

Instrumental Shapes & the Reification of Architectural Optimism

ANDREW SANTA LUCIA
Portland State University

JULIA SEDLOCK
Cosmo Design Factory

The formal project of Shape as loose fit container of activity with low-res hard-edge profile anticipates the resurrection of objecthood's primacy, however it is yet to be determined when a shape becomes an instrument or instrumental in the development of new collective organizations. Pursued through eclectic modes of production demonstrating a range of sensibilities -- including but not limited to narrative, misreadings and misbehaviors, humour, strangeness, cartoon and caricature -- the shapely architectural object shows signs of life, flexing its aesthetic muscles to direct attention towards potentially new sensibilities, identities and interactions. This paper seeks to identify and highlight these and other modes of operation as sites of architectural optimism and its relationship to contemporary instrumentality.

FLYSPACE

From the diagram of the Cartoon Theorem¹, to the graphic expediency of Shape, Logo and Cartoon², the now canonical Projective texts of R.E. Somol champion concepts that boast a return to instrumentality with particular focus "...on audience and reception...[and] the specific fashioning of unlikely collectives and synthetic communities...[where the] graphic enacts a cultural-political world of plastic relationships."³ In this paper we accept this basic premise of Projective architecture, and agree that the formal projects of shape and logo have political potential at a disciplinary level in their ease, accessibility and participatory intent. Yet, as we set out to dissect and advance the Projective legacy, we see that there is still significant work to be done, specifically around its claim to resurrect instrumentality as a form of architectural optimism.

Like John Hedjuk -- who described his relationship to the 'masters of twentieth century architecture' as "...a fly that comes in and says, 'OK, here is one aspect that has been left out, yet which has great potentiality, it should be wrapped up...' "⁴ --our purpose here is not to chart a new course for architectural theory and practice but to

make adjustments and fill gaps in a major territory that has been staked out by a previous generation. Borrowing from Hejduk's Minor Urbanism, we want to fill these gaps with Minor Projects, ones that redefine the territory of this work, establish the political dimension in everything they touch, and celebrate its collective value.⁵

MIND THE GAP OR THE PROBLEM OF MINIMALISM

So where exactly are these gaps? Our primary argument is that the Projective definition of instrumentality requires a more aggressive and direct articulation of its political intent. Despite its many promises of newness, we argue that the politics of the Projective tend towards a more polite Performative Reformism (Figure 1), one that works within an existing Neoliberal paradigm to reframe existing social and cultural conditions, often at the cost of inviting in new voices and points of reference, and eschewing the Formal and Object Activism that this paper advocates. The critical project suffered earlier from a Conformist Formalism, or Conformalism, that attempted autonomy by recycling the discipline's inherently formal project, but only going so far as to abstract its elements and remove its references. One indication of this Projective pitfall is its consistent reliance on Minimalist art practices in illustrating an interest in theatricality as a means of initiating participation, where both viewer and context are required to complete the work.⁶ From a purely aesthetic point of view, this may be the case, however, when set within a broader political context, Minimalism's mostly white male artists, and their insistence on authorless work and irrelevance of identity, played a significant role in undermining the art practices of women and people of color of the same time. Not to mention, that Minimalism is not the only movement interested in participatory practices.

When coupled with participation, the Identity of the producer and the implications associated with it (political, social, gendered, sexual, aesthetic) provide the context of art with the possibility of a supercharged emergence. Amongst important and widely publicized conceptual and minimalist artists, Carolee Schneemann is an exception to white male authorless production and works about nothing, instead focusing on feminist discourses of body, sexuality and gender, as a dimension of participation within her art. Schneemann's work between the 1960s and 1990s expanded

