

## architecture as

ELIZABETH DILLER

... in conversation with terrance galvin

*Le travail de la firme Diller + Scofidio, par la pratique et l'enseignement, traite du problème à faire l'architecture à "l'âge de la reproduction mécanique". Ce travail prend la forme de dessins, de performances et d'artifices. T.G. a rencontré Elizabeth Diller à leur atelier de New York, le 29 avril 1991. Ils ont discuté de conférence, d'installation et de programme en tant que mise en scène.*

*Elizabeth Diller is an architect in the New York firm of Diller + Scofidio, whose activities include both practice and teaching. Concerned with the three issues of the body as site, the body altered by artifice, and the role of architecture as a modified completion, our conversation focused on the idea of lecture, installation, and conceptual program as staged event. The sophistication of various themes in their projects, culminates to date in the Slow House, which received a PA Architectural Design Award in 1991.*

*Most importantly, their work addresses the problematic of making architecture in the "age of mechanical reproduction", and the concept of the body (and architecture), as de-signed, which they explore through drawings, artifice and the involvement of performance. We, in turn, are left contemplating architecture as Probe.*

*The following interview took place at 36 Cooper Square, in New York, on the morning of April 29th, 1991:*

**tg** This year, the Montreal Alcan series had a certain emphasis on architectural theory, with lectures by Cornell West, Georges Teyssot and your own which opened the series. I sensed that your lecture, although provocative, left much of the audience scratching their heads. How do you determine in which form to present your work?

**ED** We don't adapt the lectures to the crowd. Ricardo and I have a different kind of lecture that we perform together; very similar in terms of the spoken text and projected images that you just saw, but

Ric draws with phosphorescent chalks on a chalk board in black light, so you can't see his body, but you can see the images appearing - he wears white gloves. He is the hand, I am the mouth.

These three modes of information form a friction against each other. The audience is either looking at images, at drawings and/or listening to the verbal information as the strands weave in and out of each other. Sometimes they're coincidental and sometimes they form a caustic relationship. Since it's impossible to take in all the information at once, your attention wanders from one to another. It becomes entertaining and the audience is quite happy just to look at photo images and drawings and let the text just wash over. The drawings are analytical; they do something that verbal text can't do. In a way that kind of talk is more performative, but at the same time it's explanatory.

**tg** I was thinking back on the project you did at the MoMA, where you were able to monitor and record the responses to the installation as the corollary to the performance. By contrast, when you leave a lecture like the one at Alcan, the feedback is often silent, unless people write you or you run into them later.

**ED** Right. Well, the only people that usually write are the ones that enjoyed it, or want a job (*laughter*)...but you rarely get critical feedback.

**tg** Lecturing must be a different experience than when you're teaching. For instance, if a student asks you a question or if you

present your work in that context, you get to expand on and explain it. That is why I find lecturing a one-way system when you address a series such as Alcan. When lecturing at the AA in London, don't they generally arrange a seminar session where you present work and then discuss it?

ED That's happened actually in the past, but not this last trip, where students can come back and grill you, or often I've had experiences opening the floor to questions at the end of a talk. Generally the questions don't really challenge the talk. It was always the intention that we weren't only going to expose and explain (i.e. describe) the work, but perform it. There are certain inherent ironies in the presentation. On the other hand, the opening up to questions involves a kind of earnestness and the earnestness and irony can't coexist. If the questions are really tough, then it overcomes that paradox in a way. It's interesting that at Waterloo, the audience was quite receptive, but at the same time the questions were very sharp and difficult, and I had to really think on my feet.

tg Well, the University of Waterloo has one of the more critical schools of architecture in Canada, so it isn't surprising that students come prepared to be critical and not just slough off your work. It is a difficulty when an audience doesn't have enough background...

