Monument, fulfill a need) and then we occupy what we built to get on with the tasks at hand. One can debate the motivations for Simeon creating his lofty platform, but one thing is certain: the architectural nature of his act changed him and the world around him. For architecture is a form of dance; we create it and then it creates us.

(Left)
Your Turn, 2017
 Installation view, The Aldrich Museum
 Ward Shelley (left), Alex Schweder (right)

"There is no doubt whatever about the influence of architecture and structure upon human character and action," stated Winston Churchill in an address to the English Architectural Association in 1929, "We make our buildings and afterwards they make us. They regulate the course of our lives"

For the past ten years, Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley have been practicing a form of experimental architecture, exploring the dance between the designed environment and its consequences. Since 2007, the duo have designed, built, and lived in (or on) five structures, all of them in locations where the public are invited to not only witness, but to actively engage with the artists in direct dialogue about their practice—an activity that has coalesced into what they call "performance architecture." Blurring the boundaries between architecture, installation, sculpture, design, performance, and, at times, athleticism, Schweder and Shelley's work poses more questions than answers, alternating between the quotidian and practical, the poetic and the absurd.

The artists have not given up their solo careers in order to work in tandem, and their collaboration only coalesces when a new opportunity beckons. Superficially, Schweder and Shelley's collaboration might seem like an oddball architectural firm, but, unlike typical architects,



(Above)
 11th century icon of Saint Simeon atop his pillar



they function as the designers, builders, and subjects of their projects; their buildings aren't separate from them, in fact their physical presence is integral to the very meaning of their work. These facts shift their practice towards art and away from the usual role architecture has in solving practical problems, although, as we will see, their work has cultural reverberations that go beyond the simply expressive.

Schweder and Shelley initially met in 2005 while fellows at the American Academy in Rome. Schweder, an architect whose practice leans towards the speculative, and Shelley, an eclectic visual artist, discovered they had a shared interest in both social space and the way architecture influences human behavior. Schweder's individual practice includes the design of temporary structures, often inflatable, that transform public space, and, most recently, the creation of *Architectural Advice for Performative Renovations*, an ongoing series that offers a service to volunteers, akin to psychotherapy, regarding how they could improve their domestic living environment through altering their behavior. In 2013, he performed *The Hotel Rehearsal*, a work consisting of a nomadic cargo van that incorporated a scissor lift to deploy a small, elevated hotel room anywhere it could park. Shelley is known for diagrammatic drawings that visually chart the history and evolution of entities as diverse as science fiction, Judaism, the Beat Generation, and the automobile industry, but had been doing durational performances that involved living in hand-built structures, often in collaboration with other artists, since 1997. These notably included *We Have Mice*, in which he lived for a month inside the walls of Brooklyn's Pierogi Gallery.

Since the 1960s, there has been a notable roster of artists working together as duos: Gilbert & George, The Starn Twins, Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh,¹ Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Type A (Adam Ames and Andrew Bordwin), and the architects Claude

Parent and Paul Virilio, to name a few. These collaborations share characteristics such as a loss or dilution of individual identity, a built-in system of dialogue and critique, the efficiency of shared responsibility, and the division of labor into areas of particular expertise. But in the case of Schweder and Shelley (who, by the way, are twenty years apart in age), the collaboration has focused on the intrinsic nature of what it means when two individuals whose outlooks are parallel, but quite different, are put in the position of forging an artistic practice.

Schweder and Shelley first worked together in 2007, along with artists Pelle Brage, Eva La Cour, Douglas Paulson, and Maria Petschnig, in the architectural performance piece *Flatland*, a four-story-tall, two-foot-deep transparent "building" that the participants occupied for three weeks. Each of the six artists lived in a section of the structure, which resembled an ant farm, sharing a central bathroom and kitchen. The nature of *Flatland* demanded cooperation and endurance, a situation that laid the groundwork for Schweder and Shelley's future collaboration.