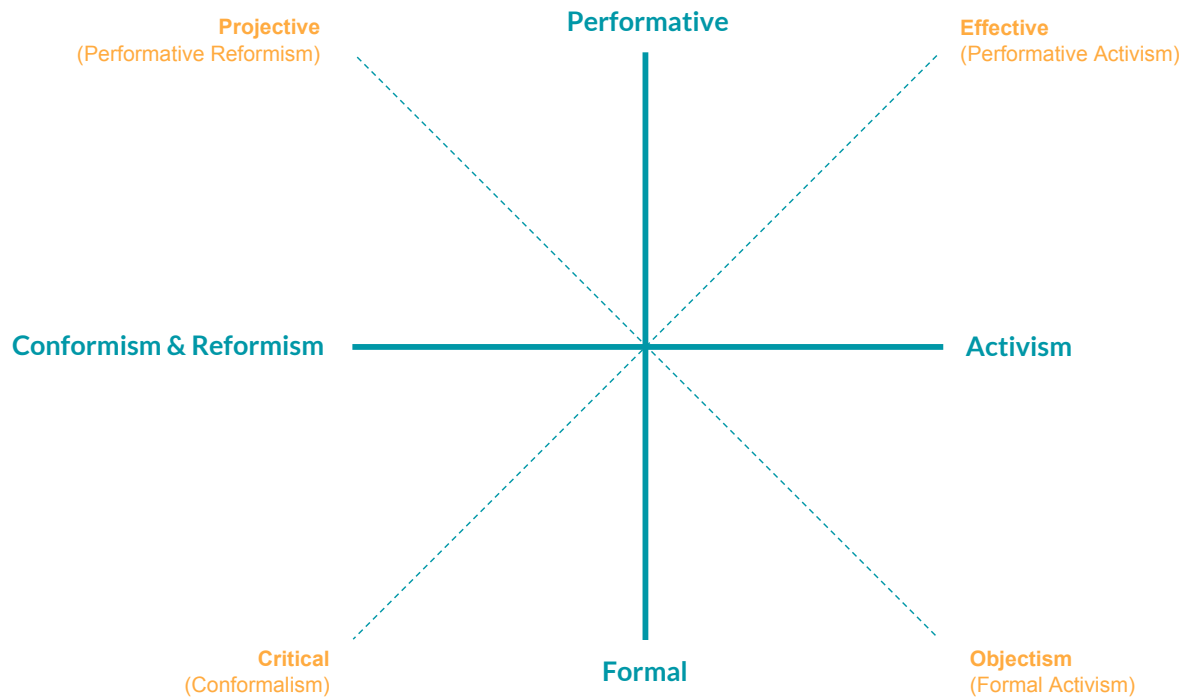


Figure 1: Diagram locating a old and new diemnsions of architectural practice between performance and form, as well as conformism/reformism and activism.

the fields of photography, installation, and performance art by not only challenging the mediums she used to produce work, but also by enhancing them with her body and identity as a woman, most notably in *Interior Scroll* where Schneemann pulls out a long paper scroll out of her vagina, simultaneously connecting the traditional nude sculpture through her posture, but subverting the Patriarchal assault on a woman's body as subject matter.⁷

The opportunity of racial identity is another dimension that challenges the primacy of minimalist discourse within projective architecture. The Chicago painter, Kerry James Marshall historically developed new pigments of black to represent actual blackness where art history had not even the right shades of color to depict a non-white world. This is an example of inducing medium specificity with identity, essentially pushing the medium forward by questioning its autonomy, most specifically its lack of representation. In terms of participation, Marshall's reliance on perspective, false perspective, and figurative painting techniques use Black identity as another object within the work.

For both Marshall and Schneemann, there is an abundance of opportunity implicit within redefining, challenging, and ultimately producing work that is representative, but also intertwined with identity as a dimension of production. The inherent and explicit performative qualities of their work - as performance-plus-identity & painting-plus-identity - create spaces of both conceptual and literal participation, whether it's work being completed by the observer's



Figure 2: Carolee Schneemann, "*Interior Scroll*" (1975) (Photo by Anthony McCall)

presence or the actual engagement in the work by a viewer. As canonical art practices, Marshall and Schneemann provide an avenue for the Projective to introduce identity as a new dimension of architecture to both make it less white-male-centered and encourage new trajectories of participation to emerge alongside non-status-quo communities that ostensibly couple with architectural objects.

