

Temporary Help: Temporary Structures in the City

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INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces a discussion about the temporary structure in the everyday city. These structures, as I define them, are designed for utility. They support permanent structures that are in disuse or disrepair. While seemingly permanent structures undergo transformation, the temporary ones preserve and protect the objects. They cannot, however, insulate the objects as they change or settle into their sites.

In an attempt to examine binary oppositions such as presence and absence, as well as the rigidity of disciplinary boundaries, I will talk about these architectural configurations through the work of the Japanese artist, Tadashi Kawamata. Using discarded wood, he constructs temporary attachments to buildings. This work has both the potential and ambiguity to illustrate my thoughts about urban relations in our cities.

I will then focus on temporary solutions I have photographed. These structures, often made by people without a design education, expose the displacements to which we have become immune and carve out spaces that allow occupation to take place. Through this research, I look toward the layering of a new system onto a building or city to produce a texture unforeseen by the original designers. These interventions and the spaces they create invite new forms of production, comprehension and experience.

As we approach the millennium, many designers are attempting to reinscribe architecture and planning with new possibilities. They acknowledge context, focus on the particularities of a site and communicate their research. In their struggle against imbalance and for clarity, designers may need to look closely at the temporary solutions around them.

These structures can help make spaces, boundaries and hierarchies identifiable and knowable. The conflicts, defenses and weaving patterns that lie just hidden beneath the surface can be revealed. This everyday reality, filled with both informal and unfamiliar constructions, breaks down acceptable norms, genres and types. The temporary solution re-knits the fabric of the city, not in a uniform continuity or compatibility but in a way that accepts and invites difference. They are suggestive and instructive as strategic interventions in our cities.

TADASHI KAWAMATA

Tadashi Kawamata constructs labyrinthine structures out of discarded wood in urban settings. He assembles found lumber in a particular place, gives the salvage a function as part of his newly created structure, takes the construction apart after a set length of time, and then returns the wood to the streets as discarded objects once more.

By simulating the process that materials pass through, Kawamata's work explores and demonstrates the political, social and ethical conditions of building. His work reveals issues of production and consumption, use and waste. "The physical act of construction is as important to him as that of deconstruction."¹

Visually, they subvert our expectations about buildings by both taking on a life of their own and blending into their context. They can appear abandoned, fragmented or transient. Often, they form a second wall, a penetrable boundary that becomes a suggestive mask.

Kawamata's installations can be seen on one level as a humanizing factor when applied to the apparently flawless facade of modern architecture, bringing out a sense of individual relationship in a rescaled architectural space through the juxtaposition of a makeshift, temporary structure against a permanent and manufactured one. Yet they are also an observation on the cyclical nature of property development in major cities, occupying a position somewhere between construction and demolition.²

MAKING ART

Kawamata dematerializes his building sites by materializing the building process; the structure embodies both the constructed and demolished in its presence forcing us to confront the force of its emergence and disappearance. Looking spontaneous and loose, the assemblage grows, evolves and changes. The result is undefined, a construction that never resolves itself. This is inherent in the materials; they remember their former use and disuse while participating in this new venture.