Their first foray into working purely as a team was *Stability and Other Tenuous Positions*, a hanging structure realized in Seattle, Washington, in 2009. The piece, which conceptually set the course their collaboration has taken to the present, was a wooden box truss, similar in construction to a covered bridge, which was suspended from the ceiling via chains situated at the center of the box. Each artist occupied one end of the truss, with their respective living environments mirroring each other. Without the artists present, the structure was static and balanced horizontally, but with Schweder and Shelley inside, every one of their moves, no matter how minor, created instability, with the structure tilting like a balance beam. In the middle was a small kitchen area and bathroom, and to use either of these amenities both artists had to come together in this central zone to maintain balance,

otherwise the structure would tilt uncomfortably at an almost fifteen-degree angle. To maintain balance, a constant negotiation was required; for instance, if the two artists were asleep in their respective ends and one of them needed to use the bathroom, the other had to get up and come to the common middle area to avoid both their persons and personal effects awkwardly sliding towards one side. "Nighttime . . . that's the worst," quipped Schweder. "If someone gets up to do something, your REM falls away rather quickly. We dream pretty tersely."² *Stability*, through its mirroring of living environments, set a formal physical agenda for the duo's future works, but more importantly, it established negotiation as the central tenet of their working relationship.

Schweder and Shelley have a set of rules for the occupation of their projects, including bringing with them everything they need to live so they are self-sufficient while in residence, and planning performance periods to generally last no less than ten days. The extended duration of each performance is particularly important as it provides time for the artists to settle into a routine and learn how to negotiate with each other as the character of the structure mediates their activities. The structures are designed with an eye to setting up particular challenges and limitations, yet the artists don't completely understand what they have designed and built until they have experienced living in the particular situation for an extended period. They are adamant that their work has little or no real-world application, however their creation and habitation of extreme living environments does relate to certain aspects of design that have grown in importance recently. These include the small house movement, a renewed interest in nomadic architecture, such as mobile homes and trailers, and, perhaps most interestingly, the challenges of living in space.

In Orbit, a structure that was realized in New York in 2014, consisted of a twenty-five-foot diameter wheel, suspended from the ceiling,

(top to bottom)

Flatland, 2007
Installation view, SculptureCenter, Queens, NY

Stability and Other Tenuous Positions, 2009
Time lapse installation view, Lawrimore Project, Seattle, WA



which had the ability to rotate via a central axle. Shelley lived on the work's outside surface while Schweder lived inside. Given the force of gravity, the artists could only occupy the elements of their respective areas on the wheel that were relatively horizontal—Shelley was always on the top part of the outside of the wheel; Schweder was always on the interior of the bottom. Like *Stability*, the work had an oppositional nature: each artist had his own bed, easy chair, chest of drawers, and work station. The bathroom and kitchen were built as small “rooms” mounted on gimbals that allowed them to freely turn and remain upright while the wheel rotated. As these rooms were on opposing sides of the wheel, if Shelley used the bathroom,

Schweder needed to be in the kitchen, and vice versa. Unlike *Stability*, where the loss of balance created minor inconvenience, any mistakes in coordination with *In Orbit* could be catastrophic; the top surface of the work was almost twenty-eight feet off the ground. Rotating the wheel to allow the artists' access to the amenities required slow, careful deliberation, and any object that wasn't fixed in place could tumble off the structure. Once the *In Orbit* performance began, both the general public and media started to refer to it as the “hamster wheel,” yet its movement—and the artists' life on the structure—didn't so much resemble a circular treadmill as a clock. The slow rotation of the wheel³ and use of its amenities settled into a daily, twenty-four-hour rhythm, and the sweep of the artists' beds, chairs, and workstations spoke of the passage of time and the flow of the daily, repetitive activities that define our lives. But the extreme nature of life on *In Orbit* was anything but normal, and living in such circumstances couldn't help but bring to mind the complexities that are faced by astronauts.

In 2001, Shelley had created a collaborative performance piece entitled *Mir2*—after the space station launched in the Soviet era—at Smack Mellon Studios in Brooklyn. Suspended from the ceiling, the work consisted of a jerry-built series of interconnected modules that were occupied by as many as twenty artists for several extended weekends. But where *Mir2* resembled a futuristic chill room at a dance club, *In Orbit* was, in contrast, a Spartan and rigorous environment where mistakes could not be made and every detail had to be taken into consideration. The movement of Schweder and Shelley around the circumference of their wheel brought to mind Gary Lockwood as he jogged around the cylindrical, rotating spacecraft in *2001: A Space Odyssey*; the need to anchor objects to prevent them from falling had a direct parallel to the problem of untethered items floating around in zero gravity. *In Orbit* was the first instance of the artists using furnishings from Ikea (the chairs,

