Something More Than Literal: Notes Towards the Autonomy of the Interior

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Paradoxically, the space between Architecture and Interiors is proximate yet remote. The two disciplines are inextricably linked to one another in vicinity yet distances apart in the values that animate their practices. Efforts to reconcile this paradoxical condition typically reside in strategies to reduce the gap between architecture and interiors. To reconcile them and create only proximity, as it were. Such strategies either mediate the disciplines' disparate values or dismiss one discipline's values in favor of the other's. In all cases, however, these strategies require Architecture or Interiors to relinquish autonomy in one way or another. As such, a question arises: rather than surrender autonomy, might there be an alternative strategy that approaches the condition of proximity and remoteness without requiring forfeiture of disciplinary sovereignty?

AUTONOMY

This presentation addresses the conceptual and formal dimensions of the idea that there can be a productive discrepancy between the interior and exterior of architectural works. That is to say, it focuses on the questions of how might a useful incongruence between inside and out present itself challenge the assumed synthetic nature of architecture? Phrasing this questions in the terms of the conference theme, this paper attempts to understand a possible conceptual remoteness in a context of extreme and inevitable literal proximity.

This ideas of a productive discrepancy between the interior and exterior of architectural works already has currency in architectural discourse. Perhaps most popularly, Rem Koolhaas writes of it in his essay *Bigness*, in which he describes that architectural condition in which a building become so large that 'the humanist expectation of honesty is doomed and the interior and exterior architectures become separate projects.'[1] Koolhaas actually writes of this separation more fully in *Delirious New York* where he describes the formal conditions of the urban skyscraper. There, he writes that these conditions necessitates a 'lobotomy' of sorts that severs the connection between the skyscraper's interior and exterior architectures. The frontal lobe, as it were, attends to the needs of the city, according to Koolhaas, while the rest of the architecture – the interiors – attends to the idiosyncratic, varying, personal needs of the interior inhabitants. What type of interior does this lobotomy create? Koolhaas refers to it as a 'mutant branch of interior design' that 'recycles, converts and fabricates memories and supportive iconographies' as it does its work. To illustrate this type of interior design, Koolhaas presents what he calls the 'first autonomous metropolitan interior:' Murry's Roman Gardens, a 1908 interior project that fabricates the appearance of a Roman Residence.[2]

Another example of the notion of a productive incongruence between interior and exterior is found Walter Benjamin's *Arcade Project*. Unlike Koolhaas though, who describes this separation in the context of commercial spaces, Benjamin describes it in the context of the relationship between bourgeois domestic spaces and exterior cultural conditions of the modern city. For Benjamin, the interior of the bourgeois home served as a sanctuary from the alienating conditions of modernity. To combat this alienation, these interiors were populated with an overabundance of familiar items ranging from furniture to pictures to statuettes and the alike to create a secure, stable and known interior world in the face of a changing and relatively unknown modern world outside.[3]

The common thread that connects Koolhaas's and Benjamin's interior descriptions is a strategic one: each rely on signs and symbols – 'supportive iconographies' to use Koolhaas's phrase – to create, in large part, the incongruence conditions between the interior and the exterior. Not surprisingly, given this strategy's reliance on familiar signs and symbols, the values that animate this strategy privilege the personal subjective dimension of human experience with all the contingencies that accompany this experience.

LITERALNESS AND SOMETHING ELSE

This presentation will consider an alternate strategy. One that does not utilize 'supportive iconographies,' as does Koolhaas and Benjamin, but instead operates in the context of abstraction, or to use a more precise term in relationship to Donald Judd's work, literalness.

Literalism is a term used to describe art that uses materials and their qualities as they have been manufactured. The catch phrase for Literalism is 'This is that.' Paint, of instance, is used as it is, literally, out of the can. Or the quality of wood is privileged without affectation. Literal works are not scenographic or image making. They present materials as they are, and in Judd's three-dimensional work, these materials are used to create space. In fact, this space-making activity is a defining quality of what Judd called *Specific Objects*, the term he used to differentiate the then new works of art in the 1960's from traditional painting and sculpture.[4]

Literalist work is architectural.[5] The values that animate it are the same as architecture's. Of course, the space making is one architectural quality but there are other important aspects too. For instance, the modes of representation and production that create the works are similar, if not the same, as those of architecture. So too is the underlying notion that there is an authenticity and probity to material use and construction. And other formal qualities besides space-making are evident, such as shape consistence and a rational, synthetic connection to site. Judd's *100 Untitled Works in Mill Aluminum*, located at the Chianti Foundation displays, all these qualities. From the drawings and fabrication processes to the consistent geometric form and material use to their careful placement and alignment in the former artillery sheds, these works, more so than most, are distinctly architectural.

But there is another quality in the works that runs contrary to its literalness, to its architectural-ness. And to define these qualities in distinction to the architectural qualities, I will call them Interior. What are these qualities? They are the subjective perceptual experience created by viewing the reflective aluminum forms from different positons in the changing environment of the sunlight. Why call this quality Interior? In one sense, it's quite simple: this contrary quality is most evident inside the consistent overall rectangular shape of each mill aluminum work. Here, inside the repeated and predicable rectangular shape, the aluminum pieces vary in placement, size and orientation. In a slightly more complicated fashion, this contrary quality is fundamentally interior in that it values and derives meaning through the experience and contingent perception of human subjects. In their internal variety, the works become formally and perceptually unpredictable as the viewer's experience of the work becomes conditional on material position and reflection, and viewing position and lighting conditions. This perceptual quality leaks out to the outside of the forms too, such that their exterior surfaces assume interior qualities. When perceived, then, the *100 Untitled Works in Milled Aluminum* lose their literalness. The Literalism catch phrase 'this is that' no longer holds. Instead, this is no longer that but rather it's something more.

Interestingly, in the *100 Untitled Works in Milled Aluminum*, their literalness and subjective contingent qualities (their architecture and their interior) are equally present in the works. Neither dominates the other. Instead, the qualities are experienced in an oscillating fashion, switching from one to the other rather than in a condition of simultaneity or unity. This oscillating experience might be called

Polarity, a term used by Judd when describing Jackson Pollock's works. Rather than having the various elements of Pollock's paintings become an amalgamation, as they would in traditional painting, Judd saw that the elements of Pollock's paintings retained a separateness such that a viewer could see and recognize the various elements and then flip back to see the entirelty of the painting.[6] Using *Polarity* as a strategy, then, creates a condition in which architecture and interior reside together in a work without reconciliation or amalgamation and creates an experience of crossing, back and forth, between Architecture and Interior.

ENDNOTES

1. Koolhaas, Rem. *S,M,L,XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), 501.

2. Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994), 100-02.

3. Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Projects,* trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 20.

4. Judd, Donald. *Specific Objects*. [online] atc.berkeley.edu. Available at: http://atc.berkeley.edu/201/readings/judd-so.pdf [Accessed 6 Nov. 2017].

5. For an expanded discusssion of this notion, see: Linder, Mark. *Nothing Less Than Literal*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007).

6. Judd, Donald. 'Jackson Pollock.' *in Donald Judd Writing*, ed. Flavin Judd. New York: Judd Foundation, 2016)., 188-93. For the view that 'polarity' is central to Judd's work, see: Raskin, David. *Donald Judd* (New Haven: Yale Univerity Press, 2010).