Immaterial Design

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As the profession of architecture responds to advances in technology including digital media. telecommunications and Internet technology, a number of practices at what was once considered the fringe of the profession are beginning to alter the definition of architectural practice. The most noted of these is Diller + Scofidio, a firm that defines itself as a collaborative, interdisciplinary studio whose work intersects architecture, the visual and performing arts. The awards that Diller + Scofidio have recently received reflect this cross-disciplinary work: they have won and Obie award for creative achievement in off-Broadway theater for a performance entitled "Jet Lag," a *Progressive Architecture* award for the Blur Building, and the first MacArthur Foundation Award ever awarded to architects. This is an unusually diverse resume for a partnership formed by two professors of architecture. In fact, it is unique.

As Diller + Scofidio question the boundaries between architecture, media and performance, definitions are blurring. In "This is Not Now," a presentation given at the Biennale di Venezia in 1998, Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio posed the following question:

If, according to Victor Hugo's prophesy in "This Will Kill That," the book was to kill architecture, and presently, electronic media threatens to kill the book, what will become of the geographically fixed, painfully slow, materially rigid, and now doubly obsolete medium of architecture?[1]

In the Blur building, they offer answers to these questions. The Blur building proposes an architecture that is ever-changing. that literally transforms the material of is site (water) into architecture (fog/the blur) by utilizing electronic media (computers) that monitor and react to changes in the environment (the weather). In response to the above question, what happens to architecture in a culture transformed by digital media is that its medium must change to incorporate the flexibility and interactive nature that emerging technologies present. If electronic media has indeed killed architecture as the architects imply in the above statement. Diller + Scofidio propose its technologically reincarnated presence in the Blur Building.

Sited in Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland, the Blur Building was designed as part of a competition submission for Expo.01, the sixth annual Swiss national exhibition. The first and most obvious challenge the Blur Building presents to architecture is that of materiality. The building does not have exterior walls: rather, a cloud of fabricated fog defines its exterior. Elizabeth Diller explains the reasoning behind this unorthodox material selection in stating. "We struggled with the question of what a building on the water should be. Then we decided the building material should *be* water."[2] The design of the building completely revolved around this initial concept of designing what the architects call nothing: a blurred effect created by fog. In order to achieve this effect, the designers created a metal tensegrity frame that appeared to float upon Lake Neuchatel. The form of this frame was dominated by the need to position water nozzles, which create the fog and therefore the blurred effect. The structural frame had the secondary purpose of supporting the habitable spaces of the building. Because the Blur Building is not an enclosed structure, the fog is subject to weather. The nozzles creating the fog, which were designed by nuclear engineers, respond to varying climatic conditions including temperature, wind, and humidity. As a result, the fog is constantly changing. This reciprocal relationship between natural and manmade weather effects draws attention to the project's juxtaposition of nature and artifice. While the fog is always changing in terms of its density and motion, it is ever present, inhibiting clear vision and creating a blurred effect.

Elizabeth Diller explains, "This is the big idea for the spectacle. Inside, there's nothing to see."[3] Nothing, that is, beyond the effects of the blur. Ironically, blurred vision enables observers to focus more pointedly on the questions at hand. As Tom Keenan, a member of the media think-tank that Diller + Scofidio consulted during the design of Blur, noted: "We always look twice, more than twice, when things get blurry."[4] In struggling to focus clearly upon the visual aspects of the project. inhabitants of Blur are left to speculate: is it acceptable for architecture to shed its responsibility of sheltering humans from the elements, and instead embrace weather as an element that can, itself, create architecture? If so, what is the role of

architecture? More specifically, what is the purpose of exhibition architecture, if not to offer up a spectacle as an object for viewing? In Blur, the exhibition pavilion is simultaneously a form of perception and a thing perceived. The Blur building acts upon its inhabitants by impeding sensory perception, thereby drawing attention to our dependence upon vision. Blur posits an architecture that is a transformation of materials (i.e.: water becoming fog becoming architecture), and in doing so, presents architecture as something that transforms rather than reflects.

In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin observes that cultural transformations register shifts in sense perception. As the omnipresence of digital media currently signals a cultural transformation in which society becomes exponentially more dependent upon the sense of sight, Diller + Scofidio ask, through the construction of Blur, whether or not architecture can transcend the visual. In other words, if architecture blurs vision, what is left? Elizabeth Diller said, "What fascinated me about architecture was not so much the nuts and bolts. It was much more about real-time performance, choreographing bodies in space. I was specifically not interested in the constructed artifact as an autonomous thing, but the interactions with people."[5] This interest is clearly present in Blur, where the relationship between the body, sensory perception, and architecture becomes the driving force behind the project.