tables, beds, and lamps came from the company's standard inventory), with their decisions based on why so many shop there: inexpensive, simple, and straightforward design. Interestingly, in early 2017 Ikea sent its in-house design team to live in the Mars Simulator in Utah to see what they could learn about a constrained environment. In an interview with *Wired*, Marcus Engman, head of design at Ikea, said the company wanted to identify the boundaries and restraints needed to work in space and use the experience “for a better everyday life on earth.” “They're going to have to do everything that you have to do when you are on Mars,” said Engman, “including the problematic stuff with going to the toilet, all of it.”⁴ Quite often, the first question posed to Schweder and Shelley regarding life on their structures is about bathroom facilities, underlining the parallels between their work and space travel. If the artists' practice touches on anything practical, it's how people can live in close quarters, and how the design of small, functional living spaces⁵ will become more important as the world becomes a more crowded place.

A word needs to be interjected about the artists' chosen attire while in performance. Starting in 2007, with *Flatland*, Schweder and Shelley have consistently worn red and orange jumpsuits, a choice that has both formal and expressive implications. The jumpsuits act to set their performances off from everyday life and emphasize their working as a team by eliminating the individuality that clothing choices represent. Visually, the jumpsuits allow the audience to immediately locate the performers and understand they are as important as the structure. Jumpsuits are uniforms, and uniforms generally denote order, discipline, and exclusivity, whether you are in the military, in prison, or working for FedEx. The environments created by Schweder and Shelley are certainly orderly, and the jumpsuits play into the functional and no-frills aspect of their practice, drawing parallels with the sartorial choices favored by oil rig workers, auto mechanics, and test pilots.

The performance aspect of Schweder and Shelley's work does relate to the tradition of experimental theater, and their structures can be thought of, on one level, as stage sets. This analogy is most clear in the artists' relationship with their audience: instead of ignoring viewers, they actively engage with them, which is very much in the spirit of experimental playwrights such as Bertolt Brecht, who worked to break through the invisible “fourth wall” by having actors pose questions to their audience. In most theatrical productions, the sets have a background role, but Schweder and Shelley's structures are as much actors in the drama as are the artists: it would be impossible for them to perform without the structure; in fact, in many ways the structure provides a form of script, delineating the flow of activities and directing much of the interaction with the audience. In Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rear Window*, the action takes place entirely in an enclosed, urban courtyard, a complex set built specifically to guide the story. John Belton, an academic specializing in film history who has written extensively on Hitchcock, has stated that the set is more important to the film than either Grace Kelly's or James Stewart's performances.⁶ Critics have noted that a major theme in *Rear Window* is voyeurism and much of the plot centers on the way the set enables Stewart's character to watch his neighbors. Who doesn't stop to glance at a neighbor in a window, even if their activity is as simple as washing the dishes? Schweder and Shelley do nothing extraordinary while in residence on their structures, but the simple fact of being on view in a formal and public way amplifies their every move. The artists' work elevates the common and everyday into art, expanding the Modernist notion that the act of framing the mundane can create art that is anything but ordinary.

Schweder and Shelley's new project, conceived and built for The Aldrich, is entitled *Your Turn*. Echoing, but not repeating, many

In Orbit, 2014
Installation view, Pierogi Gallery's “The Boiler,” Brooklyn, NY



aspects of their past works, *Your Turn* takes the form of a monolithic wall, twenty-three-feet high by twenty-three-feet wide, with each artist occupying and limited to one side. A grid of steel U-shaped rungs, which allows the artists to move about on their respective surfaces, both provides handles and animates the sides of the structure. Built into the work, like drawers, are six amenities that have the ability to slide back and forth from one side of the structure to the other. These include a bed, workstation, bathroom, kitchen, dining table and chairs, and what the artists refer to as a “comfortable chair.” Each amenity can only be used by one of the artists at a time, after it has been slid onto their respective side of the monolith. Balance is not an issue with the work, as the force of gravity only affects the artists through the potential of losing their footing and falling off the structure. The mediating issue with *Your Turn*, as the title implies, is the negotiation of use of the resources offered. In past works, such as *In Orbit*, the artists needed to be doing pretty much the same thing at the same time, other than in the use of kitchen and bathroom facilities. With *Your Turn*, one of the artists can be enjoying the “comfortable chair,” while the other is making dinner in the kitchen; one of the artists can be

