Let's Get Small: Strategies for Urban Comedy

Our contemporary global condition exerts enormous pressure on architecture to expand its disciplinary tools in order to facilitate connections across greater and greater distances. For the last twenty years architecture has generally responded to these pressures by adopting Rem Koolhaas' attitude that the small tools of architecture (composition, scale, part to whole legibility) are obsolete in the global production of contemporary urban life[1]. Running parallel to the interests of this panel, this paper provides a counterpoint to such trends – a way to assert an equally ambitious agenda for architecture while holding on to the power of the architecturally small interventions that give shape to the city. The emphasis on the small may at first appear to favor separation over connection, the local over the global and the individual over the collective; however the strategies of sharing discussed in this paper describe both a methodology and an attitude that advance the dual meaning of *partage* as both division and sharing to describe ways in which small scale interventions aggregate to produce a coherent whole, a transformation that is greater than the sum of its parts.

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IN WHICH BANJOS & BUNNY EARS REPLACE PUNCH-LINES

Jacques Rancière uses this dual meaning of *partage* to highlight the aesthetic nature of democracy as a condition that aggregates unlikely elements in order to bring attention to conditions previously deemed insensible (unnoticed or not accounted for)[2]. Steve Martin's 1970's stand-up career rewrote the traditional rules of stand-up in order to produce a routine that uses *partage* to demonstrate a similar relationship between aesthetics and politics. Martin's innovation was to create a form of comedy without punch line in order to avoid the predictable, almost obligatory laughter that it produced. Instead he built tension without providing relief. Arriving on stage with a banjo in hand and bunny ears on his head to deliver a dead pan folk song, each bit would flow into the next without a clear end or beginning. At first, individual audience members laughed out of the shear discomfort of not knowing when to laugh, but were ultimately empowered to laugh when they wanted to: "This type of laugh seemed stronger to me, as they would be laughing at something they chose, rather than being told exactly when

to laugh."[3] This audience participation ultimately carried through to the end of the act where the lack of finite jokes made it difficult for Martin to bring closure to the show. One night he continued to deliver his act as he walked off stage, through the audience and out of the club. The audience took it upon themselves to follow him out to the street where Martin continued the act, incorporating material from people passing by. Martin's style encouraged a form of audience participation that produced a positive feedback loop; transforming his act, breaking the boundary of the fourth wall, and redrawing the lines between comedian and audience, Martin brought the comedy to the street.

As an act of *partage*, Martin's insight to divide his audience into individuals with the capacity to share his material on their own terms ultimately produced a radical transformation of his act and the genre of stand-up comedy. However this stylistic illustration of partage cannot be isolated from the content of Martin's comedy, which, as the source of this paper's title, is equally provocative. *Let's Get Small* is the title of his first album and a reference to his bit where "getting small" alludes to taking drugs that literally make you smaller. He recalls "getting small" and climbing into a vacuum cleaner; when the drug wore off while he was still inside and his body retained the shape of the vacuum cleaner. He also points out that if the cops ever arrest you when you are small they have to put you in a special jail cell so you don't climb through the bars of a normal one. This exaggerated alteration of the human body makes visible and perceivable to all what is normally only perceived by one. This external sharing of an internal experience speaks again to the redrawing of boundaries, and communicates the political content of Martin's aesthetic sensibility. In both style and content Steve Martin's stand-up routine illustrates three strategies of sharing that may also be applied to the ambitions of architectural Smallness. The first is the relational practice of sharing that invites audience participation and interpretation through unpredictable conceptual adjacencies. Second, there is sharing through the drawing and redrawing of boundary lines. Such re-presentation creates a legible image of what is possible, and then redraws that image in order to communicate the possibility of future recombination. Lastly, there is a sharing through spatial smallness – whether taking on the form of other objects, or slipping in and out of a confined environment, Martin's bit provides clues to the kind of subversive spatial operations that architecture can achieve through a smallness that shares forms and boundaries with adjacent environments. Through its examination of the following case studies this paper calls attention to the ways in which these strategies for sharing enhance small interventions in order to produce coherent effects at the scale of the city.