*Enter Ricardo Scofidio.*

*We embark on a Cocteau interlude :*

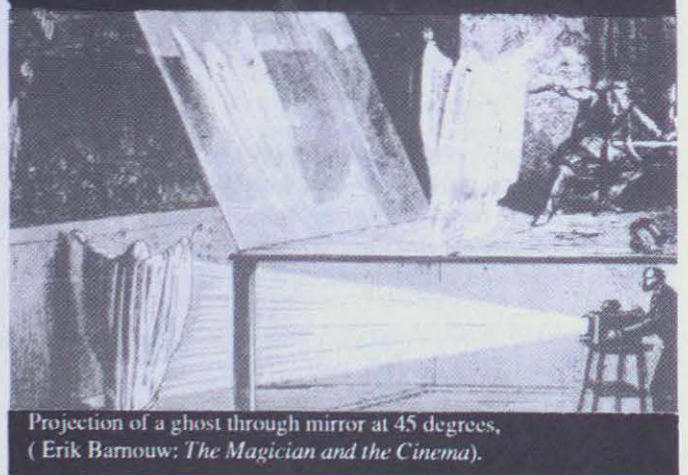
tg I had first encountered your work after having done a project, inspired by Jean Cocteau's use of mirrors, entitled *Private Acts in Public Places*. I then read the AA files article on your *Rotary Notary and His Hot Plate*<sup>1</sup> project. We were both dealing with scopic instruments, such as mirrors rotated at 45 degrees, and I realized that our common interest was the act of translation...

*phone rrrriings.*

*ambulance siren, evidencing the Doppler effect, pulsates outside the window.*

...Cocteau's work also explored the idea of creating illusions and translating his ideas from literary ones into visuals. He had written

DUCHAMP : Mirror (photo : Michael Moran).



Projection of a ghost through mirror at 45 degrees,  
( Erik Barnouw: *The Magician and the Cinema*).

the poem *L'Ange Heurtebise* as early as 1925, and still in 1960 he was working through the same themes, which is what we all do. When one looks at the body of your work, there is evidence of this act of translation that is constantly ongoing, which relates a project like the *Bridge* to the current *Slow House*.<sup>2</sup>

Although, there is a major distinction between the two projects. If the

*Bridge* project was the performance, similar to the lecture becoming an avenue for the performance, then architecture can be seen as an ephemeral event. However, when the *Slow House* becomes built, written about and concretized, isn't it a different form?

ED Well, I don't know, how concrete is text? In the end the *Slow House* is more concrete, it is built; architecture is connected to the ground, but we see that the work takes on many manifestations along the way, and none of them are the final product. In fact, right now we're starting to put together a book on our work, and the book is a critique of the architectural monograph. It doesn't just present the work that's been done, but it *re-presents* it critically, and then it transmutes into another manifestation of itself. Much of our work is temporary and no longer exists. We take the evidence of that work which is in the form of photographs, and we rework them. We develop deceptions about what it was, and also rethink what it could have been, in addition to explaining it at that stage. In this particular manifestation, which is in the form of text, photographs and drawings, we continue to posit the work. So it doesn't sit still in text - there is a certain kind of activity and transiency in it. It isn't limited only to the body performing it.

tg That's an important point in relation to your last project, the *Slow House*. You have said that architectural drawings are documents of intent; that the work is a continual recording, which would then critically relate the house to the rest of the body of your work. A question that arises is whether performance art, as evidenced in your early work, can become translated into architecture which is rooted to the ground, and isn't ephemeral in the same way as performance?

ED The way that we use the allusion to the drawing, being traditionally thought of as a document of intent, is to absorb certain principles that are in the world of architectural notation directly into the project. I mean, certain kinds of privileges (like seeing), certain kinds of abstraction and syntactical conditions (sections and so forth), become a privilege we draw on. For example, we build projects in section, or through the use of mirrors, etc., we allow

spaces to be seen in plan. Drawing is a very important part of our work, both as a type of *prequel* and as a *sequel*, so that there is an absorption of drawing principles in the work itself.

But we don't really see the house so much as a departure from the rest of our work. Every project to us starts from '0' and a program. From this point of departure we do research, and we try to look at the evolution of that program. We start by looking back, and by critically rethinking the program within the context of our culture and our time, and then we proceed with it. It doesn't matter at all whether it's a temporary installation, or whether it's a performance, or whether it's something that's rooted. We see the *Slow House* as an apparatus to live in, and in that way the involvement of the body, the subjects that are in that space, the way that they operate that thing and the way that it operates them, is critical. I would be presumptuous to say that, in itself, "living there" is the performance, but there is a certain kind of activity that is very important to the house. The house isn't just meant to be an inert sculptural object. It is something that's activated by the presence of the other irreducible components of domesticity: the bodies that are there, those particular relationships of family, how the vision of those people is being altered and translated by the house, and so forth. So it is very much an active notion, we don't really see the house as still.

tg That's clear. I see it as analogous to your use of notational drawings which, through their sequence, reconstitute a type of depth in plan and section. This demonstrates that the house is not fixed in TIME, but through this duality of host and parasite, there unfolds a performance. As evidenced in both the *Slow House* and the *withDrawing room*<sup>3</sup>, one of the most powerful issues in your work is the body/architectural object relationship. Many contemporary architects have been interested in the relationship between the body and the building. Anthony Vidler's article on the "The Building in Pain"<sup>4</sup> is very provocative, but I think you've actually managed to translate some of the theory into the built work, which is always the most difficult process.