FROM MITCHUM EFFECT TO TANGERINE REALNESS

Even more central than minimalism to the Projective project is its appropriation of the diagram as a primary tool of architecture's instrumentality.⁸ Whereas Peter Eisenman's critical project uses the diagram at the service of the semiotic and representational, Somol and Whiting reclaim the diagram as an architectural instrument of lifestyle, behavior and event. In "The Doppler Effect and Other Moods of Modernism," Somol and Whiting reference Koolhaas' use of the Downtown Athletic Club and Cartoon Theorem as stand in for the American frame structure. In this example of building operating as diagram, the formal and structural mechanism of frame is used to literally capture and multiply an infinite diversity of worlds stacked upon worlds. The boxers eating oysters stand in as representatives of this "infinite" diversity of lifestyle, yet represent little more than wealthy white men. This difference between the Critical and Projective projects is further illustrated using an analogy from film. Contrasting Robert Mitchum and Robert Deniro's performances in the original and remake of *Cape Fear*, Somol and Whiting illustrate the Critical Hot vs the Projective Cool (a hybrid of Dave Hickey's "Mitchum effect" and Marshall McLuhan's hot vs cool medium), where again, all "differences" emanate from the dominant paradigm of privileged white male vantage point.

To provide escape velocity from this privileged position of both the Critical and Projective, we look to characters in the 2015 film *Tangerine* to illustrate the political and intersectional positioning that an activist instrumental architecture might achieve. We update the problem of Hot-Cool with the introduction of "Realness." Where Hot describes the difficult, labored, representation of a real "psychic subtext" to portray an artful fiction, and Cool is a mood, an easy performance of plausibility, "an inhabitation of alternative realities," Realness is an over-the-top performance of image.⁹ The duality of Hot vs. Cool is irrelevant to the both/and world of Realness where life, identity and image are simultaneously a fabulous and exaggerated comedy of artifice, and a raw display of genuine grit.

Realness is indebted equally to Judith Butler's notion of Gender Performance and the canonical Drag Queen pageant documentary *Paris is Burning's* categorization of Realness. Butler states that "gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts."¹⁰ In *Paris is Burning*, the famous drag queen Mother Pepper Labeija defines Realness as a drag queen's ability to blend in aesthetically with the straight version of the character they're portraying, such as "realness girl," where a man that is in drag passes as a female.¹¹ When combined,

the possibility of defining limits and therefore completely crossing them, allows for a combination of different sensibilities, aesthetics, and objects to achieve a new possibility between states.

It is worth noting that both *Cape Fear* and *Tangerine* begin with the protagonist's release from prison, and proceed with their pursuit of a young female character. Nevertheless, the similarities end



Figure 3: Movie still of *Tangerine* showing the protagonist Sin Dee and her best friend walking in East Los Angeles.

there. *Cape Fear* is a thriller/drama in which the main character Max Cady, is a villainous white male stalking his prey of innocent and pure young white female. Regardless of acting style (Mitchum vs. Deniro), the patriarchal assumptions hold. Alternatively, *Tangerine's* sympathetic, and comedic, protagonist -- a trans sex worker named Sin-Dee portrayed by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez a trans-woman -- is chasing down the cisgendered woman with whom her boyfriend has been cheating while she was in prison. In this context, where designations of right and wrong, good and evil, innocent and guilty are of little consequence or meaning, the chase appears to be less sinister, more playful, definitely messier and ultimately more Real. Sin-Dee's best friend Alexandra makes her promise there will be "no drama" on this quest, but it is clear that Sin-Dee's "Realness" makes that an impossible promise to keep. However, in a life where everything is drama, it can also be said that nothing is drama. And in a sense, this is the real lesson of Realness. The effect is one that levels the significant and remarkable events into an even field of things that happen to a person in the unfolding and defining of life, identity and image. Taken to its extreme, this condition where crisis and chaos, or exaggeration and excess are the static background noise of life (i.e. our current news cycle), the "person" (life, identity, image) as subject loses its privilege and is rendered an event that happens alongside many others.