TOKYO'S ARCHITECTURAL COMEDIES

Atelier Bow-Wow is an example of a practice that draws attention to the more lighthearted and humorous moments of urban life through the strategies of sharing outlined above – spatial smallness, representation and relationality. Bow-Wow explicitly draws attention to the intimate intersections between architecture, subjectivity and the city. Although their projects range in scale and content, from small single-family homes to temporary installations to urban research, the work coheres around the relationship between architecture and the city as a generator of a specific urban lifestyle, one that is characterized by mobility, social engagement and spontaneity. Bow-Wow's projects treat the city as a relational field of subjects in constant interaction with one another – the form of buildings, people, cars, street furniture are all engaged in this dynamic, offering idiosyncratic

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personalities and unexpected juxtapositions that bring whimsy and joy to everyday life on the street. In House Without Oku (1994) Bow-Wow illustrates the potential of spatial smallness to provoke a different part to whole reading of the city through *partage*. The project nests one volume within another, breaking up the envelope of the house so that it is no longer the enclosure of a single building or the dividing line between public and private space, but instead is a composition of parts that contribute to the formation of a 'micro ecosystems,' or "small urban episodes [that include] jokes, humor and pathos."[4] Instead of reading the single family home as an autonomous object distinct from the city, the project transforms the house into a mediator between subject and city, where the spatial composition of small forms behaves as a series of switches in a larger system of relationships. The overlap of small moments within the house (doors, windows, halls, interstitial spaces) orients the body of its inhabitants out towards the city, sharing private life of home with public life of the street. The aggregation of these small architectural parts produces an urban fabric defined by its social life, affirming architecture's prowess to make connective incisions that accumulate to transform the city into a machine for social interaction.

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Figure 1: Composite Drawing from *Made in Tokyo*, ©Atelier Bow-Wow.

The transformative potential of representing architectural parts in relationship to the city is evident in their first publication, *Made in Tokyo, Vol. 1* (2001), a guidebook that describes the city's urban condition through the survey of seventy buildings that Bow-Wow designate as "Da-me Architecture" (or no good architecture). These 'B-grade' building typologies are not designed by architects but rather are determined by the purely pragmatic considerations of economy, politics and geography. Such forces produce unexpected results where infrastructure, program, scale and social life come together in new combinations – shopping centers under

highways, roller coasters on top of building, a blood donation center at a public park. In their observation of these buildings Bow-Wow uses a meticulous process of representation to describe the city and to appropriate lessons for architecture. Each building is represented by an intricate axonometric line drawing that describes the details of a building's form, envelope, fenestration and signage, as well as its relationship to adjacent buildings, the street, landscape and infrastructure. Selective and precise in what they choose to represent and what they leave out, these drawings provide sufficient context to establish a sense of its urban posture and relationship to the ground plane. In a final composite drawing shown on the cover and title pages, Bow-Wow recombines all these drawings to produce their own version of Tokyo's urbanism. Although the drawing depicts a city that resembles Chicago more closely than Tokyo -- significantly less dense, connected by a web of infrastructure and dominated by details such as vehicles, vegetation, animals and flag poles – the drawing invites speculation on other possible re-combinations of Tokyo's architecture through the lens of Bow-Wow's architectural priorities and the principles developed through this study.

Two of these principles -- Virtual Site and Pet Size -- are particularly relevant to the interests of this paper in their capacity to conceptualize small scale interventions as instances with a larger urban framework. Virtual Site translates a chain of convenience stores into an invisible logistical network that creates an expansive public facility which is only visible through its parts, the individual stores. The generic design and ubiquity of these stores suggests a new kind of urban relationality, one which questions conventional ideas about architecture and place as a generator of community. While these instances of small sameness don't share much in common with the context in which they are placed, they do share connections within a much larger urban network and incite architecture to generate new definitions and models of collective urban interaction.[5] On the other hand, the concept of Pet Size describes the way that large objects such as vending machines, karaoke boxes, parking machines, food trucks and signage fill small gaps in the urban fabric at a size that is "too small to be architecture but too big to be furniture" and turn the "urban environment into a 'super-interior.'"[6] Much like Steve Martin's act suggests, these urban objects "get small" in order to navigate the tight spaces of the city and in the process generate new urban experiences for the city dweller. Bow-wow advances the capacity of these types of urban interventions to evoke new collective experience with projects such as White Limousine Yatai, taking the traditional street side food cart and stretching it from its typical length of 1.5 meters to a length of 10 meters. While the original length cart "…has a wonderful charm to tie people together and encourage interaction," the stretched version enhances this quality by allowing more people to gather around it, thus amplifying its urban appeal. In addition to its explicit social function, the long 'Yatai' draws attention from crowds of people when it creates traffic jams as it attempts to turn corners and produces a spontaneous instance of 'micro public space' among the witnesses who enjoy this awkward moment. White Limousine Yatai borrows an existing form from the city and transforms it into a small architecture that enhances and exaggerates the ways it makes connections to the city, producing a positive feedback that transforms the city around it. The disciplinary perspective of architecture is critical to the observation and documentation of these urban conditions, drawing lines to highlight and articulate the all-too-important parts that make up the whole. Meanwhile, a cohesive vision of the whole, the urban lifestyle and sensibility generated by these parts, is never far out of mind.