Kawamata questions the purity of the original building

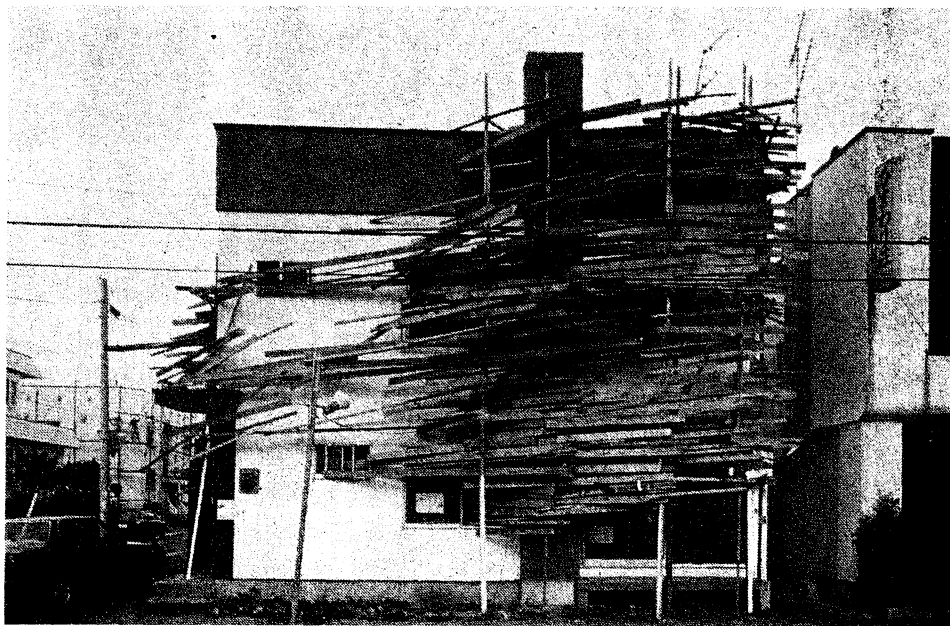


Figure 1: Tetra House N-3 W-23 Project, Sapporo, Japan, 1983.

with his re-translation. The idea is not to wrap something as Christo does but rather to create a tension between new and old. His assemblage focuses on the specific time and circumstance of its location. He creates a new identity for the site, both obstructing the original building and assimilating the work with that from which it emerges. By re-thinking the network of relations and oppositions inherent in built work, Kawamata challenges and displaces the significance of static building. As Manfredo Tafuri writes:

At the origins of the critical act, there always lies a process of destroying, of dissolving, of disintegrating a given structure. Without such a disintegration of the object under analysis no further rewriting of the object is possible. And it is self-evident that no criticism exists that does not retrace the process that has given birth to the work and that does not redistribute the elements of the work into a different order, if for no other purpose than to construct typological models.³

One beauty of the forms is that they are not closed; the constructs are not designed as billboards; they have no one primary message. Allowing for multiple meanings, Kawamata's work provokes us with its undecidability. The critical transformation of the sign system in which we live produces a condition of possibility.

In its intervention, the construction expands the original building by extending the inside to the outside and by engaging the building form directly. Kawamata questions the ideas of shelter, habitation and embodiment. Through memory, invention and the relationship between things, we come to understand the work. Kawamata has written:

My intention is not really to wrap something up. It is rather to extend, . . . to expand, to intervene. . . . Making

and showing, private and public, art or not art, sculpture or architecture: these contrasting qualities are introduced as the work extends outside.⁴

ATTACHING TO ARCHITECTURE

Of primary importance to his work is its temporality; one cannot return to it over and over again. The momentary quality of the structure leaves open our encounter with the work; it remains only in photographs as a record of the event. (Many images of Kawamata's art are burned in my mind not through actual experience but through magazine reproduction.)

When Kawamata's art is removed, the building is meant to return to its original state. (I question whether the site ends up as it was or if in the process of removal, the site is cleaned up by his team.) Some might argue that his construction is mere ornamentation or decoration and serves no practical purpose. By contrast, when scaffolding is removed we detect a change, something newly added, fixed or cleaned. One might also argue that the work is a metaphor for a natural disaster, along with the hypothetical act of re-building. In truth, by questioning the original state of its host, these constructions transform the host.

[Kawamata's] temporary projects may affect the architecture ever so briefly, but they radically transform the perception and the history of the object, and its image in the public's consciousness. The enduring idea of the building is amended by his short-lived encroachments. Kawamata's installations are sutures that stitch together the temporal and concrete dimensions of architecture.⁵

Kawamata lets us know that what we see as ubiquitous and permanent may be changed rather quickly or destroyed. He

focuses on the unplanned, the accidental; impermanence is an essential aesthetic factor. The disintegration into fragments and debris that his structures imply can only be seen in comparison to stability and completeness. Permanence, the making of a mark on the world that “lasts a relatively long time”, hides the impermanence of our society and the duplicity we feel because of our fragile status in the world.

LIBERATING OPPOSITION

In Western thought, binary oppositions are implicitly linked: us/them, permanent/temporary, positive/negative. In this hierarchy, the first term is preferred; the second term is the undesirable negation of the first. Yet, it is only through the second term that we come to understand the first. We only know the timeless, stationary and certain by knowing the transient and ephemeral.

In the visual arts, binary oppositions have been strategically blurred. As Craig Owens writes:

We have witnessed the gradual dissolution of once fundamental distinctions -- original/copy, authentic/inauthentic, function/ornament. Each term now seems to contain its opposite, and this indeterminacy brings with it an impossibility of choice or, rather, the absolute equivalence and hence interchangeability of choices.⁶

Artists such as Kawamata depend on architecture with which to engage and play. They comment and rely on

existing structures for their composition. By acknowledging their dependence on the surrounding context, they enhance and change the site. Whether the art is present or absent, the very act of placement and removal helps re-determine architecture.

