

# Encountering Architecture through Contemporary Art

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**Contemporary discourse in architecture often utilizes sources outside the traditional realm of architecture. Much less often do architects examine what contemporary artists have to say about architecture. Architecture as the subject matter for artists often examines conditions that occupy the periphery of architectural thought. Contemporary architecture discourse tends to focus on the creation and production of new form and space where programmatic function, method of production, financial constraints and ecological impact dictate much of the design focus. Contemporary artists who reference architecture as a cultural commentary tend to examine architecture in a post-occupancy condition or capture architecture in a state of transition. For architects, examining the outcomes of their profession from the viewpoint of the contemporary artist can be enlightening and inspiring.**

**This paper looks at six contemporary artists whose work examines architecture as a means to express a position towards social and cultural issues and aspects of daily life. The paper examines the work of Do Ho Suh, Rachel Whiteread, Theaster Gates, Clay Ketter, Sara McKenzie and Tom Sachs. Each artist offers a transformative understanding of architecture from outside the profession.**

## INTRODUCTION

The breadth of the commentary on architecture from contemporary artists ranges from the poetics of the mundane detail to issues of the urban condition and cultural communities. The exploration of surface, materiality and modularity as well as issues of memory, identity and social engagement will be examined through the work of these six artists. Many issues in contemporary art overlap with the traditional discourse in architecture and offer a broader understanding of tectonic form and physical space. The hybrid realm these

six contemporary artists often work within has also informed the discourse in contemporary art. Recurring themes in their work have examined the relationship between production and product and painting as a physical object. The value that these artists bring to the architectural profession is their ability to transform the mundane to address issues of domesticity and everyday life, and elevate art into social activism and urban renewal.

## DO HO SUH

The work of artist Do Ho Suh is partly autobiographical but addresses issues that are common to an increasing number of people. The personal relationship to one's home is at the center of Suh's work. The home, defined as the physical space or place coupled with the emotional and psychological relationships and memories, is recreated as a polyester fabric shroud replica of the houses and apartments that the artist has occupied throughout his lifetime. Suh describes his desire to carry his house with him as he moves from one place to another, not unlike a snail would carry his house.<sup>(1)</sup> The full-size fabric architecture transforms the house into a semi-transparent ghosted image of domestic space. The architecture floats within a larger space and moves with the disturbance of air created by its occupants. For architects, the work is reminiscent of the transparent computer model that we experience through our three-dimensional software. It oscillates between the real and imaginary.

Suh's cataloging of his former New York apartment and studio by creating rubbings of every surface and element produces what is essentially a full-size paper model that is habitable yet transformed. Suh states that "The project is about memory and my time in that space. Rubbing reveals textures and marks, which are linked to my recollections,"<sup>(2)</sup> Details of fixtures, moldings, light switches and surface textures are integrated through a common material and color. Through Suh's drawings, sculptures and spatial replicas of domestic artifacts, we perceive the elements of architectural design transformed into a realm that is both two- and three-dimensional. What Suh brings to the profession of architecture is the profound understanding of the relationship between domestic space and memory where emotional response and experience supersede formal and spatial configuration.

## RACHEL WHITEREAD

Rachel Whiteread's work has much in common with that of Do Ho Suh. Her cast sculptures *House*, 1993; *Untitled (Floor)*, 1994; *Untitled (Stairs)*, 2001; *Untitled (Rooms)*, 2001– were literally created by using a house and other architectural elements as a mold. Beyond the recording and documentation of space, surface and texture, Whiteread's sculpture addresses a desire for reflection. As with Suh, memory is a central theme in many of Whiteread sculptures. Whiteread uses opaque materials such as plaster and concrete in her work to create the perception of the space as a mass to bring a monumentality to domestic spaces and objects. They reference the universal and particular in architecture with subtle evidence to the one-time occupant etched within the surface of the form.

What becomes more critical in Whiteread's cast sculptures like *Cabin*, 2016 on Governors Island, New York (Figures 1 and 2) is the additional spatial and contextual aspect of site. While *Cabin* itself is small and simple, it stands in stark contrast to the grandeur of the Manhattan skyline that it faces across New York Harbor. There is inspiration from the cabin of Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond<sup>(3)</sup> that helps to position it within the realm of the American experience, but the mood within its park setting contrasts with the urban condition that it faces. Whiteread's sculptures are relevant to architects as a study in the transformation of space to form. The intertwining of surface and memory created through the process of casting to record and give substance to materials that will deteriorate and decay over time produces an artifact that will continue to produce layers of new memories and build networks of associations.

