

Ambiguously Contingent / The Folly as Both Subject and Object

Is it folly to conceive of an architecture without contingency? Definably, the word contingent is used to describe something that only happens following a prior requisite occurrence; therefore contingency immediately establishes an implicit hierarchy, suggesting the first thing informs the second. This chicken and egg dilemma of something needing to come before something else has continually fueled architectural debate over which is in fact the subject and which is the object; the building as a thing or the site as another thing.¹

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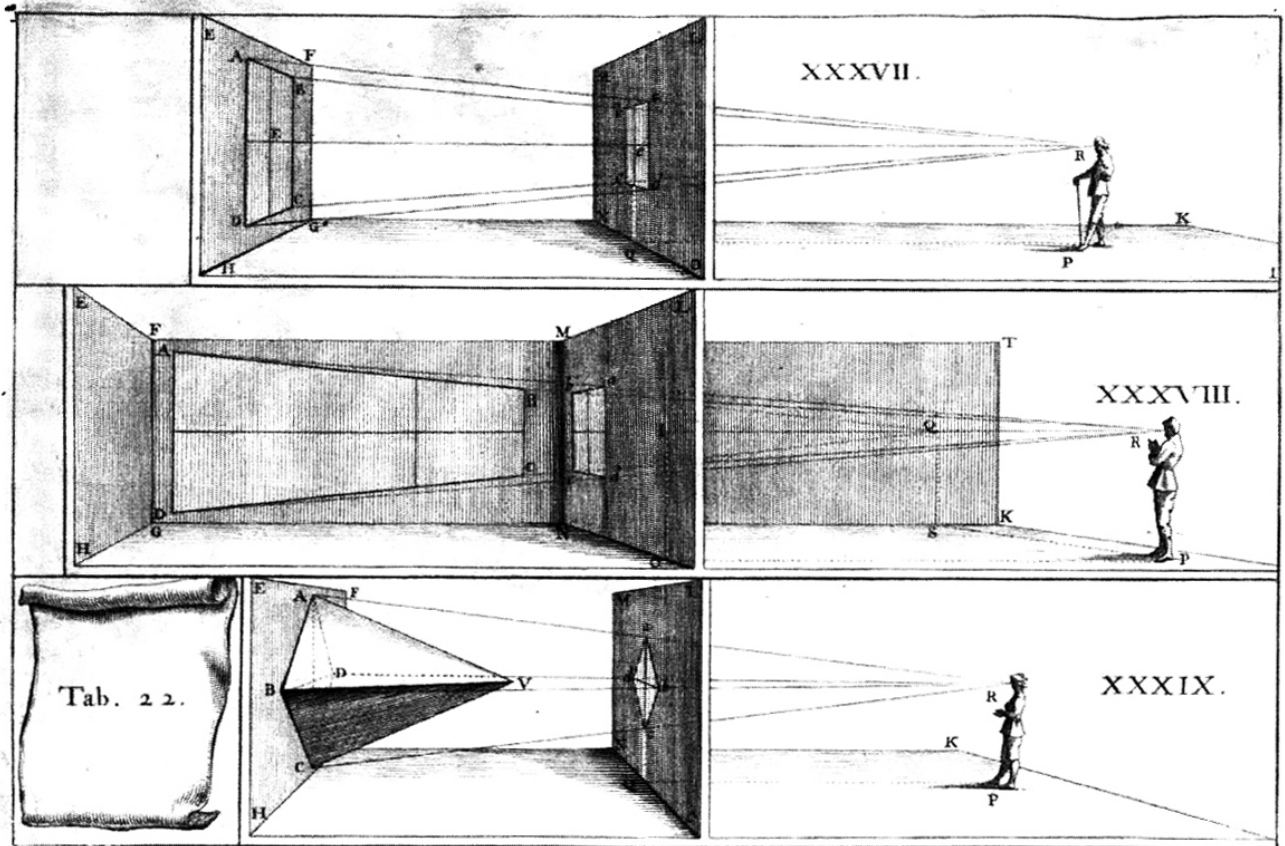
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Arguably, this roots back to the primitive act of the human putting something on the ground identifying both the earth and the construct as two things. This idea of the two, has in turn lead to much of the theory we wrestle with in architecture, regarding the expression of these things and their apparent differences or similarities in construction, and in their respective contextual worlds. Throughout history, various architectural movements have elevated one of these two things, site or building, to be the subject and the other to be the object and in so doing established a hierarchy between the two. In the search for an Architecture without contingency, or perhaps a more ambiguous relationship to the hierarchy, perhaps we can begin by organizing these periods into subject and object, regarding the site and building. Let us begin by examining the idea of the site as subject influencing the building as object, which perhaps is the relationship where we are most used to thinking of contingency in architecture.