*SIREN whirrs by.....*

ED We look at the body as a kind of surface...

tg Or as a kind of site...

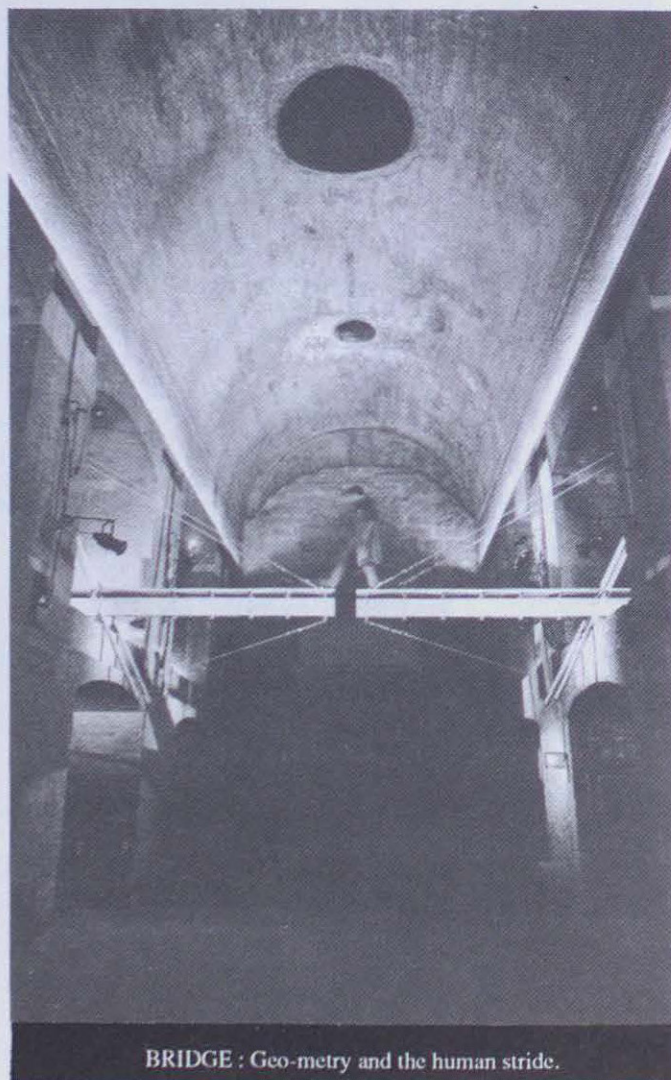
ED Yes. Site for meanings and for changeable inscriptions. We attempt to work, not with the physical *corpus* (the meat), but rather with the space that it defines and is defined by it. Spaces that are conventions of culture redefine the body - so the body is inscribed; the body inscribes space. And we're interested in the negotiation of that space.

Also, because of contemporary technology, that body has been de-territorialized. In the *withDrawing room* are some allusions to incompleteness. Prostheses take over the incomplete chair, the incomplete table, the incomplete bed. The prosthesis never completely fulfills, but aids and makes an issue of incompleteness, and the body is also a victim of all that. The body takes advantage of that split bed as a possibility of a new program. The occupants could be together, the occupants could be apart, share that split, and so forth. The body occupies that split - it bridges the split, but is vulnerable to it. We see the body as always acknowledging this incompleteness and its own vulnerability.

tg That's where I feel that the writings of Merleau-Ponty on phenomenology deal with the potential for a certain kind of embodiment in the *Bridge*. In that project, inspired by Camillo's "memory theatre", the body could be seen as "becoming" the threshold which crosses the synapse. The *Bridge* project had a certain optimism about the body and memory being reconciled, which is quite different than affirming that we live in a culture that tends towards voyeurism and detachment.

Within the framework of current debate, in literary as well as architectural theory, the dialectic is whether it is possible to find any meaning in this space - this gap, this abyss between the body and what it inscribes or circumscribes. If this void cannot be bridged, aren't we ultimately left with retinal art, scopie devices and a kind of invaginated voyeurism?