While Kawamata’s work is additive, the artist Gordon Matta-Clark used subtraction. One saw the remnants and performance of the original building in relation to Matta-Clark’s activities. His art depended upon the cyclical nature of destruction and rebirth. The building became a mutable object, available to new procedures and interpretations.

Matta-Clark’s contradictory dissections, his intricate mazes opposing the clarity and geometry of any architectural plan, violated the unity and continuity associated with Modernist architecture, exposing relationships between forms and materials to make visible unexpected, multiple layers in spatial and temporal depth.⁷

With artists like these, I find it difficult to locate the category the work inhabits. It does not fit into sculpture or installation, and while it explores and demonstrates the building process, it does not quite fit “building” either. I use this work which developed out of art institutions and funding to understand the temporary solutions in the everyday city. Unlike the artists’ works which are emblematic, the work I will now focus on is utilitarian. Through an individual’s ad hoc expression, spaces are remade to meet the diverse conditions of living.



Figure 2: Entry Stair, 56th Street, New York, NY, 1991.

THE TEMPORARY SOLUTION

The temporary solution is what we sometimes see unexpectedly on a drive through town. It is the gateway made with leftover pipes from a long since removed chain link fence, the loudspeaker haphazardly hung above the doorway of a restaurant that announces to diners standing outside in the street that their table is ready, or the remains of a 2 x 4 wall leaning against a wheelless Chevy. Each example defines a space not with constructed walls but with suggested enclosure, odd juxtapositions and chance adjacencies.

People, who claim no visual acuity, create the environment around them. Their surroundings are constructed space, indicating their home, recreation or work. Instead of respecting the boundaries created for them, they socially and aesthetically redefine the use of space by programming for the diversity of their choices and lives.

The temporary solution is instructive because it does not necessitate the coming to finality or conclusion. Rather it may be the process of research or experimentation through a multiplicity of sources. It provides a glimpse into what might be, not what has been. By formulating a series of interpretations, an accumulation that comes from clarity of intent and a focus on need, the builder of the project allows us to see things in more than one way, to discover relationships. The result is a project that poses questions, but does not necessarily give answers.

I look for these temporary forms to provide a "matrix for orientation when much else seems in a state of permanent transition. [They] simultaneously help to concretize for us the inchoate experience and illusive conception of time."⁸ They mark the present with conviction.

UNCOVERING A SITE

Looking to the use and abuse of everyday space provides an interesting model for designers who try to understand a site in order to willfully and intentionally enhance it. What is found on a site and in its surroundings is diverse; those contrasts enrich and liberate rather than deplete a project.

Lying just hidden beneath the surface are the conflicts, disruptions and defenses that make up a site. As new fences are built, old barriers are dissolved. As differences are resisted, safe spaces are uncovered. My research exposes and incorporates the range of spatial variations which animate daily life, reveal social arrangement, and acknowledge discord.

An example might be two structures supporting a staircase, perhaps a steel column with a wood column right next to it. The wood acts as a new, temporary construction reinforcing the passive steel stair. The juxtaposition of two structures creates something visually redundant. The steel necessitates the wood while the wood supports the steel; which is permanent? which temporary? The simultaneity of the two systems exposes and educates us about the fallacy of permanence. By overlaying a distinctive organization onto an existing one, an environment is produced that is complex

and multiple. Heidegger writes that explanation is always twofold. It accounts for an unknown by means of a known, and at the same time it verifies that known by means of that unknown.⁹

The framing of this stair also suggests shelter. It creates an opportunity, a semi-private zone underneath a public stair. This practical design begins to control the activity in and around the stair while remaining anonymous. It respects the need for intimate spaces within large, vacant plazas.

Recognizing and accepting the temporary solution allows architecture to move beyond its traditional boundaries. Buildings are meant to be solid and constant; they give the illusion of permanence. The materials, however, are subject to time. They transform the static, enclosed conditions of architecture as they weather. My project tries to record the visible changes that take place, to see impermanence as a fact of urban reality. I acknowledge and validate the mutability of materials and with that, the alteration of boundaries.

Another example might be a doorway framed by pilasters and then reframed by a 2 x 4 construction. The construction reorients the symmetry of the opening by blocking one of the doorways. The threshold into one of the interior spaces is blocked; visitors cannot experience the building as it was



Figure 3 caption - Building Entry, Lafayette Street, New York, NY, 1993.

designed. This unidentified project also highlights a crack in the horizontal span. The doorway which signals entry and welcomes us, can no longer protect us from the elements. The performance and flux of time becomes a fundamental feature of this facade.