## THEASTER GATES

The issue of site and context has much to do with the work of Theaster Gates. The artwork of Gates is broad and diverse in its execution but relevant to architectural applications. The making of place through urban interventions such as the Dorchester Project blurs the line between spatial intervention and urban redevelopment. In common with the previous artists outlined above, memory and associative meaning are primary in his work. Much of Gates's work is about documenting and reframing particular moments in history. The making of objects, spaces and events overlap to create experiences that remind us of our past but build on producing new communities and opportunities. There is a social mission to much of his work with an aesthetic tendency that revels in salvaged raw materials and surfaces that have acquired a patina from a long history of use. The acquiring and reuse of materials that transform an element of architecture to a painting, sculpture, installation or another architectural space has the power to bring multiple contexts together. As an architectural idea, this layering of history and materials is an important lesson.

The work of Theaster Gates reminds us that art and architecture is not just a functional and aesthetic exercise. They overlap and form part of a broader interconnected network of systems that bring social, historical as well as financial value to a community. Gates's installations create spaces for semi-scripted events and unscripted

connections. The work is a catalyst to reinforce community ties and build new ones. It is an art that produces many scripts simultaneously. Sometimes the physical work is backgrounded and secondary to the event or performance and sometimes the physical work is framed and primary to capture the attention of the viewer. Architecturally there is a temporality that ties the work together. Many times, the works are embedded in other spaces such as *Sanctum* and *Listening Room*, forming a juxtaposition which also acts to frame the work. Gates states, "I think people miss things when they're unframed, when no context is given. The frame says that something is so important that a gaudy frame has been put around it. There are all kinds of frames—writing is a frame, financing is a frame, endorsement is a frame."<sup>(4)</sup> In architecture, site and context are a frame and many of the works of Theaster Gates have this in common. Gates's artwork often flows outside the frame and down the street into the houses and living rooms of the community.



Figure 1: "Cabin" by Rachel Whiteread, Governors Island, New York.

## CLAY KETTER

While Theaster Gates relies on repurposed and salvaged materials for most of his works, Clay Ketter relies on seemingly new, off-the-shelf construction materials to make many of his sculptures. Through time, use and setting, materials acquire a particular character. New, mass produced construction materials are generic and without contextual attributes other than their material form and method of production. These are the type of materials that Clay Ketter tells many of his tectonic stories through. Angel (2004), *Half the Man*



Figure 2: Detail of "Cabin" by Rachel Whiteread

(2002) and the Surface Composite series(1995–1999) address issues of modularity, mass production and formal and spatial composition (Figure 3) with strong associations to IKEA furniture systems. "For these kitchen sculptures Ketter uses IKEA's well known module system. That our consumption of IKEA's products is a pragmatic, not an idealistic choice, I think most people would agree."(5) These sculptures are quickly and easily assessable yet transformed to remove all remnants of functionality. They are at once nowhere and everywhere.

In contrast to Ketter's sculptures, his photographs and photo collages tell a very different story, yet with many of the same architectural elements of his sculpture. Ketter's series of photographs titled Gulf Coast Slabs taken after hurricane Katrina is akin to a photo documentation revealing the layered floor surfaces of houses leveled by the hurricane. The photographs (Figure 4 and 5) reveal a connection to abstract modernist collages only with a tragic sub-text. These works reveal traces of what came before. The photographs privilege the building materials and the complexity of the revealed surfaces and textures. There is an association with architectural drawings— plans, sections and elevations that imply a systematic process of building and layering that is involved in the creation of a space. Ketter's other works of photographs, paintings and drawings from the last twenty years preserve this thread and oscillate between two- and three-dimensional representation. Surfaces are thick and deep, revealing the spatial complexity of the image being depicted.