ARCHITECTURE AS OBJECT

Taken from his 1961 publication, *The Elements of Phenomenology in Architecture*, Ernesto Rogers writes, "To understand history is essential for the formation of the architect, since he must be able to insert his own work into the pre-esistenza ambientali and to take it, dialectically into account."² Statements of this kind became a championing rise of "contextualism" in architecture and arguably the movement towards an architecture of contingency on the literal translation of ambientali as the physical environment. However, other translations have been offered to the concept of l'ambiente to mean more generically surroundings, or perhaps even milieu, a person's social environment.



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One of the core inquiries we must question is the difference between Context and Contingency. Rogers' called us to move towards an architecture of "ambiente...", suggesting the architectural object is contingent or rather that the insertion must adapt to its surrounding environment and not the other way around. This form of adaptivity could be exhibited in many ways, including formal vernacularism, environmentalism, as well as the unseen flows of ecology. We could call this the idealist position wherein the form of the object is irrelevant, but in fact it is the idea of the object's ability to be a vessel for ameliorating larger societal concerns that we are seeing. Rodgers went on to discuss the specific notion of history as that of the immediate context within which the architect is working, but today immediacy grows to encompass a wider space given interconnectivity and the omnipresence of building culture immediately accessible to the architect. Once, we generalize the terms to include the unseen forces of culture, can anything truly be non-contextual?

Pardoning the rhetorical answer of no, let us instead examine the consequences of allowing the pre-existing surroundings to have an agency on the architectural object. It could be ventured that an architecture that like a chameleon is awaiting input from the subject of context, is internally vacuous and has no self-disciplinary control or awareness of its own agenda or agency. The dangers of a medium only being reflective of the surroundings was being written about simultaneously by Clement Greenberg in a discussion of painting at the turn of the twentieth century:

Having been denied by the Enlightenment of all tasks they could take seriously, they looked as though they were going to be assimilated to entertainment pure and simple... The arts could save themselves from this leveling down only by demonstrating that the kind of experience they provided was valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity.³

Figure 1: Excerpt of 17th century Anamorphic Projection Research by Jean Francois Niceron, *La Curieuse Perspective*

Greenberg describes how painting at the last part of the eighteenth century was reduced to a product of reproducing the effects of the environment without any agency of the artist. It became the moment of abstraction and inward focused visual conversation that saved the discipline of art from becoming absorbed into the leisure and entertainment industries.

Some contemporary architects have argued that architecture of contingency and contextualism has become a similar digestible parlor trick for general consumption and satisfaction, undermining our authorship to the excuses presented for work's formation by site and contextual forces. The argument would suggest that we undermine the value of our physical contribution to the environment by entering into the claim that our forms must be predicated on externalities and other forces, as if they are the product of the world in whence they came. This other new camp might suggest that Architecture is neither the grammatical subject nor the object, perhaps existing autonomously.⁴

ARCHITECTURE AS NEITHER OBJECT NOR SUBJECT

More recently, the philosophical argument has arisen that objects are neither agents nor to be read as a summation of the world around them but are just that, objects. Grammatically, to be neither subject nor object would be an indirect object, without any contingency or reciprocity around it but merely a residual to the other relationships. The interpretations of Graham Harmon's writing on Object Oriented Ontology all seem to surround the concept of impending depletion of architectural agency in our inability to embrace our agency as artists. The interpretation of the philosophy here is notably that a building is what it is and needs no explanation. More specifically, the argument attests that if we present buildings as a summation of their component parts, or as a series of types that respond to the externalities of place we are undermining the things of our genius. Further, if we present buildings as only valid in their successful participation in larger contexts, socially, urbanistically or ecologically we are overmining the ability of the things. In a sense, whenever a building is rendered as subject to the forces around it or as a respondent to concerns the author is lost. In this conception, the product of the architect 'is what it is,' just an object to be ambiguously interpreted in its own right, and cannot be judged by the externalities or contingencies that it may or may not have.⁵