CHICAGO'S VIRTUAL SITE: THE EMPTY LOT AS URBAN VISION

While Atelier Bow-Wow uses *partage* to conceptually redraw the relationship between architecture and the city of Tokyo, The Available City by David Brown (through research conducted in association with the University of Illinois at Chicago) advances similar concepts of smallness and sharing in a proposal to develop Chicago's empty lots. Exhibited at the 2012 Venice Biennale with the City Works team from Chicago (curated by Alexander Eisenschmidt), Brown's project addresses the 10,000-plus empty city-owned lots concentrated in Chicago's South and West sides through a radical reconfiguration of public-private relationships. As an alternative to the current strategy pursued by the city – developing individual lots as single family homes, or replanting them with trees – Brown proposes a strategy that registers the accumulated potential of all the city's lots as a physical entity the size of the Chicago Loop. Although not physically connected to one another, Brown redraws the total area of empty lots across neighborhoods in the South and West sides as an aggregation at the scale of a major urban intervention. Brown accepts the single lot as the smallest unit of intervention for his proposal, but Brown's strategy develops the lots as a shared network of public and private space, producing a significant transformation of Chicago's urban fabric as it is realized across multiple blocks.
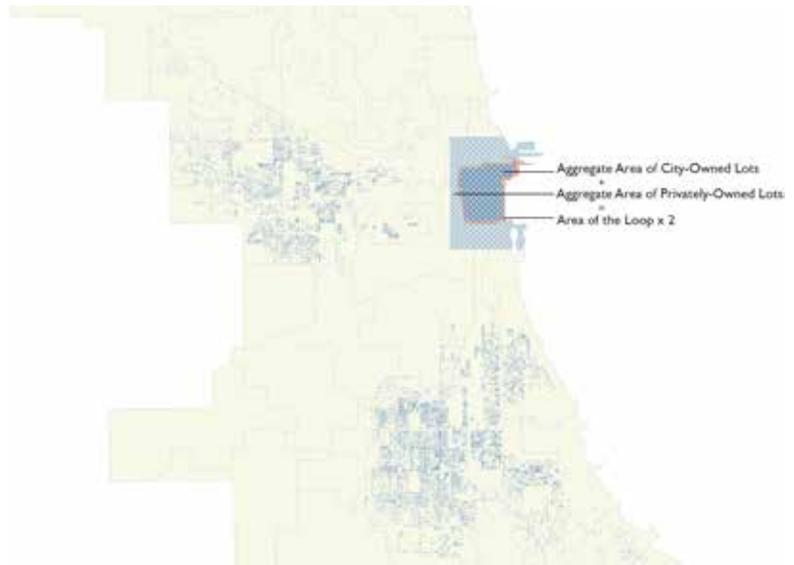

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The basic premise of the proposal is to incentivize the development of privately owned empty lots that are adjacent to city owned lots by granting those property owners the right to develop the public lots as well. Private developers using city-owned lots gain larger footprints and taller envelopes in exchange for the inclusion of public space within the area of development. Axonometric zoning diagrams describe the full range of allowable built volume and the corresponding volumetric requirement of public space. However, in addition to these abstract diagrams that outline the principles of the proposal, Brown has also developed a catalogue of specific shapes that articulate the formal potentials embedded within his system. As a planning strategy, this catalog prompts future architects working within the system to develop playful solid-void relationships within the confines of Brown's volumetric requirements. These creature-like shapes insert a new formal vocabulary into Chicago's primarily residential neighborhood, and when accumulated across multiple city blocks radically transform the urban fabric.