The perceptibility of these irregular constructions helps materialize present conditions. As structures in our built environment get worn down, prosthetics are designed to keep them standing. They open up possibilities while maintaining what many view as the role of architecture: that everything in this world gets disordered and that architecture provides an order to the confusion.

Often the temporary structure is flexible, ready to be reconfigured or removed when circumstances change. While some argue for architecture as a source of continuity, a protective shield from the rush of time, the temporary structure in times of transition allows for choice and chance. By allowing tension rather than embracing it, these solutions re-inscribe architecture with possibilities after years of reduction.

LIVING WITH SURVEILLANCE

Urban dwellers, uncomfortable with diversity, use boundaries to protect themselves from the tensions of the city. Cities have become divided, enclosed spaces with controlled means of access. Those barriers and patrolled environments indicate an indifference to the structure of space.

When street activity no longer supports the maintenance and upkeep of building spaces, buildings become empty. Soon after, they are demolished as a way of combatting the arson, crime and drug use that can overtake them. Unfortunately, there are no funds to rebuild or rehabilitate the buildings into habitable space. Once a building is removed, paved parking lots or fenced-in, empty lots remain. They are disturbed sites, symbols of the decay in our neighborhoods, the careless disregard toward street activity, and the inability to re-think notions of use and public space.

Urban renewal is, in part, based on impermanence and the “financial benefits of neglect, even destruction, and consequent conspicuous restoration, which usually involves more destruction.”¹⁰ There is, however, another renewal dependent upon memory and survival. The temporary solution and its momentary relationship to urban space incorporates past experience into present thinking and finds beauty in the untrained, functional application.

An automotive garage in a building with bricked-in windows and a cracking facade will not give up its place. It offers a constructed 2 x 4 wall that is not enclosed; a minimal encroachment necessary to remain in business. Certainly, many will find irony in reading the sign “Do Not Block Entrance” through this open wall. But I also see an economical use of space. Half of the garage may be blocked but the other half is still operable. This informal solution emerges in an uncertain time; the garage is confronted with increased poverty and crime, and the approach of gentrification. The

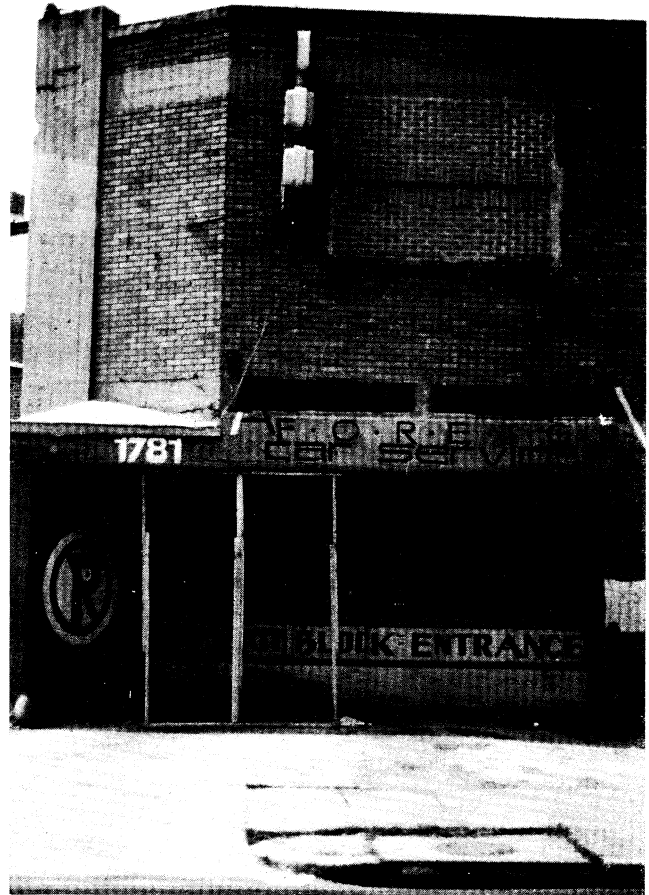


Figure 4: Car Service, Florida Avenue, Washington, DC, 1994.

project expresses the precariousness and fragility of this marginal urban site, something the typical building process covers up. It also creates a permeable edge between the public street and the private business.