Autonomy in its purity suggests the presumption of zero context, and zero contingency, which despite its resoluteness even the most-staunch of objects standing in ambiguous defiance to its field could have very specific conversational agendas within the context of the architectural audience who reads it and who's history it is contingent. Given such a concern, it would behoove me to summon a figure such as Robin Evans who championed the idea that architectural drawing is in fact a productive and generative medium in its own right and that our particular way of seeing and investigating architecture can lead to new effects of visual culture, which further inform more architecture so the architecture is in fact the subject for the creation of further objects. This argument also precludes the understanding that the creation of the object can reversely create place, situation, environment or more bluntly make the environment which is then contingent on the object rather than the other way around. While the object could be conceived of from internal contexts the object also has the ability to be simultaneously the catalytic agent to provoke the viewer.

ARCHITECTURE AS SUBJECT

Looking backward, early examples of what we might associate with autonomy in architecture are in fact referenced typologically as Follies. Claude Nicolas Ledoux and Etienne Boulees in the eighteenth century designed what were apparent as alien objects inserted in stark contrast to their rapturous surrounding in the 'natural' world. However, we would be negligent to suggest that these individuals were working devoid of context at large but rather were focusing their gaze on the context of the history of geometric and typological forces within architecture which produced the affect of autonomy. Further the form of these



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insertions were driven around a manner of speaking about their purpose beginning the idea of an architecture that communicates itself to an audience, creating an architectural parlante or a series of inward and outward dialogues and communications.

Every folly must have a name,” noted Francis Coventry that “every folly should be emblematic, or unambiguous as possible of the quality or characteristic it exemplified. The folly, as an extreme example, as extreme example, became in the eighteenth century the experimental object of architects who searched for an architectural parlance, a visual rhetoric that could be “read” like a book and a moral book at that by its viewer...The Folly thus became a unit of language, a grapheme of philosophic discussion, an instrument in the didactic program of the enlightener.⁶

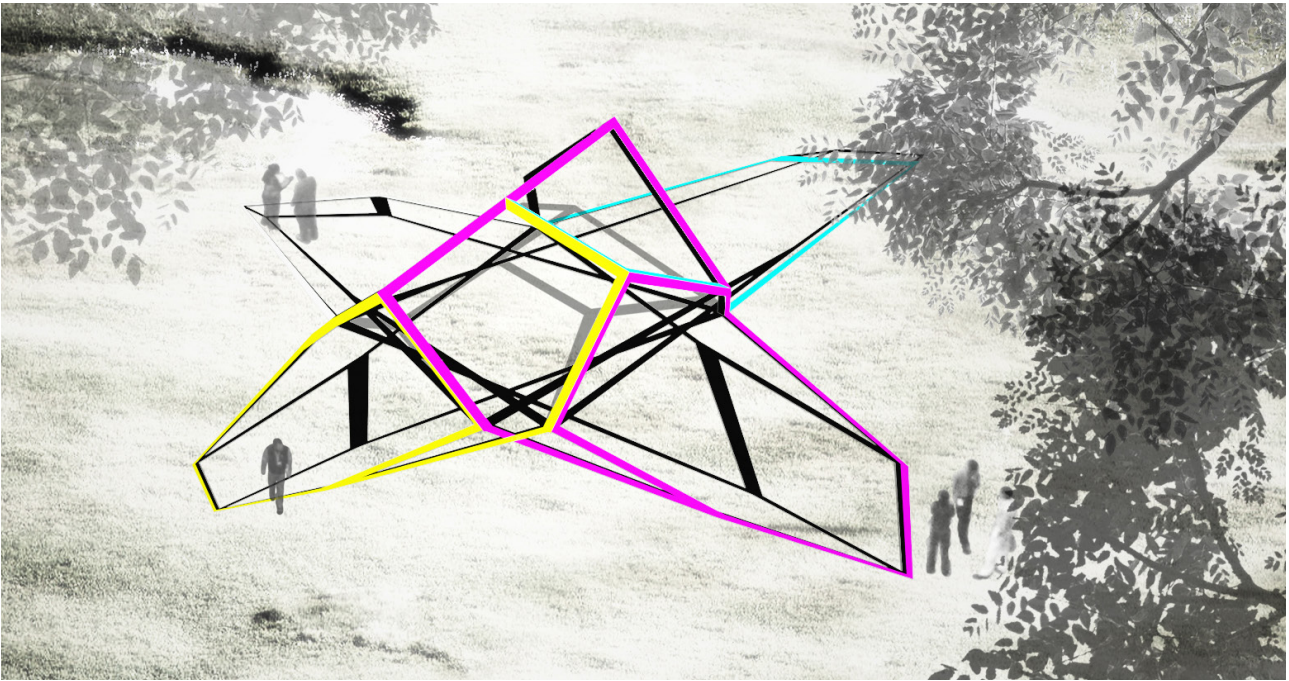
In Anthony Vidler’s words, “the folly is a solipsism,” or self-referential to its type.” It is the “asylum for the absolutely impossible” throwing away reality in favor of curiosity. And lastly and perhaps most importantly, he describes the folly as “perversely, exhibiting a discipline, a logic a reason in itself, which because withdrawn from the world, remains in a sense pure. “ This maintains the idea that the folly is both emerging from its internal world and simultaneously speaking out towards its surrounding. It in fact is the subject which catalyzes those around it to react and informs the world in which it sits.