Figure 2: Map of the available city, David Brown, *Available City.*

Brown's project also considers economic circumstances where the maximum built-out volume would be unfeasible and undesirable by private investors. As an alternative, Brown proposes a system of surface interventions where the city would make a small initial investment to develop the lots as low-density amenities (recreational, cultural, commercial and agricultural) that could be used by small groups or single individuals in exchange for their custodial services on the lot. Although developed as single instances, when applied across a whole neighborhood these surface interventions describe a network of public space rerouting circulation routes through city blocks and defining new districts of overlapping programmatic zones. The small structures and landscape follies of the surface interventions use Bow-Wow's concept of Pet Size to insert low-budget, low-maintenance programmatic additions to neighborhoods that also make new connections across multiple blocks, like urban furniture in an expanded territory of urban interior.

Brown's application of Bow-Wow's lessons is a radical re-visioning of Chicago's urban sensibility. In a sprawling, low-density city dominated by centripetal forces, Brown redirects attention to the city's potential for interiority and density, turning attention back in on itself to insert density, overlap and relationality. Brown's project is visionary and inclusive. By conceptualizing the division of an individual lot as an extension of a larger system of development, Brown draws a new image of the city and generously invites others (developers, architects, city officials, local residents) to participate in its interpretation and realization.
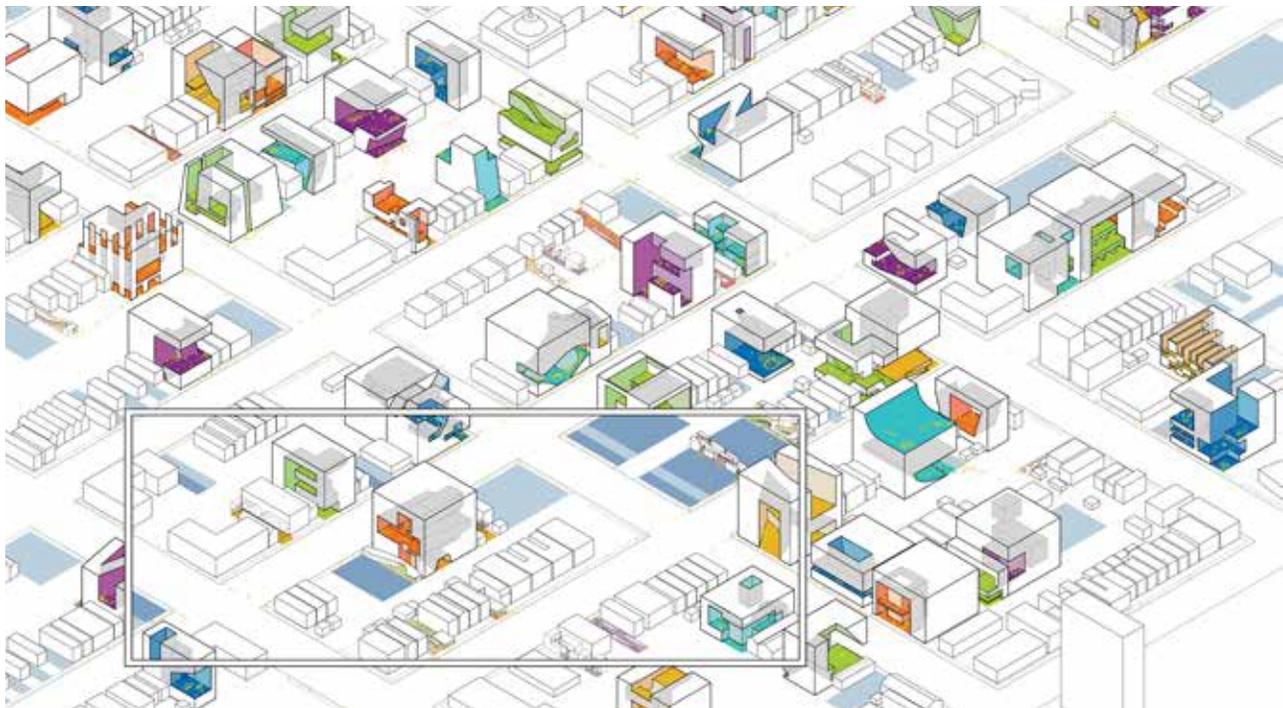
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PET SIZE SPIN-OFF: A CITY IN A PARKING LOT