As Gordon Matta-Clark said, “In the typical building process everything is all covered up; here, the grinding, chewing, gnarled edges are all there is, so you really read it. You read the traces much, much more.”¹¹

These projects derive their form and content from the material and cultural context in which they are made. They intensify surfaces, offer a window onto the spectacle of devastation and renewal, and connect what is already present. They establish relations between things by juxtaposing different kinds of activities to bring people into contact with one another. Joints and bridges are being formed to remake what is fragmented and dispersed.

As an example, a small wooden bridge connects two small buildings. Constructed in the shadow of a large office tower, this bridge maintains a human scale and connects two vernacular structures. The bridge solidifies the status of these two buildings by establishing a clear relation between them. It turns the buildings into a block and readjusts the hierarchy of viewing positions; this gateway becomes an

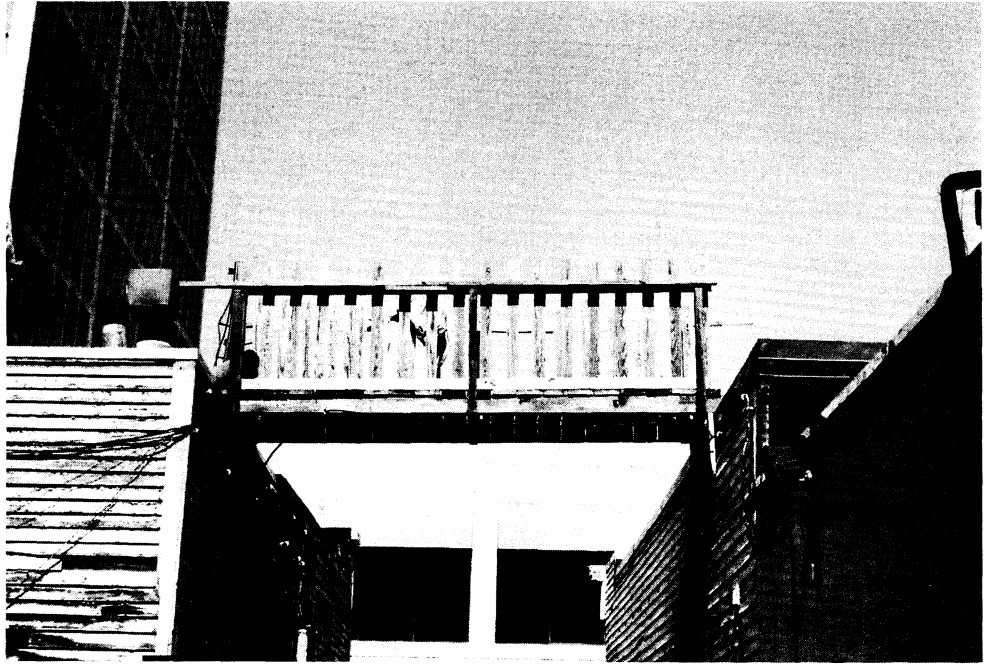


Figure 5: Wooden Bridge, Central Square, Cambridge, MA 1993.

initiation place for anyone who passes beneath it and a position of power for those who stand on top. A different organization is allowed to develop within an existing one.

As Aaron Betsky writes, "Only the most thorough collages go beyond mere collecting, to be formed into handles onto the invisible systems that allow their construction."¹²

RENDERING CURRENT CONDITIONS

The ephemeral constructions I describe are visible from the street. They are composed with a variety of materials, often a reuse of things discarded. The anonymous author arranges these found objects for support and purpose. They juxtapose a temporary structure against a conventional space. These transformations create a language that is not yet clear. In place of architectural containment and closure, they allow for accessibility. This implied dismantling and reorientation of architecture offers both a metaphoric and literal use.

Temporary solutions make spaces, boundaries and hierarchies identifiable and knowable. By registering knowledge, these constructs define and refine how we look at the world. I believe that if the elements of power are visible, they can become more knowable. While I understand there can be no possibility for and do not want a world without boundaries, I do want a world where borders are made more visible. Visibility may then mobilize the viewer to examine the problems and significance of those structures. As political action, it may invite critical judgement or provoke acts of defiance. By focusing on the evidence of segmentation, the sighted and sited striation of our lived-in worlds, we discover the irregularity of communities and systems, and hopefully find the suggestion for new relations.