checking email in the workstation while the other is taking a nap on the bed; more freedom is offered by the situation—but both cannot be doing the same thing at the same time—which translates into the potential for both cooperation and conflict. Past structures dictated the rhythm of activities: *Your Turn* is a permeable membrane that allows for more spontaneity; but, as we all know, peaceful sharing can easily be disrupted by selfishness. The structure also allows for a third state that was not offered by the binary nature of past works; if all of the amenities are slid to one side, the artist on the other side is left in a kind of limbo, hanging on a wall of rungs with nowhere to go and nothing to do. This situation emphasizes the structure’s wall-like nature: walls are built to separate, and usually the parties on either side of a wall are unequal or the wall would not have been built.

An interesting question is raised by Schweder and Shelley’s work: Is it utopian or dystopian? Their work *ReActor*, currently installed outdoors at Art Omi’s architecture field in Ghent, New York, resembles a larger version of *Stability*, but instead of being suspended from the ceiling, it is perched atop a concrete pylon and is free to not only tilt up and down, but also to spin in the wind 360 degrees. Its location in a bucolic setting, and its sensitivity to the forces of nature, casts the work in idyllic terms. In a blog written during the artists’ residency in the structure in July 2016, Shelley states, “*ReActor* throws a lot of its weight into the realm of sensual beauty—much more than any of our earlier work. Before, visitors would say, ‘How do you stand it, living in that?’ Now they are saying, ‘Can I come up?’” In contrast, the sliding amenity features of *Your Turn* recall the slapstick scene in Terry Gilliam’s 1985 dystopian science fiction comedy *Brazil*, where the protagonist, played by actor Jonathan Pryce, fights for a sliding desk that he discovers he shares with another government bureaucrat who is on the other side of a wall in an adjoining office. The limited environments created by Schweder and Shelley have a lot in common with the



contemporary architecture that has developed due to overcrowding and high property values in Japan’s urban areas, where limited real estate has given birth to both bizarrely narrow buildings and the famous “capsule hotels,” in which guests are housed overnight in claustrophobic plastic pods that are just big enough for sleeping. The answer to the question of utopian vs. dystopian is, however, that Schweder and Shelley’s current work is primarily based on cooperation, and as we all know, cooperation is becoming exceedingly important in a world with shrinking resources and a growing population. The artists’ performances can be thought of as a metaphor for all bilateral relations, and *Your Turn*, which is, at its most

basic, a wall, speaks of the need for those living on both sides of a divide—whether it is a physical or social construct—to get along. Perhaps this isn’t utopian, but it’s certainly optimistic, and currently optimism seems to be in short supply.

Schweder and Shelley aren’t ascetics like Saint Simeon, and clearly their goals aren’t spiritual, but the philosophy and discipline they exhibit in both building their structures and living on them connects the artists with the secular idealism espoused by Modernism. In 1923, Le Corbusier, the pioneer of Modern architecture, wrote that “a house is a machine for living in,”⁷ which expressed his belief that houses are tools we use to live, and if we looked at them that way, our lives would be better. Schweder and Shelley’s “houses” are machines for living, but more importantly for contemplation (both by the artists and viewers) on the polarity between freedom and control, cooperation and isolation, and art and life.

Richard Klein

Alex Schweder was born in 1970 in New York City; he lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Ward Shelley was born in 1950 in Auburn, New York; he lives and works in Easton, Connecticut.

1. Montano and Hsieh only collaborated once, but their collaboration was so extreme that it warrants listing among those artists who have had long-term working relationships. Beginning on July 4, 1983, the two artists performed *Art/Life: One Year*, where they were tied together by an eight-foot-long rope, twenty-four hours a day, for twelve months.
2. Robert Siegal, “Living in a See-Saw Has Ups and Downs,” *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, March 27, 2009.
3. After the first few days that *In Orbit* was on exhibition, extensive press coverage resulted in large crowds of viewers, which encouraged the artists to constantly rotate the wheel, a situation that was not routine under normal circumstances.
4. Jeremy White, “IKEA designers are living in a Mars simulator to get inspiration for future collections. Really,” *Wired*, June 8, 2017.