OBJECTIFICATION AS LIBERATION

“(Objects have) unified realities—physical or otherwise—that cannot be reduced either downwards to their pieces or upwards to their effects.” - Graham Harman, *Art Review* ¹²

If we push this proposition into the framework of Object Oriented Ontology, these “events” (whether they be race, gender, incarceration, infidelity, friendship etc) that define a life, identity and image are translated as objects and rendered as equals, a set of qualities (sensual and real) perceived amongst other qualities. With this ontological “objectification” in place, humans shift from beings, either privileged or oppressed, at the center of a narrative about hierarchical power structures to a field of objects among many. As a narrative about liberation, the possibility of emergent agency associated with performance, subjectivity, and application underline the importance of OOO as a gap-filler in the Projective delineation of minimalist objecthood. Contrary to popular belief, as objects we can be liberated - albeit conceptually - from old narratives and power structures, yet coupled with them in formal arrangements.

As counterintuitive as this premise may seem when applied to living beings, its application in architecture is productive when we define all aspects of architecture as a series of discrete objects that find themselves alongside other objects like human objects, social activism, ecologies, landscapes, or technologies. Somol and Whiting’s Doppler Effect begins to describe the coupling that takes place between such objects:

“Doppler architecture acknowledges the adaptive synthesis of architectures many contingencies. Rather than isolating a singular autonomy, the Doppler focuses upon the effects and exchanges of architecture’s inherent multiplicities: material, program, writing, atmosphere, form, technologies, economics etc...A projective architecture does not shy away from reinstating architectural definition, but that definition stems from design and its effects rather than a language of means and materials.”¹³

If Doppler Architecture makes this shift towards the object and its capacity for coupling without actually saying it, the Shape project approaches its reification -- as a loose fit container of activity with a hard edge profile, Shape is simultaneously indifferent to and a product of its contingency. Shape’s “f**k context” mentality suggesting a certain autonomy, or withdrawal, yet it’s figural outline justified as a product (and producer) of program, audience, economy and atmosphere, deeply embedded within the field of objects that compose and surround it. What can be construed as a simultaneity of figure and field or object and object, Shape singlehandedly encourages different dimensions of Formal Activist participation with architecture.

Not necessarily Bigness per se, yet surfing the narrative that Bigness becomes its own context, Shape can get itself in trouble when it becomes too self-assured, too much a product of what is, and therefore too reified, rather than deliver it’s promise of continual becoming. This is a goldilocks problem where the hot is too hot and the cool is too cool. However, rather than the middle lukewarm

option, it is Realness that is “just right.” In architectural terms that notion of Realness is represented by the minor project of formal activism as the flyspace endgame.

In the following three case studies, we look at instances of minor architecture projects whose Shape and Realness is achieved through a coupling with various objects (drug policy, accessibility, and ecological remediation, respectively). These small yet legible instantiations insert themselves into an expansive global context with self-assured confidence that their capacity to be many things at once will never undermine that they are objects in their own right. They follow the rules of Shape, yet simultaneously push against, shift and elaborate on its capacity to take action in the world as an instrument.

MINOR PROJECT A - SAFE SHAPE

In Safe Shape, Portland based design collaborative Office ANDORUS, creates a travelling Drug-Consumption Room exhibit that challenges acceptability and legality while attempting to influence public perception of opiate use and government policies around it. This course of action that their architecture finds itself in renders it as a form of Policy Object - equal parts bargaining chip and augmented reality simulation. By engaging perhaps one of the most underserved populations for architecture - drug users - Safe Shape removes antiquated notions of ideal users for idiosyncratic architectural spaces that reflect and accept the human condition unconditionally. Within a pop-up political space, Safe Shape’s scale of instrumentality is located at the intersection of activist communities, public education and projective authorship.

Safe Shape is more a developable tool than pure installation. Its programming is idiosyncratic because activists running it tailor their Harm Reduction approach and message to their location and audience. This truncated pyramid is constructed through fabric tension,



Figure 4: Safe Shape deployed in San Francisco Harm Reduction community event.