If Bow-Wow uses architecture to describe Tokyo's urban condition, and Brown rethinks urban planning in order to create novel architectural opportunities, then the final example uses architecture to create a microcosm of a city within the area of a parking lot. The premise of Cosmo Design Factory's Murphy Monsters is that urban conditions can be generated wherever there is a narrative that

Figure 3: An instance of intensive development of buildings with collective space volumes over time, David Brown, *Available City.*

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connects characters to one another. The project uses small architectural interventions to insert an urban sensibility into a block-sized parking lot, and invites its audience to become part of the story. Submitted to the 2012 Flat Lot Competition for Flint, MI (sponsored by Flint Public Art Project) the brief called for a temporary pavilion in a parking lot in downtown Flint to provide a series of amenities (sound stage, shade structure, concession stand, lounge area etc.) during events while occupying no more than eight parking spaces during business hours. While other entries chose to occupy eight adjacent parking spaces with one large structure, the Murphy Monster entry dispersed its amenities through a series of smaller structures whose profiles were composed to resemble creatures, each with their own personality and interests (i.e. character and program). Each small intervention was endowed with a sensibility and sense of purpose – Blowhole, the sound stage, is an extroverted attention hog, while Chowhound, the concession stand, is a gracious and gregarious gatherer of people. The pavilion forms are deliberately zoomorphic – literalizing Bow-Wow's concept of Pet Size with heads, eyes, tails and legs that bestow character through architectural elements (stairs, overhangs, arches and doorways). Yet their geometries are simple extrusions of straight lines and arcs – not far from the regular geometries of Flint's gridded downtown fabric, yet still different enough to call attention to themselves and in the process call other buildings' characters into question. Unlike other proposals that rehash Flint's story of relentless job loss and home foreclosures, the Murphy Monsters brought a new story to Flint, one that engages imagination and participation through its promise to fill an empty lot with strange, but friendly, beasts.

The manner of representation selected for the competition boards was especially important to the conceit of the project. Lifting its strategy directly from the popular genre of 1980's action figures and their packaging, the Murphy Monsters project is about the relationship between the toy (pavilion) as an object for engagement and the narrative behind it. The submission boards represent the project as a series of individual products available for purchase and play in the near future, each with their own personality and price tag. One intention of the programmatic personalities was to attract interest groups to the different
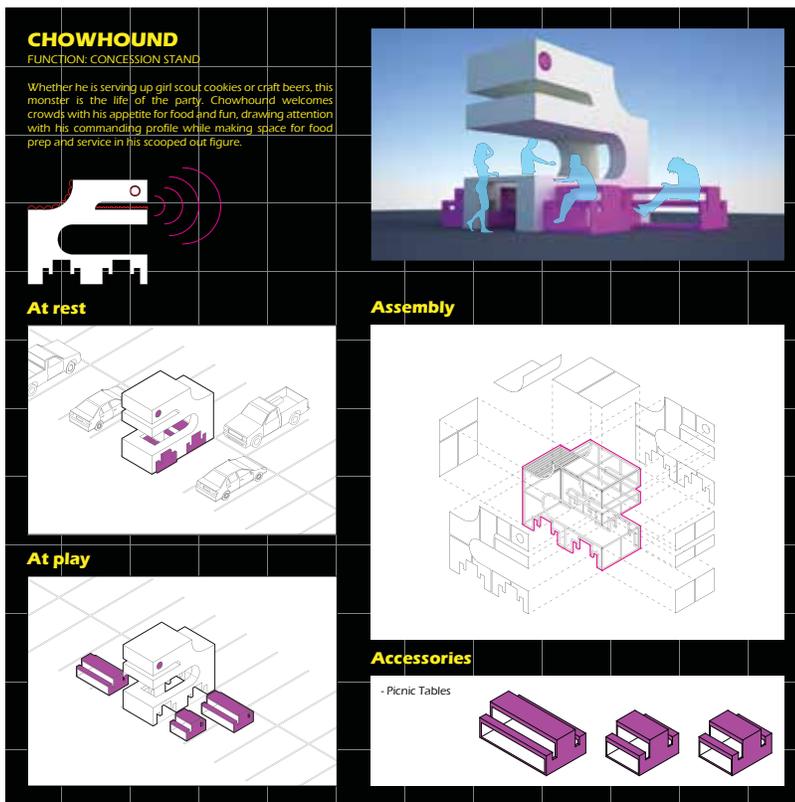
pavilions – through the Adopt-A-Monster program, a local choir might pair with Blowhole as a place to practice during off hours, or one of the gardening clubs might cultivate the tops of Triumph's arched gateways. In this way, the story of the Monsters could extend out beyond the parking lot that they occupy and into the social life of the city around it. Alternatively, the presence of the Monsters might inspire new associations to be formed. The configuration of Monsters within the lot incites multiple conversations and interactions – between the Monsters themselves, between the Monsters and the existing buildings of downtown Flint, and between the Monsters and the people of Flint. In this way, Cosmo Design Factory uses the architecture of the Murphy Monsters to insert a city within a city, overlaying small stories, relationships and forms to produce the potential for various new urban narratives.

CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF SMALL

In each of the examples discussed above we see how a penchant for smallness is not always an abdication of ambition, but rather a strategy for achieving more – more ideas, more interaction and more architecture. Small interventions are often seen as the crutch of bottom-up planning, where big ideas and vision are superseded by the problem-solving mentality of do-gooderism. This image is overcome by the dual meaning of partage as both division and sharing. Through Rancière, the concept of partage provides a framework in which "Getting Small" is a prerequisite to practice that acknowledges the interdependence of aesthetics and politics. Steve Martin's contribution illustrates how his unorthodox comedic style generated a democratic condition among his audience, encouraging individuals to laugh on their own terms and in their own time. Without sacrificing his own comedic intent, Martin gave up the guarantee of laughter in exchange for an audience that was directly engaged with his material and sensibility.

Figure 5: Whether he is serving up Girl Scout cookies or craft beers, this monster is the life of the party. Chowhound welcomes crowds with his appetite for food and fun, drawing attention with his commanding profile while making space for food prep and service in his scooped out figure., Cosmo Design Factory, *Murphy Monsters.*

Herein lies the crux of what we learn about smallness from this series of examples: the terms set by an initial act of division establish the terms for future sharing. In other words, small is powerful when it draws lines that represent a coherent vision for what its effects will be, and what its audience is buying into. All three projects use small moves to build audience, or to put it more boldly, to build a movement. The grand transformations made possible by the small interventions discussed here are not necessarily manifest as physical or formal changes, but rather as political maneuvers that alter the way city dwellers inhabit their city and interact with the architecture around them. As an urban planning project, David Brown's Available City has a sincere ambition to alter the fabric of the Chicago neighborhoods its addresses; however, its restructuring of the relationship between public and private land use is a political move that radically changes our reading of the city, even before any built form is constructed. Alternatively, Atelier Bow-Wow does not propose large scale planning changes to Tokyo, but rather changes how the city is read through architecture in order to insert their own new architectures with urban implications. Again, their urban research builds an audience for future work by setting a tone about the kind of urban lifestyle their architecture can support through its interaction with the city. Lastly, Cosmo Design Factory's ambition for Flint MI is not to change the city but to change the city's image of itself. Murphy Monsters pose as totems, small architectural characters that tell a new story with which to engage the city and its inhabitants. In each case, the spatial, relational and representational strategies of "Getting Small" work together to overcome the bottom-up versus top-down duality, producing a new kind of relationship between architecture and the city where individual parts support, and are supported by, a coherent vision of the whole.

ENDNOTES

1.   See "Bigness" and "Whatever Happened to Urbanism," in *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995).

2.   David Panagia, "Partage du sensible": the distribution of the sensible," in J.-P. Deranty (Ed.), *Jacques Rancière: key concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2010) 95-97.

3.   Steve Martin, *Born Standing Up* (New York: Scribner, 2007). 111.

4.   Momoyo Kaijima, et al. *Made in Tokyo*, (Tokyo: Kajima Institute Publishing Co., 2012) 36.

5.   Ibid. 38-39.

6.   Ibid. 25.