This idea of the architectural-object being in fact a subject that acts on its surroundings could be seen as an interpretation of the philosophical movement, the Actor-Network Theory, wherein non-human things such as buildings could participate to form larger flows. These quasi-objects are almost cognitive in their influential capability unlike the previous conception which holds objects to be things acted upon. This suggests that perhaps, the architectural-object can be both.

ARCHITECTURE AS BOTH SUBJECT AND OBJECT

Our own office’s work of late has been pre-occupied in this problem of objects that are caught in visible tension, in what we have been referring to as a double desire for formal immersion and isolation in simultaneity. A schizophrenia provoked by oscillation between being the subject and the object. This type of oscillation plays itself out in a lot of optical illusion strategies wherein the eye is modulating between two things. Arguably, the context or

Figure 2: The geometry of the hut is presented to the user by the constructed geometry above and the inscribed anamorphic geometry in the ground, *The Anamorphic Hut, op.AL*



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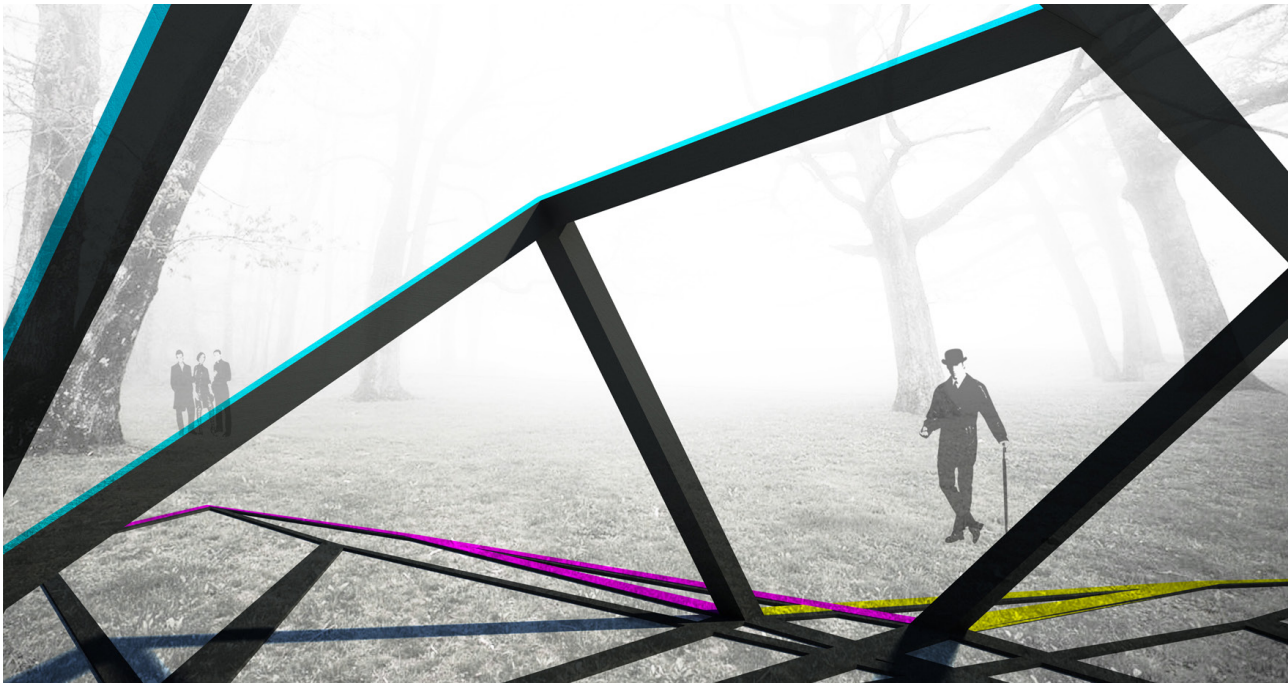
the flows within much of our work lies, would be that of visual cultural and the audience of Architectural Pedagogy.