5. Shelley relates that his interest in small, self-sufficient living spaces was influenced by his experiences on sailboats, where all amenities are packed efficiently into below-deck cabin spaces. On small sailing vessels, not only do individuals have to work together cooperatively as a crew, but also have very little or no privacy.
6. See Thea Marshall-Behrendt’s excellent essay, “The Importance of Set Design to Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*,” on the KSA MA Architectural Visualization blog: <https://ksamaarchvis.wordpress.com/2015/12/08/the-importance-of-set-design-in-hitchcocks-rear-window/>
7. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (London: J. Rodker, 1931; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1985), p. 240.

(Above)
Cast and crew on the set of Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Rear Window*, 1953

(Right)
ReActor, 2016
Installation view, Art Omi, Ghent, NY





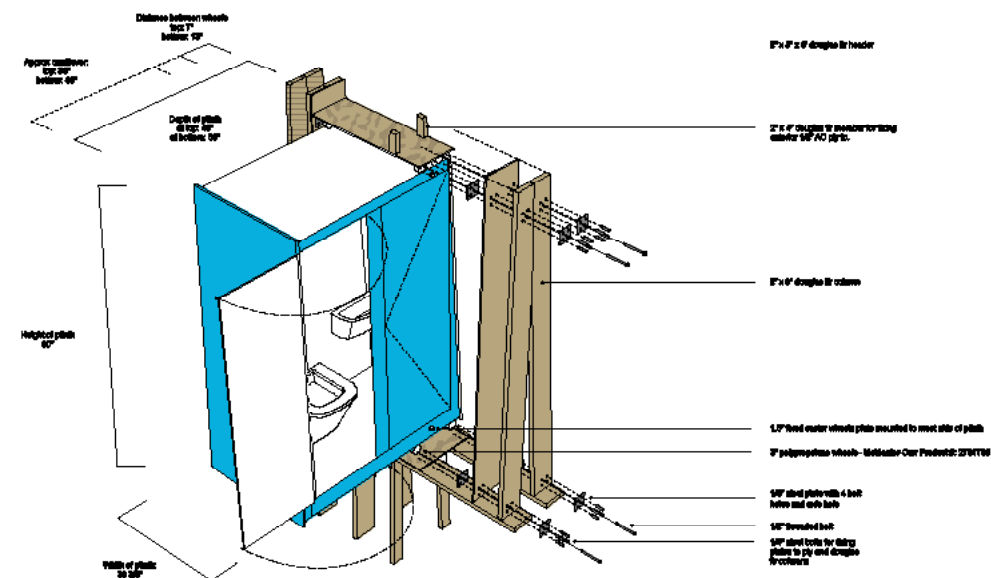
Your Turn, 2017
Installation view (A-side)







5 BATH- ROOM



Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions h x w x d in
inches unless otherwise
noted

*Counterweight Roommate
Painting, 2016*
Acrylic and ink on Mylar
56 x 26
Courtesy of Wasserman
Projects, Detroit

In Orbit Painting, 2016
Acrylic and ink on Mylar
44 x 26
Courtesy of Wasserman
Projects, Detroit

ReActor Painting, 2016
Acrylic and ink on Mylar
20 x 28

ReActor Video, 2016-2017
One channel digital video,
projected, 5:25 minutes
Videography by Carlton
Bright

Your Turn, 2017
Wood, steel, paint,
household items, ten days,
two people
276 x 276 x 72

Your Turn Painting, 2017
Acrylic and ink on Mylar
48 x 32

Your Turn Video, 2017
One channel digital video,
presented on monitor,
14:00 minutes
Videography by Carlton
Bright

All works courtesy of the
artists and Edward Cella
Art & Architecture, Los
Angeles, and Pierogi
Gallery, New York, unless
otherwise noted.

(Left)
Your Turn Painting, 2017

(Above)
Your Turn Bathroom, 2017
Computer-aided working drawing
Rendering by Matthew Brown, studio assistant

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

Founded by Larry Aldrich in 1964, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum is dedicated to fostering the work of innovative artists whose ideas and interpretations of the world around us serve as a platform to encourage creative thinking. The only museum in Connecticut devoted to contemporary art, The Aldrich has engaged its community with thought-provoking exhibitions and education programs throughout its fifty-three year history.

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Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley: Your Turn
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Curated by Richard Klein

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Alex Schweder and Ward Shelley