Analyzing the practice of Diller + Scofidio, one may conclude that the role of the architect is to question architectural programs. Rather than responding to a program that called for the construction of an exhibition pavilion, Diller + Scofidio built a structure that called the very nature of its building type into question. This critical approach to program is one that the architects may have inherited from John Hejduk, with whom they taught at the Cooper Union for many years. Indeed, Hejduk was adamant in declaring that the role of the architect is to invent new programs. His most radical vision of inverted programs came in the form of his Masques, such as the Berlin and Berlin Night Masques. In these projects, Hejduk employed an architectural cast of characters and a program that in many ways read as a script for a theatrical production. These projects have clearly affected the approach Diller and Scofidio take in addressing programmatic needs. Visitors to the Expo were drawn to Blur in such large numbers because the structure inspired curiosity. Because the cloud of fog hovering upon the lake was such an unusual construct, visitors were lured down the entrance ramp and dared to don raincoats provided at the entrance as they began the procession into the mist. Arriving at the tensegrity frame, visitors entered the primary exhibition space of the pavilion and discovered that, as the architects put it, the spectacle presented nothing to see. Moving further into the building and towards the top level of the pavilion, one could sample various bottled waters sold at the Angel Bar, or simply look through the fog out towards the lake on the observation

deck. The focus of inhabitants is continuously drawn to the materiality of the pavilion: water. Whether donning raincoats, walking over a lake, moving through mist or selecting from various waters to drink, inhabitants are reminded time and again that the building is made of water in its various forms, and that the point of the building is to experience the effects of an artificial climate generated by technology. In describing the experience of moving through the pavilion, Elizabeth Diller likens entering to logging into a computer, and exiting to logging out, drawing attention to the importance of the interactive nature of the pavilion. In the Blur building, architecture provokes. In fact, it teases its inhabitants, who become participants in its interrogations. Inside this pavilion, architecture is defined by fog and as a result, uncertainty. To describe the architecture of Blur, one must include weather, change, motion, interaction between inhabitants, and reciprocity. Even the building itself was fleeting; as a pavilion that formed part of a temporary exhibition, its existence was short-lived. In the end, Blur was operational for a mere six months during the tenure of Expo 02, from May through October 2002.

Diller + Scofidio's team for the Swiss Expo competition was comprised of Vehovar & Jauslin Achitektur; West 8, Landscape Architects; Tristan Kobler, Architect; Karl Gartl, Structural Engineer; and Stephane Maye, project manager. Before they began to discuss the nature of the project's design, in an attempt to define Diller + Scofidio's role, team members opted to list Diller + Scofidio not as architects, but rather as the firm overseeing "Immaterial Design." This unusual nomenclature foreshadowed the unorthodox nature of Diller + Scofidio's contribution. As the team progressed through the stages of design and implementation of their submission, relations between team members crumbled, and tensions regarding professional roles were heightened. At a particularly low point, Vehovar & Jauslin attempted to wrestle control of all architecture away from Diller + Scofidio, declaring that their role should be limited to media design. Why did they make this demand? Clearly, Diller + Scofidio's visions of architecture and building were unsettling even to members of their own design team. This confrontation was an early indicator of the polarized reactions that the Blur Building would evoke, because in the Blur Building, architecture and media design are inseparable and indistinguishable from one another.

The mere possibility of such a division enraged Diller + Scofidio, as did the suggestion on behalf of Expo management that another artist's work be placed within Blur. In response to this request, Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio wrote: "In response to your call of last week . . . we have begun to wonder whether the DA (Expo Management) has really understood our concept. Informing us at this late date that you want to add an art project inside Blur is as brutal as asking James Turrell to put another artist's work in his light environment."[6] They go on to explain that they would be happy to collaborate with a variety of poets, writers or artists in a media project; however, simply

placing another work of art within the building would be unacceptable. The reason for this is that the building and its media are inseparable: they both combine to create architecture. While this is a radical re-framing of the definition of architecture. it is certainly not unprecedented. In the early 20th century. architects and designers including Frank Lloyd Wright and Eileen Gray declared that interior finishes and furnishings were as much a part of architecture as were floors or walls. Diller + Scofidio's similar insistence upon the media project being an integral element of their own building is very much along this line of reasoning. What distinguishes their argument is that it declares that digital media including wireless telecommunications systems (braincoats). computers (regulating fog nozzles). and display devices (LED screens) can be architectural materials.