## SARAH MCKENZIE

Sarah McKenzie is an artist that focuses almost solely on painting. In her artist statement she states, "My paintings capture architecture and/or the built environment in a state of flux. Past series have focused on suburban sprawl, construction sites, and abandoned, decaying homes and factories. More recent canvases depict hotel rooms and parking garages—spaces that are specifically designed to accommodate the temporary, accepting change and transition as a constant state."(6) McKenzie's work, like the of Clay Ketter, examine the universal and generic character of the building industry. For architects, the work is very familiar and could describe any project anywhere. While the subject is universal, the manner in which the subject is depicted seems unbiased and produced without taking a critical stance. It allows the viewer to focus on the spatial and formal characteristics without the social criticism that naturally follows suburban sprawl and urban decay. The paintings aestheticize in a very positive way conditions that tend to be messy and unfinished. These idealized depictions remove the associations the viewer might expect to encounter in construction sites, in suburbia and other urban sites and replaces them with a quiet contemplative atmosphere.

McKenzie's series *Constructions* (Figure 5) produced between 2004 and 2012 are perhaps the most evocative in terms of subject. The use of color, the compositional structure and organization allude to an architectural representation that sometimes uses perspective, elevation and axonometric to represent a space, surface or detail. There is a diversity of construction environments from domestic house construction to multi-story buildings. The paintings reveal the beauty of the unfinished construction much the same way that the Gehry house in Santa Monica, California, did so many years before.

McKenzie's most recent paintings, *White Walls*, depict the typical stark, quiet interiors of the museum or gallery. The form of the painting as a one- or two-point perspective closely resembles an architectural representation that one would typically produce in the design phase of a project. Color is used sparingly in most paintings to focus and structure the composition and to create a dynamic between the vanishing point and the compositional center. Each painting in the series explores perspective and space a little differently with some combining elevational and perspectival representation. The work bridges the professions of art and architecture to reveal spatial complexity and elevate the mundane.

## TOM SACHS

Tom Sachs takes a much more critical view of architecture and consumer society in general. His installation *Nutsy's* from 2002 borrows recognizable artifacts and environments from popular culture and high modernism and crudely models them to a common scale of 1:1 or 1:25. Sachs juxtaposes a model of a McDonald's restaurant with a model of the Villa Savoye as a means to reveal the conflict between high and low culture. Sachs's bricolage technique uses foam core extensively to privilege the handcrafted, informal quality of his representations. At the center of the installation is a 1:25 scale model





Figure 3: "Surface Habitat for Appliance," 1997 by Clay Ketter

of the Unite d' Habitation as a monument. The 1:25 scale foamcore model measures 18 feet long by 8 feet high. It is the largest and most detailed Unite model in the world. Sachs seems to be challenging the universal ideal that was the basis of Corbusier's high modernism as just another stunt with unintended consequences. The fabrication of Nutsy's Unite probably has more to do with a commentary on architecture models and not as much related to the real thing built in Marseille. Sachs's work is about how things are produced and represented through the physical making of an artifact. The rudimentary copies themselves challenge the original with a new-found character and aura.

### SUMMATION

The points of view these artists offer on architecture and the building industry in general provoke a broader view of the context and ideas manifest in the built environment. They share a provocative ability to transform the everyday or normative condition into something poetic. It can be at once critical and reflective. It challenges the way we perceive architecture and possibly the role of the architect. The recording of space and form, the layering of materials, the

construction of event space and the framing of views that reveal a subject that privileges atmosphere and aura over utility and function provide an alternative voice in which to explore the increasing complexity of architecture.

### ENDNOTES

1. *Art:21, Art in the Twenty-First Century*, season two, PBS Home Video.
2. Harris, Gareth; *The Art Newspaper*, 31 January, 2017; <http://theartnewspaper.com/news/do-ho-suh-creates-memorial-to-his-lost-new-york-home-and-studio-/>.
3. Nicholson, Louise, "Rachel Whiteread takes to the hills on Governors Island," *Apollo, the International Art Magazine*, 12 September 2016.
4. Wei, Lilly; *Art in America*, December 2011, 125.
5. Nacking, Åsa, "Made Ready-Mades," *Nu: The Nordic Art Review*, 2, 2(2000).
6. Artist's Statement, <https://www.sarahmckenzie.com/statement/> (accessed August 26, 2017).
7. *Tom Sachs: Nutsy's*; Guggenheim Museum Publications, New York, NY; 2003; 58.





Figure 4: "Holiday Drive Detail" 2007 by Clay Ketter.



Figure 5: "Pirate Lane" 2007 by Clay Ketter.





Figure 6: "Support," 2007 by Sarah McKenzie