Figure 5: Goteborg Bathing Culture in Gothenburg, Sweden.

meaning it is self-supporting and strong, yet light and soft, and comes with its own assembly instructions. The design, a 10'x10'x10' volume with two skins for indoor and outdoor events, collapses into four check-in bags. This creates both a localized and broad collective space where an architectural object mediates an essential public health discussion in the United States, creates security through its iconicity, yet is malleable as an educational space. Safe Shape is a social pressure release valve that is both big in intention and small in application, suggesting that architecture does not have to act historically to be disciplined. This aluminum framed and fabric draped building challenges conservative ideas of what healthcare spaces might be while at the same time provide a new species of urban architecture that aspires to empower people through shape, education and compassion.

MINOR PROJECT B - ARCHITECTURAL BEASTS OF WASSAIC

Architectural Beasts is a temporary site-specific installation and performance event designed and built by New York practice Cosmo Design Factory for the 2013 Wassaic Project summer exhibition and festival in the Hudson Valley. As an object that is composed of many overlapping objects, this project is difficult to discern as a whole, and yet produces a legible and lasting image and presence. The various parts of the project include: a temporary figural screen that acts

as entry portal and photobooth backdrop, a set of masks, a photobooth performance during the festival, a series of photographs and an extra-wide wheelchair access ramp that has endured three years longer than originally planned. The aggregation of these parts represent the intersection of multiple architectural instrumentalities. The figural screen occupies a compositional hole in the larger figure of a fully restored grain elevator, now converted to an exhibition space and community arts organization. The profile of the temporary screen turns the existing building into a head or mask that sits atop the small "body" of the installation. It also serves as sign for this secondary entrance, calling attention to and making spectacle of the otherwise overlooked area of the wheelchair access ramp. Not only is the ramp enthusiastically announced by this Shapey portal addition, it is also three times its required width. This dimensional amplification of an architectural add-on whose presence is often minimized allows it to take on several programmatic responsibilities that it normally wouldn't, including a loading dock for the exhibition space and a stage for future performances, in addition to pumping up the volume on its symbolic impact as it allows the reality of universal access to literally take center stage.

The other component of the installation is the photobooth that Cosmo set up during the three day Wassaic Project festival. With the temporary screen as backdrop and ramp as stage, festival goers