While architects can not change power relations, (public policy and personal values need to speak to the issues),

architects do focus attention on the separations we encounter and suggest an adjusted order, a modified social construction. If architecture can dictate the behavior of its users, it can also subvert those functions through the interplay of order and chaos, fixed and momentary, stable and damaged. I believe the desire to expose and enliven becomes an act of demystification. If people are put into the position of the other, a position they would not normally be in, they may come to understand their own position.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY

The physical landscape is constrained by a dismantled center and the problems of assimilation. In a world already built and over built, architecture will inhabit existing buildings, cities and states, and inhabit computer space, journals and gallery walls. The architect, as builder, planner, educator and artist, faces a number of questions.

In a culture of motion and movement, there is an implied choreography but who is responsible for the arrangement? If we live in a sequence of divided spaces, how can the circulation through, around and into those spaces be re-configured? What are the consequences of adjusting the boundaries and thresholds through which we want to pass and in which we desire to reside?

In response, I have been compiling a list of available strategies: To select, represent, interpret or frame; To erode, efface, obstruct or bury; To mend, relieve, adapt, or integrate.

These procedures are important first steps to any practice since designers will be asked to: Insert habitation where there is no space; Reveal the multiple layers, cultures and contexts of a site; Displace current information in order to reconcile the past with a possibility for a future; Make

evident the interchangeability and specificity of choice through precise material narratives.

CONCLUSION

The demand for architecture or planning as it has been traditionally conceived is under consideration. Because our country's pluralism leads to uncertainty, there can be little chance for a collective symbolism to emerge. I find it difficult to believe in the possibility of building something new. I am filled with mistrust for singular, individual, grand ideas; I can not afford to be arrogant.

A traditional view of architecture might include the notion that architects clear a site, flatten the ground and construct a new building from scratch. That notion implies that the history of the site is forgotten, thrown away with the rumble and that a new history is created on the level ground. The isolated building marks the site as an address, as a destination.

A different view of architecture is developing. The world is almost built to its maximum capacity; many recognize that our foundations and structures are already made. I am among a generation of architects who will not build. Instead, I will be asked to alter and innovate existing structures rather than build new ones. As an alternative way to work, such practices are now socially permitted.

Architects and planners no longer hold onto one particular style; they do not require being recognized, appropriate or accepted. The goal of the architect or planner is to re-knit the fabric of the city, unite buildings, gardens, streets and communities, not in a uniform continuity or compatibility, but in a way that accepts and invites difference.

Activity and opportunity is always already embedded in a site, but the structures of our economy find little possibility for pausing or inhabitation. Built structures often try to control a site rather than explore the potential of a site. I find promise in sites of disuse or nameless spaces, where unexpected places are carved out for occupation.

If architecture longs for meaning and if the fleeting and momentary are linked to disintegration and meaningless-

ness, then a temporary structure allows for an architecture that embodies complexity and multiplicity as well as unity. Temporary help may be disruptive, but it can reveal a site while supplying different and possibly contradictory notions of order. It provides the opportunity to understand a diverse set of inter-relations.

Often, what we see as problematic is called unstudied or installation as opposed to architecture; it resists classification and identification. My goal is to include problematic, temporary structures. The vitality and tension these "ordinary" constructions attain based on their symbiotic relationship stimulates both my work and my thoughts. Palpable, inhabitable spaces are created and made visible. I celebrate their suggestiveness.

NOTES

- ¹ P.S. 1 press release, *Kawamata Project* (Tokyo: On the Table, 1986), p. 9.
- ² James Roberts, "Tadashi Kawamata," *Artscribe*, Summer 1988, p. 89.
- ³ Manfredo Tafuri, "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir," *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 272.
- ⁴ Howard Fox, "Kawamata," *Primal Spirit: Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptures* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1990), p. 65.
- ⁵ Patricia Phillips, "Added Attractions," *Artforum*, May 1989, p. 108.
- ⁶ Craig Owens, "Feminists and Postmodernism," *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Hal Foster(ed.) (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), p. 77.
- ⁷ Judith Russi Kirshner, "Non-uments," *Artforum*, October 1985, p. 104.
- ⁸ Phillips, "Added Attractions", p. 108.
- ⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," *The Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), p. 121.
- ¹⁰ Donald Judd, *Architektur* (Munster: Westfalischen Kunstverein, 1989), p. 100.
- ¹¹ Gordon Matta-Clark quoted in Kirshner, "Non-uments", p. 103.
- ¹² Aaron Betsky, *Violated Perfection: Architecture and the Fragmentation of the Modern* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1990), p. 104.