ED We feel ourselves very much inspected from the outside, and we are ourselves voyeurs. The question about the *Bridge* is an interesting one. The project was done in 1986 or so and the way that we described it then was different than we would describe it now. That bridge is only momentarily bridged by the human stride, and it is so tentative, since the anatomy can, in fact, never actually occupy both sides. When one leg is up, one leg is down; it hinges really on a "split" second when the weight changes over. When we staged the *Bridge*, the director posed the character frontally (i.e. perpendicular to the axis of movement on the bridge) bridging - with legs astride holding a glass ball. We absolutely objected to that use, or abuse, because the body could never complete the bridge, it would never finish it. The structure was never meant to be finished; it would occur only at the moment



BRIDGE : Geo-metry and the human stride.

of stride because it was fractional.

**tg** But that's the optimism ! ..that leap of faith is a kind of 'projection' which leaves one thinking about the potentially powerful symbolism behind architecture.

**ED** Well, I would be more on the side of irony. I think our work is always on the side of irony, and maybe not so optimistic. Actually, it's difficult to talk about. I have to contend with this because now we're putting together this book, and we have to figure out how to describe our work rather than just 'represent' it. We're trying to situate our work somewhere between the inscriptive and the prescriptive, and I don't know if that word game is going to work. I'm struggling with having to define this a little more clearly, but the work is never about prescription, it's not about remedy.

We're playing with the notion of script, but description is, by convention, a passive condition. One often recapitulates through description. Our work is somewhere other. It's not a passive description. There's another mode of description that intervenes; description is never objective. It's always edited, uses emphasis, and so forth. Our work is *inspecting* things - describing the work is a *hyper-description*. In that way it makes certain things that are not visible, visible. Not by laying bare the bones, not through a stripping away to some interior, but by looking at the space of surfaces and between surfaces.

**tg** Are you referring to the space between surfaces, such as the door which runs along the floor eventually inscribing a groove, or the bed whose dust under it acts as a kind of analogue...?

**ED** That's a literal inscription, but also the work reads other inscriptions at the same time; the project constructs its descriptions through read inscriptions. We're just simply reading various texts that are already latent in things.

**tg** That interpretation implies an exigesis that doesn't leave the readings so open-ended and pluralistic that the author is relieved from any program of intent. Through your use of drawings as notations, the

intentions in your work are evident, separating it from artists whose work is self-referential.

**ED** Certainly, the references aren't internal references, they're all borrowing from a broader vision. You know, more and more we're trying to tackle themes that are tangentially related to architecture, but never really seen as parallel.

**tg** In relation to the MoMA project, you asked whether it was possible to be critical about the museum, and work within it at the same time; whether the target and the weapon could be the same. This reminds me of a similar irony, where Libeskind described 'the knife..without the handle..with the blade missing',

**cut :** *absent laughter*

..a description that leaves one holding the residue of the simulacrum.

Seemingly comfortable within a framework of irony, you began your career working within the margins, in order to explore the boundaries between architecture, performance, and script. Hasn't your work become, at least in the current *Slow House*, more directly related to Architecture, which implies a very different set of parameters ?

**ED** We've always believed in building, it's critical to us; we're never satisfied with solely projecting ideas through drawings and texts. As a result, the work always finds itself built. Sometimes it's temporary, and sometimes not. Building is a very important component, but only one of the manifestations of the work. The difference between our position then and now is that times have really changed over the course of the last fifteen to twenty years. At first we operated in the margins because there was no context for us. We generated our own projects, we generated funding and we built the projects ourselves. Sometimes we worked under the auspices of certain institutions, but these institutions were always marginal, like the *Storefront for Art & Architecture* and *Creative Time*.