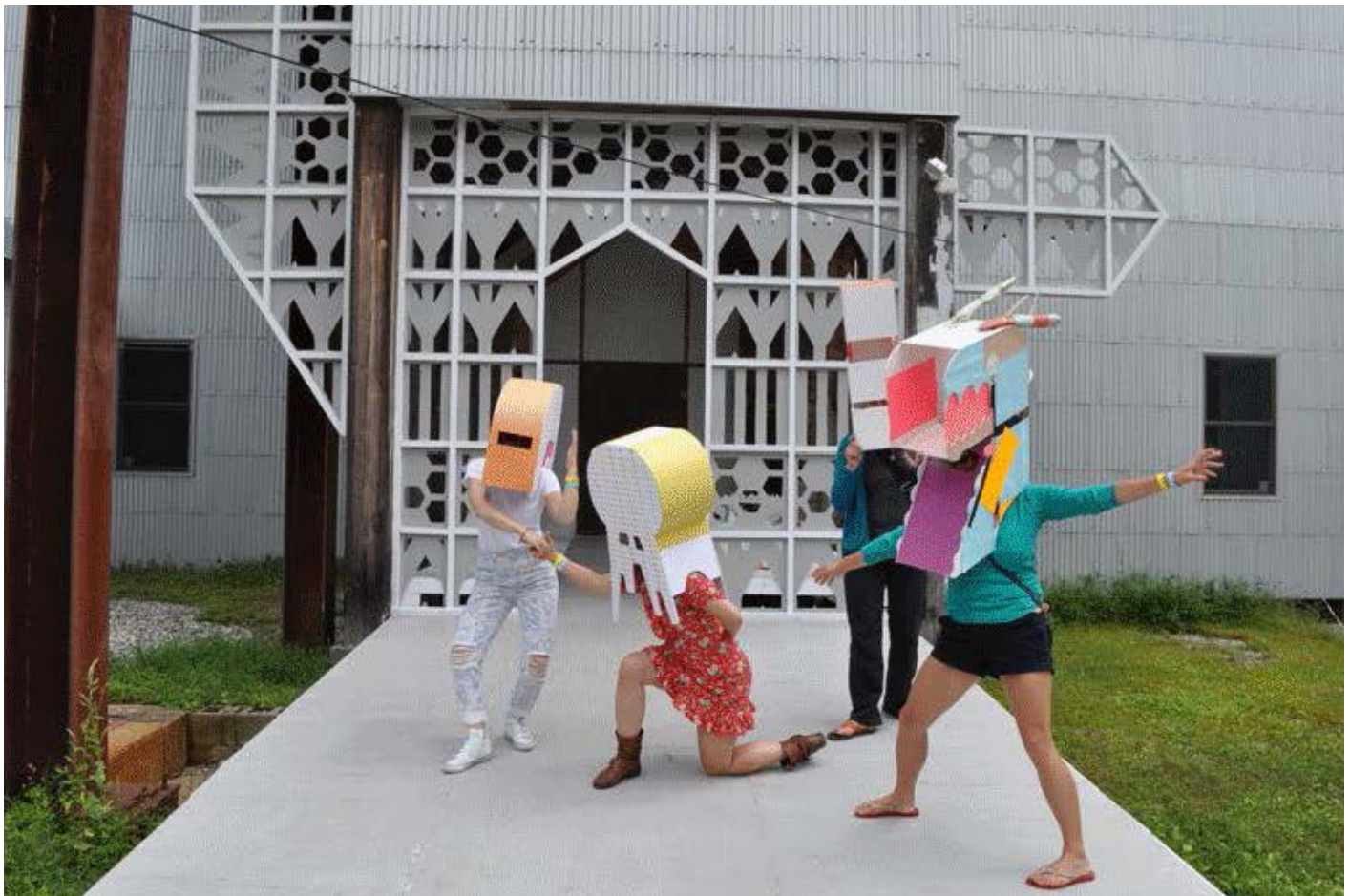


Figure 6: Architectural Beasts at Wassaic opening event where workshop participants wore masks that were used to develop original shape of entrance screen.

were invited to don “architecture masks” and pose with friends and family as the characters created by the masks. The creature-like masks were made by local high school students in a workshop that Cosmo facilitated during their residency at the Wassaic Project. Participants. The purpose of the workshop was to provide a context in which students with no architectural background could experience the direct engagement between their bodies and architecture, and to understand the symbiotic relationship that the two objects share. The festival goers at the photobooth were encouraged to share a similar architectural experience, one that was captured in hundreds of photos that were disseminated via social media. While these photos deliberately extended the spectacle of an otherwise short-lived installation, a less expected extension of the project’s duration came with the continued use of the access ramp, which is still in place four years later. Without the accompanying screen, the ramp certainly brings less attention to itself, yet its more subdued spectacle asserts an even louder argument about architecture’s instrumentality.

MINOR PROJECT C - GÖTEBORG BATHING CULTURE

Berlin-based studio Raumlabor has created a sauna building called ‘Göteborg Bathing Culture’ in Frihamnen, the industrial harbor of Göthenburg in Sweden. Raumlabor achieves a form of ecological revitalization by introducing this area, which is “gradually losing its industrial character and steadily becoming a new central part of the city, open to be discovered and adopted by citizens.”¹⁴ The site itself provided Raumlabor with opportunities for architecture to interject itself alongside the different transitory states it finds itself in - recognizable former industry buildings, shipping channels, large brownfields, undeveloped spaces, and an extensive harbor. The introduction of the Göteborg Bathing Culture into the industrial water landscape is amplified by Raumlabor’s insistence on locating it inside the harbor on piloti, but perhaps most notably by its non-anthropomorphically shaped exterior container, simultaneously a new figure in an old field with reminiscent materiality but absolutely new programs. The resultant is a familiar strangeness that allows for the public to instantly see the value of environmental remediation, but without the greenwashing associated with the types of development globally.