In *This is Not Now*. Elizabeth Diller says. "The work of our studio attempts to dismantle the qualitative distinctions between mediated and 'real' experience that serve to separate architectural experience from that of contemporary media. We attempt to synthesize technology and architecture using bricks and pixels as irreducible units of construction."[7] It is the incorporation of materials including pixels and fog that signals Diller + Scofidio's shift in the definition of architecture. Not only are these two materials unorthodox. they also indicate that architecture is becoming interactive with its inhabitants and surroundings in an immediate way. While buildings already respond to weather and occupancy in ways such as incorporating HVAC systems. and some architecture goes so far as to move. as is the case with sports facilities with retractable roofs. for example. the moment-to-moment changes incorporated in the Blur Building take interactivity to an unprecedented level. Both the speed at which change occurs and the degree to which the building changes are unparalleled.

In their insistence upon presenting architecture as something ephemeral, fleeting. and experiential, Diller + Scofidio's architecture is consistent in its objective to subvert. undermine. and challenge architectural concepts such as permanence, monumentality, and shelter. In many ways. the Blur building is a natural extension of Diller + Scofidio's practice. The first retrospective of Diller + Scofidio's works is currently on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. The architects' installation at the Whitney employs a robotic arm that drills holes in the walls of the exhibition throughout its duration. As the exhibit moves through time. it becomes physically demolished. Like Blur. it is a work in the process of change. It destroys itself even as it exists. Critics of Blur may say that it is pure spectacle – a thrilling experience. but not substantive architecture. Yet the point of Blur is to draw attention to architecture's dependence upon the visual. and to question what architecture could become if it were based upon the relationship between the building. its environment. and its inhabitants rather than being dominated by formal concerns. In the Blur Building. form literally dissolves. Swiss building

inspectors were initially stumped in their attempts to determine which building codes to enforce during their inspections of Blur. Initially. because they considered blur a building in its legal definition. they argued that a fire prevention system – complete with sprinklers – would need to be installed in the pavilion. With a grin. the architects pointed out that the building was perhaps one of the most advanced sprinkler systems ever designed. In an attempt to protect their authority. the inspectors declared that the building could only be inhabited while the fog system was in operation. This conundrum points to the most essential question that Blur presents: why is it possible to call this construction a building at all? Furthermore. what is the underlying reason that Diller + Scofidio designed the Blur building? A look at the Expo brief. which called for design entries. offers insight. It reads:

> *The project is a collective sculpture that seeks to excite the imagination and generate new ideas. It is intended not only to foreground progress but also to ask questions about quality. consequences. and the meaning of progress. To this end. it invents stories and explores the realm lying between the normal and the possible with childlike abandon.*[8]

Rising to these challenges. the Blur Building questions the need for and nature of shelter. It dares architects to incorporate unorthodox building materials such as fog and wireless technology. both of which are interactive in that they immediately respond to the actions of the building's inhabitants. Yet even these significant challenges can be viewed as auxiliary. because in the end. the most significant questions the building poses are: what are the limits of architecture. and what happens after these limits are transgressed? Blur is unsettling. disorienting. dynamic. and catalytic. and it demands that as architecture changes. both architects and inhabitants must participate in its recreation and perpetual mutations.

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NOTES

[1] Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, "This is Not Now." reading presented at the Rotterdam Film Festival, January 29, 1998, and reprinted on www.classic.archined.nl/news/9802.diller__e.html

[2] Elizabeth Diller as quoted by Peter Marks, "Diller + Scofidio: Architects Building Castles in the Clouds," *The New York Times*, Sunday, May 27, 2001.

[3] Elizabeth Diller as quoted by Peter Marks, "Clouds."

[4] Tom Keenan as quoted in Diller + Scofidio, *Blur*, p. 174.

[5] Elizabeth Diller as quoted by Nancy Beth Jackson, "Thinking about Architecture," *Princeton Weekly Bulletin*, March 27, 2000, Vol. 89, No. 21.

[6] Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, *Blur*, p. 324.

[7] Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, "This is Not Now."

[8] Pippilotti Rist, "Expo Brief," *Blur* p. 11.