In the past years there's been an interesting change. More and more, big institutions like the MoMA or the *Walker Arts Center* have been

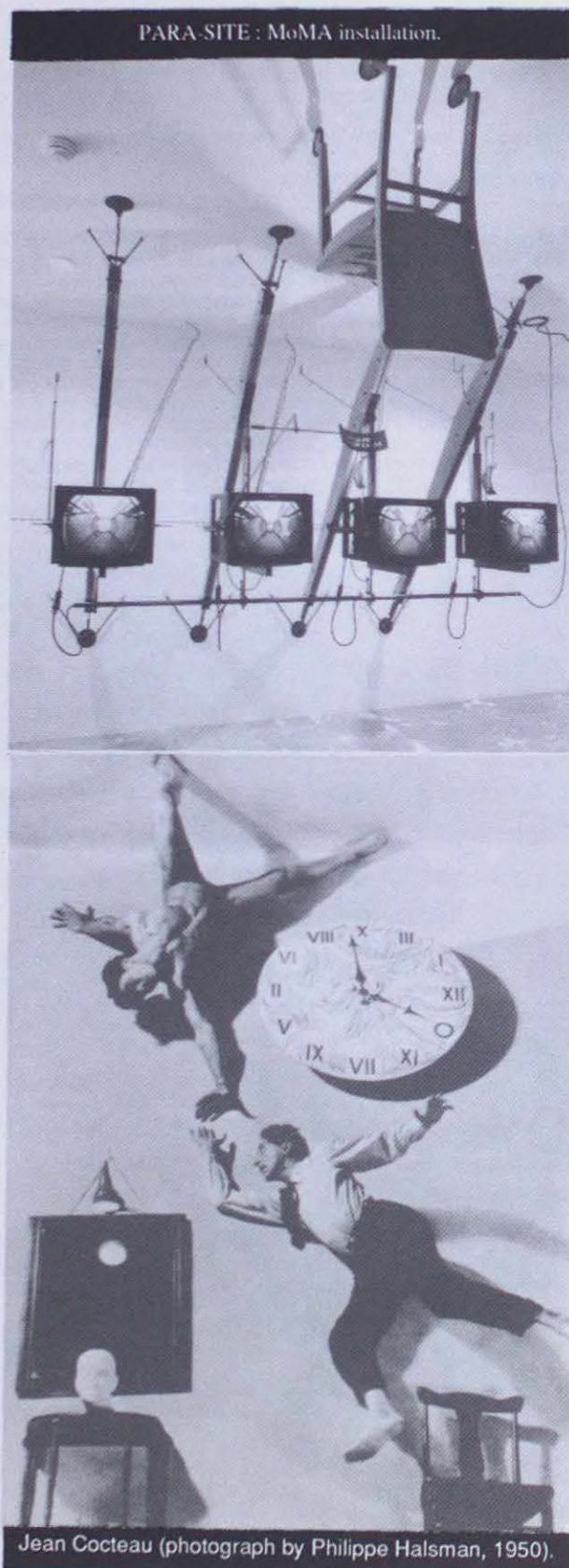
interested in our work. We realized at a certain point that we were really crossing a threshold, and we opted to take the position that one has much more power in the centre than in the margins; the margins only attract a very specific subculture. What we wanted was a broad forum within which our work could exist. And so, we took on the responsibility and opportunity of so-called getting closer to the centre. There had to be a trade off, because one can't really speak one's mind at the centre in the same way, so there's a kind of exchange that naturally happens. Of course, we pay to be able to say what we want to say. We put something in the MoMA, it looks very beautiful, it's well designed, and that becomes the way that this particular para-site operates within its host site.

tg Yes...

ED Good design actually enables one to do some more subversive things inside of the system. Often, those subversive things aren't ever read by the institutions themselves, but sometimes there is an oscillation which is healthy. We don't do this consciously to make the work acceptable; it's just naturally the way we work, and it just so happens that it pays off. In terms of centrality to margin, the extension of building something that's permanent is not all that different than doing an installation in the MoMA, by appropriating a site like an urban guerrilla. A client or audience program a subculture or the culture at large.

tg That is a central topic of this interview, since this FIFTH COLUMN is addressing "Architecture and Advertising". The Alcan lecture left me musing about the energy of working in the margins in your early projects, and the trade off involved in making it onto the cover of PA and opening the Alcan series for 1991. Do you think that the broader audience has a certain sympathy and openness to your work, compared to the audience that would show up at *Storefront* in New York?

ED Perhaps several years ago, there was much more antagonism between these things that were looked upon as oppositions. Now I think that the gap is closing down, even though *Storefront* shows certain people that haven't had exposure; last year they were showing



Coop Himmelblau, who was having a simultaneous show at *Max Protech*. The sixties meet the nineties now, and the sixties are dissolving more and more. It's an interesting sign when bigger institutions are seeing certain kinds of work as marketable - although I can never anticipate why they want to show our work. I mean, maybe things are opening up, perhaps the latitude is getting broader. I have no idea; things just contract and expand all the time.