Raumlabor goes on to state that, “apart from the polluted land and water, the heritage of this industrial port is a series of fascinating functional objects, buildings and the spontaneous and fragile nature that somehow exists between the asphalt, concrete, and water.”¹⁵ The discursive nature to the site’s relationship with Raumlabor’s shape creates an entirely new world, at times built from literal pieces of the existing site, at others lofting new activist and cultural sensibilities as materials or dimensions for architecture. Even in Raumlabor’s representation of Göteborg Bathing Culture, this simultaneous coupling can be read as object-oriented where a focus is non-discernible and all objects - people, architecture, landscapes, emotions, weather - are rendered equally in comic form, sans thought bubbles. As an interior experience, Raumlabor develops a new form of civic space through historic versions of bathing within

an interior that can be classified as a fantastic sauna with skylights and open views to the remediating landscape. This genre of industrial redevelopment is powerful because it is aware of the limitations of typical sustainable architectural approaches and attempts to introduce a strange shape into an existing field to distort it, but ultimately achieve a new space where Swedish people can enjoy a sauna and be happy participants in environmental activism.

MAJOR FOOTPRINTS, MINOR PROJECTS

The Minor Projects covered here organize the territory they find themselves in, acting as instruments for new political possibilities and forms of collectivity. When architecture couples with other objects - sensibilities, attitudes, technologies, activisms - it augments its disciplinary boundaries simultaneously incorporating the other objects it finds itself close to. Critical Autonomy left the discipline far outside the world it inhabited for the sake of advancing architecture, while the Projective identified the performative dimensions of instrumentality as a new format of audience creation and therefore social relevance. The aforementioned Shape projects develop, encourage, and ultimately create space for new collectives to emerge alongside them. This illustrates that the conceptual foundation of a Projective architecture is robust enough to be updated, yet also forecasted the possible gaps that needed to be filled, particularly in the area of objecthood.

By introducing the concepts of Formal Activism and Realness, as well as critiquing the reliance of problematic Minimalist artists and tired cultural references, this current update to Projective architecture suggests a new trajectory that encourages progressive political activism without sacrificing disciplinary development. Instead, it renders extra-disciplinary objects into disciplinary ones with the help of OOO discourse. Safe Shape, Architectural Beasts, and Göteborg Bathing Culture occupy a certain architectural optimism that is cognizant of the progressive sentiments that are a part of their architectural objecthood. Together, these minor shapes inhabit major footprints with potentially worldly applications and encourage architecture to be more equitable as an object amongst many others.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Somol & Sarah Whiting, “Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism,” *Perspecta*, Vol. 3 (2002): 75.
2. R.E. Somol, “Green Dots 101,” *Hunch: Rethinking Representation* No. 11 (Winter 2006/7) 28-37.
3. Ibid, 32.
4. R.E. Somol, “One or Several Masters?” *Hejduk’s Chronotope*, ed. K. Michael Hays (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 111.
5. Ibid, 109-110.
6. See Somol & Whiting, “Notes around the Doppler Effect and other Moods of Modernism,” 76, and R.E. Somol, “12 Reasons to Get Back into Shape,” *Content*, ed. Rem Koolhaas (Koln: Taschen, 2004) 87-88.
7. Art critic Quinn Mooreland writes on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of Interior Scroll’s impact, stating that, “the female form was idealized, fetishized, and contemplated, while the fundamental experiences of the body were considered to be unclean Pandora’s boxes. Such physical displays were inherently vulnerable, and deemed necessary in order to break taboos. By focusing on this site of supposed lack, female artists could expand the discourse about their bodies and confront social stigmas.” in Quinn Mooreland, “Forty Years of Carolee

Schneemann's Interior Scroll," *Hyperallergic*, August 29, 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/232342/forty-years-of-carolee-schneemanns-interior-scroll/>

8. Somol & Whiting, 75.
9. Ibid, 76-77.
10. Judith Butler. "Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" *Thinking Gender*. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 93.
11. Livingston, Jennie, director. *Paris is Burning*. Off White Productions, Inc., 1990.
12. Graham Harman, "Art without Relations," *Art Review*. September, 2014
13. Ibid, 75.
14. Raumlabor Berlin. "ALLMÄNNNA BADET / BATHING CULTURE." Raumlabor.net. <http://raumlabor.net/bathing-culture/> (accessed Nov 15, 2017).
15. Ibid, Raumlabor.net.