Recently, one of my students, who came back from the salt flats of Bolivia, astonished me with his photos, specifically the scalelessness that was exhibited by the people—a place without visible context. But what really impressed me was how visitors have clearly picked up on this so whenever you google the salt flats you consistently find images where people are setting up anamorphics with positioning the body. This sort of deception causes the eye to oscillate between near and far and the mind to wrestle and re-adjust in order to find the new ideological equilibrium between those two states. It's at these moments we explore a pure ambiguity of intentions.

More than these parlor tricks though we have been getting deeply acquainted with two Seventeenth century monks, Jean Francois Nicéron and Emmanuel Maignan, who pioneered the study of the distorted perspective. Specifically, their study concerned anamorphosis or the distortion of a perspective wherein the perception of an image is reconstituted into expected normality from a specific vantage point. While Maignan's focus was more aimed at the construction of imagery on given surfaces to meet a specific vantage point, Nicéron's book published in 1633, *La Perspective Curieuse*, in reverse began to examine the distortion of the form of three dimensional objects to meet the perspectival optics of a singular vantage point. While today, Anamorphosis is used more as a two dimensional artistic parlor trick, Nicéron's findings suggest possibilities of this approach as a tool to both define form based on context and in turn re-cast the context through the agency of autonomous form.

Thinking about these methods of object distortion, we designed our own folly through anamorphosis. We began working with the form of a hut, a recognizable borrowed geometry from architectural heritage, specifically in its resonance with Marc Antoine-Laugier's reading of the primitive hut as a form arising from its natural surroundings.⁹ The hut, a traditional construct of enclosure, is thrust into the ground; thus depriving the viewer of its full silhouette. An Anamorphic projection inscribes the ground, delineating the submerged geometry and creating an apparent completion of the form from particular vantage points, chosen on a given site. Geometrically, this is accomplished by finding the intersection of

Figure 3: From above the architectural folly appears to reach out and re-organize its very context that it is drawing from, *The Anamorphic Hut*, op.AL



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ground with the extension of the lines of its hidden geometry to a specific vantage point of the site. The four fully saturated colors in the CMYK range are each assigned to the four principle elevations of the hut, working together to assist the viewer in reconstituting the totality of the form in his or her mind; similar to joining together to inform a full spectrum image in pixel separation. The result, is the creation of architecture that exhibits ambiguous object-hood one which resonates with its ground while creating other moments where it is seemingly alien form with no relationship to that very context.

The Anamorphic Hut is positioned against and between two overarching assumptions prevalent in contemporary architectural production — of architectural form emerging from autonomous object oriented concerns, and from the externalities of surrounding fields. The proposal considers an architecture emerging from both: from outside-in and inside-out.