I know that the phone hasn't rung since our work was on the cover of *PA*. I think we received a lot of exposure, but it doesn't necessarily lubricate us for more professional work. At the same time, it's not like we've created any hostility with our past. I think in many people's eyes it's a natural evolution, although we don't think of it as evolution. We just think of it as an extension of what we do, except that we want a broader audience. It's not about getting bigger and better projects and building up an office. If the next project was small, it just wouldn't matter, as long as we were able to experiment and rethink things. If, in fact, some wonderful cultural institution came to us and said we want a building and we had the opportunity to think through it, then we'd gear up for it. I just don't see the steps as hierarchical, and mounting towards some goal at the end.

**tg** I agree with you, it's not as simple as centre or margin. One doesn't stay in the margin, deluding oneself that that's the place to be, when one can have a larger audience while still remaining critical and inspective. That realization is a prerequisite to action, having to do with personal ethics through an understanding of one's intentions. However, one of the trade offs would be that the larger audience doesn't necessarily mean a more prepared audience, or one which is more receptive at large.

**ED** What we attempted to do, in the last two museum projects, was to work the project in various strata to be read in different ways. We can't anticipate all readings, but we anticipate that the guy off the street is going to be able to respond to the work, and in fact our shows have been popular in a way that other architecture shows haven't been. Most architecture shows in museums deal with esoteric subject matter through the language of architectural notations, usually dis-

playing models of projects that are unbuilt, etc. Our work has been very well received within the museum context because we don't use the space as a context for our work; our work orients itself around the context of the museum.

**tg** The feedback that you receive in scrutinizing the response to your installations, such as the recording of that event at the MoMA, is a very important activity in the body of your work as a whole, is it not?

**ED** Yes, it's very important to us to understand the various readings of the work. We see the work as a kind of apparatus to make meanings from.

**tg** Then, what would the equivalent of this recording activity be in the *Slow House*?

**ED** Maybe it's not so explicit, maybe it's just the way lifestyles begin to mutate relative to the house itself, the kinds of oscillations that exist between the domestic construct and the house, and the exchanges that are made. Perhaps it's not in the form of feedback that we can record, but it's the agitation. There's always a response; there's never a comfortable fit. For example, the *Slow House* takes on the view which was not thought of as a sedate thing to contemplate, but as property beyond one's reach. We wanted to thwart the view in a way that creates a certain discomfort. You can never really see the view fully because the TV is always in front of it, so that the line of the horizon is always disturbed. And that becomes a caustic experience.

**tg** Continuing this idea of dislocation in the *withDrawing room*, objects like the two legged chair (with its third leg prosthesis, rising up through the middle), force us to deal with the space between the body and the chair. As one 'occupies' the chair, one has to negotiate the prosthesis and the potential for that habitation. Similarly, in the *Slow House*, the way that you constructed the model and the notational drawings through the development of scenarios, one actually sees the house unfolding through the drawings, again producing an

uncomfortable fit coupled with a certain tension.

However, I wonder whether the TV screen on the horizon is not a literal metaphor, compared with some of the ambiguity that you've attained in other projects. For example, in *the withDrawing room*, the convention of unexpectedly seeing the second floor in plan, as if the floor were removed, makes one constantly aware of a subtle disjunctive interruption.

ED Maybe that is true, although the television screen functions in many different ways, between broadcast TV and closed-circuit monitor, so it's...

tg For security?

ED No, actually closed-circuit. It's looking out there at the view and recording it, although it can be flipped to broadcast TV. So its program shifts - when the TV isn't being looked at as a broadcast medium, it becomes a window superimposed against a window.

tg I think that the aspect of delay between this apparatus and the site is fantastic. The fact that one could replay a different season at another time, or in another place, beautifully reflects this time and space dislocation.

ED The TV is part of many ideas. The way that it's characterized in the text that appears in PA turns it into a cartoon because it makes that the only feature of the house. But the TV has to do with its relationship to the automobile windshield as two modes of movement and stasis. The snout holds a camera that has to do with TV as a kind of focal light and source of heat, like the hearth.

In many of our projects we take apart programs in a more complex way. *The Slow House* is more gestural. Hopefully, the house itself is not a one-liner, but rather a single gesture from which everything evolves, and in that way it's a very simple project. We conceived the snail form at essentially the moment that the program was defined; the conceptual program of door leading to window, of entry to departure, etc. The way the house begins to articulate itself after that becomes

a by-product of the initial decision. In the other projects in which we take things apart like parasites, we disconnect things.

tg The PA jury described the house as 'a free standing object, that is site specific at the same time', which I found an interesting contradiction...(laughter)...and not a bad attempt at irony. If we could fast-forward time, as in Greenaway's *ZOO*, the *Slow House* is a project which will physically deteriorate and return to the earth, ironically becoming site specific. Unlike the hermaphroditic snail, from where the *Slow House* borrows its form, the house is not self-contained - it is rooted to its site. All of your projects do have a kind of rootedness or context. Each of them: the prosthesis objects in *the withDrawing room*, the apparatus attached to the characters in the *Rotary Notary*, the body-image that occupies the synapse in the *Bridge*, each of those relationships make the projects non-ubiquitous and quite specific. Earlier I was relating this specificity to 'architectural optimism', which allows your work to be accessible and meaningful. Several artists and architects explore tautological projects, not really attempting to uncover any meaning. In your work, even though the meaning may be pluralistic and ambiguous, I read a lucid program of intention.

ED Right, but we're expecting meanings in the plural sense. I would stop at optimism in that the work is not prescriptive, the work is never about prescribing a role for architecture. It is one of examination.

tg But the examination can still have a critically positive or negative accent, which have quite different implications, although this is sometimes difficult to locate.

ED I would have a hard time locating us in that range. I don't really attribute a positive or negative value to it.

tg Baudrillard, for instance, in writing about simulations, is attempting to be critically aware of the things which control us, but then goes on to say that we must get beyond those mechanisms and be in control of them rather than...

ED I don't think that way, neither of us really feels that way. I mean there is no apocalyptic vision - there is no fear of technology, there is no doomsday. It's about being able to, in an opportunistic way, take advantage of the conditions and the circumstances. I don't think about technology optimistically, toward changing our lives for the better, but I completely take advantage of any technology that I can at a personal level. But, you know, there are different ways that it can be employed. In that way, it's the part of Ballard, and it's the part of Baudrillard that I don't particularly like; the part that questions the role of technology in the end, where one has to make a value judgement. I choose to read them in a different way, I choose to read them without value.

tg Oh ?

ED That's what makes most sense for us in our work.

tg Then, how does one develop an ethics ?

ED I don't know. I really define our work as post-moral and post-ethical.

*insert : p.m. laughter*

The ethic is only in the depth of the search and in the rigour of the search and the search itself - not so much about what's at the other end.

tg You seldom speak about your process of making objects which are so expressly tectonic. The quality of design that you mentioned in relation to the MoMA project has inevitably been part of your *ethos*. Can you say something about how you construct the projects - do you make the details yourselves ?

ED Yes, we do a lot of it ourselves, and we work with crafts people, but we don't ever think of materials or details as ends in themselves. Many people fetishize over that part of our work, but we don't.

tg However, this part of the description of your work is curiously absent, I wondered for what reason ?

ED This is part of the earlier argument, that it's what makes our

work possible. You know, we love to work materials, but we don't have a romance about it. We love to do it, and it's what allows us to slip in and out of the mainstream when we want to, because people value high design. It's never our intention to make things solely for the design, or to romanticize craft in a nineteenth century way. We're just as interested in the TV as we are in the polished piece of steel. But since craft has a role in the expression of our ideas, we scrutinize over details.

tg Undoubtedly, you have inherited that attitude from your training at Cooper Union. I wanted you to address the formal quality of these objects because the space *in-between* the content and the form - inclusive - is the place that your projects oscillate within.

*This same idea, in terms of re-presenting the work, was evidenced in another way when Diller + Scofidio published the Bridge project in the AA FILES. The photos documented the event, and extending the photos into drawings was a way of translating the architectural project into another form, for another audience. In this act of making and re-making, of presenting and re-presenting, we relocate the contemporary role of the architect.*

#### Notes :

- 1 For the *Rotary Notary* and the *Bridge* projects, please refer to AA FILES 14, pp. 54 - 61.
- 2 For a description of the *Slow House*, please refer to Progressive Architecture, January, 1991, pp. 88 - 90.
- 3 See *the withDrawing room: a probe into the conventions of private rite*, AA FILES 17, pp. 15 - 23.
- 4 See Vidler's article entitled *The Building in Pain: The Body and Architecture in Post-Modern Culture*, AA FILES 19, pp. 3 - 10.

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