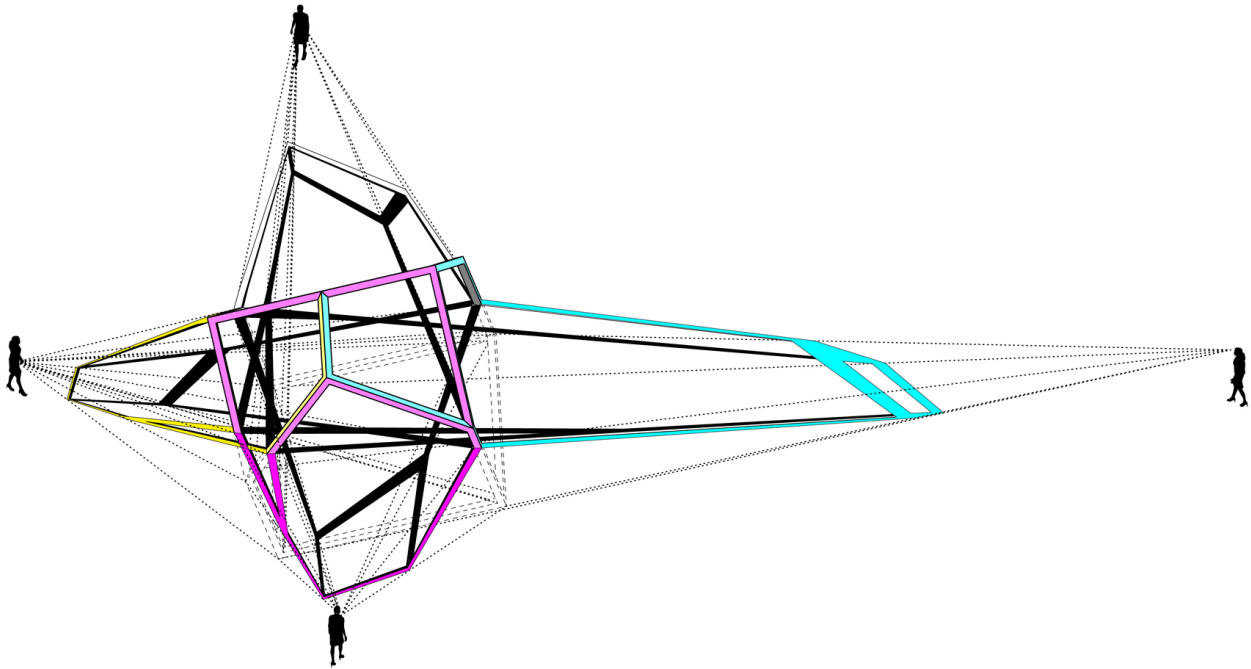
The Anamorphic Hut arises from a desire for complex double-readings, wherein architectural form “doubly functions” to exist in its own autonomous system and simultaneously re-organizing the system of its site. A reading of architectural form that seeks to engage in new forms of contextualism beyond total immersion into the system of nature and the site while further amplifying the Object Oriented investigations of Siteless forms. This visual tension forces the viewer to confront the limits and boundaries of the thing in which they are viewing.

What we found most interesting about this methodology is that the act of trying to join the site is what causes the object’s isolation and separation in producing the virtual image. This folly is suggesting an architecture that is pure, self-referential and drawn from its interior discipline. But also achieving its apparent autonomy through the actuality of trying to re-define the world around it.

ENDNOTES

1. This sentence was arranged so as neither of those things were the grammatical object or the subject, but rather their relationship was the subject; they are ambiguously un-hierarchical. Interestingly, grammatical construction is a way of delving into this understanding of the subject-object. To say, “Architecture is informed by its site” is reversible to, “The site informs Architecture,” labeling the site as the grammatical subject and the Architecture as the object of the verb.
2. Ernesto Rogers, “Gli Elementi Del Fenomeno Architettonico” 1961.
3. Clement Greenberg. “Modernist Painting”. 1965. Republished in *The New Art Ed. By Gregory Battcock*. Dalton Paperback. New York 1966. p.102.
4. Gage, Mark Foster. “Killing Simplicity.” *Log 33* (2015): 95.
5. Ibid
6. Archer, B. J., and Anthony Vidler. *Follies: Architecture for the Late-twentieth-century Landscape*. New York: Rizzoli, 1983.
7. Jean Francois Nicéron, “La Perspective Curieuse Du Reverend P. Nicéron Minime: Divise’e En Quatre Livres (1652) Kessinger Publishing, LLC (September 10, 2010) p. 323

Figure 4: The interior of the hut presents the world re-framed by its body. *The Anamorphic Hut, op.AL*



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CONCLUSION

To folly is to foil, to critically and didactically address cultural concerns at stake in architectural practice; though in its purity may not be a model for the actuality of building. Perhaps it is the Folly's ability to remain in realm of the virtual that provokes the sensation that it is reveling in its autonomy. To build upon Greenberg's earlier quote I would summon another art critic writing about the turn of the abstract era at a similar time:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important...¹⁰

Victor Shklovsky here writes about the successful ability of artful objects to remove the viewer from the world no longer focusing on the things which they are in nor in the thing that they are looking at but into a place of ideas and reverie. Perhaps in this way, it is the end goal that is important but the provocation of thinking and the technique of producing this is momentary ambiguity, onset by oscillation.

Figure 5: Specific vantage points drive the makeup of the CMYK elevations reprovinding the submerged geometry.
The Anamorphic Hut, op.AL

8. Laugier, Marc-Antoine. *An Essay on Architecture*. Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, (1977), p 12.
9. Venturi, Robert. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011. p. 23
10. Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." *Russian Formalist Criticism*. Ed Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965. 3-24.