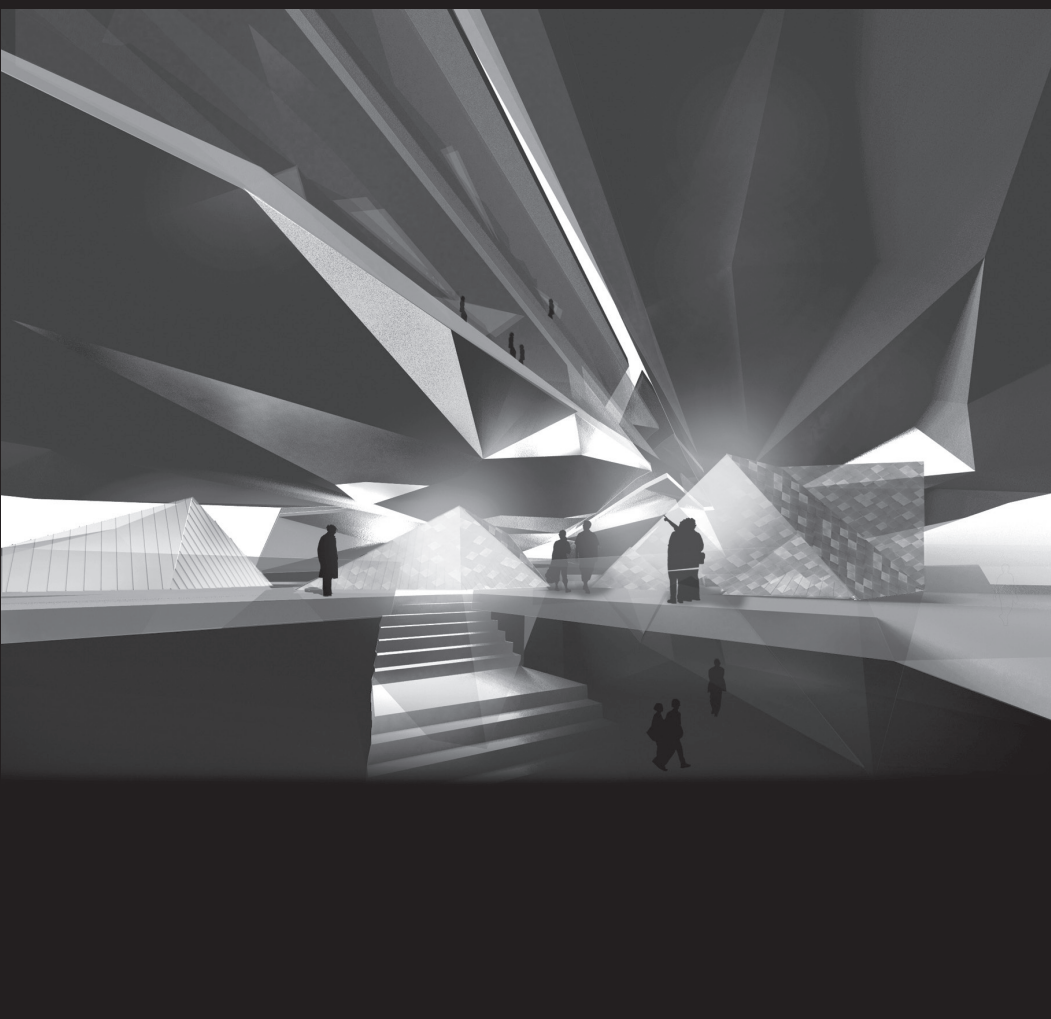

WRITING ART AND ARCHITECTURE

ANDREW BENJAMIN



WRITING ART AND ARCHITECTURE

TRANSMISSION

Transmission denotes the transfer of information, objects or forces from one place to another, from one person to another.

Transmission implies urgency, even emergency: a line humming, an alarm sounding, a messenger bearing news. Through Transmission interventions are supported, and opinions overturned.

Transmission republishes classic works in philosophy, as it publishes works that re-examine classical philosophical thought.

Transmission is the name for what takes place.

WRITING ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Andrew Benjamin

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INTRODUCTION

WRITING, CRITICISM

Art, Architecture

Writing about art and architecture occurs in many guises. While there will always be a connection between historical and critical understandings the writings presented here are for the most part acts of criticism. Criticism, however, cannot be reduced to the location or even the attribution of value. Criticism has a different register. It works in a different way.

At its most straightforward criticism involves the identification of art and architecture. However, identification is not just the naming of works. On the contrary, identification concerns a more nuanced sense of identity. Allowing for a form of identification that cannot be equated either with the mere naming of a work or its description repositions criticism. As a result criticism is delimited by questions concerning how specific works work as either art or architecture. This doubling of 'work' is important. Too often art works and works of architecture are attributed a static quality. As if they were no more than documents, evidence or examples. If such a conception of work were allowed to predominate then what would be precluded, almost by definition, would have been any direct interest in the work's material presence or in the complex process of how works acquired material presence. The presence of materials and the process by which works are materialized—i.e. how they acquire material presence—is central precisely because the meaning of a work is always an after effect of the way materials operate. This will differ in regards to art and architecture, and within art between painting, sculpture and video—nonetheless, as a generalization, meaning cannot be (perhaps should not be) divorced from the work of materials. If this were to occur then allowing interpretive concerns to predominate as though the works in

questions did not have an original relation to the broad question of materiality would be to idealize work. It would be as though meanings were just there, as though they had an evanescent relation to the materiality of the object. Integral to these writings is the supposition that criticism has a necessary relation to what could be described as a materialist aesthetics.

Once matter is attributed centrality then not only will this have an effect of how works are construed, it will also necessitate both the invention of a vocabulary as well as the transformation of pre-existing terms. However, neither inventions nor transformation are real if they are understood as the mere positing of a new set of terms. Such a move would restrict the new by equating it, even if only implicitly, with novelty. Transformation has a link to how materials are set to work. This sense of transformation occurs in two different though interrelated ways. In the first instance transformations are already present within works, or they are generated by the contemporary nature of work in a way that has retrospective force. If there is a sense of transformation whose location is brought out in the majority of these writings, then it stems from the consequences of the incorporation of the computer into the design process. This has given rise to a radical shift in how works—in the broadest sense of the term—are produced and therefore there is the concomitant need to reconsider how they are to be interpreted. Works occur today within an era of digital reproducibility. This specific site of production demands the production of concepts and categories that contemporary work necessitates.

The second sense of transformation can be linked to the performative dimension of particular works. Here this involves the relationship to traditions. Be it a relation to the tradition of housing or memorialization or modes of production within the visual arts transformation involves a repositioning of the tradition. Repositioning rather than abandoning of the given. Transformation, in this sense, occurs within works that *dis-order*. Equally, it can be traced in what has been described as the *fraying* of pre-established borders and divisions. Both these terms tie transformation and production together. Precisely, because of the retention of a sense of production—production as a generative process rather than an instrumental one—one of the additional key operative terms at work within these writings is *potentiality*. Diagrams, lines and surfaces within contemporary architecture are to be understood in terms of their potentiality. Their potentiality stems

from what defines their presence as contemporary. They are the result of the transformation of the line and the surface within the era of digital reproducibility.

The writings presented had their initial publication within magazines, books and catalogues. Some were excised from a journal. All are experiments. They should be understood therefore as attempts within a defined and delimited space to engage with works. At times it is the work itself that is important. Either a work of architecture or particular paintings or sculptures. In every instance what is central is particularity and therefore the question of the way a given work works. There is however a two-fold risk that attends any insistence on particularity. The first element is the equation of criticism with description. The second is the supposition that any writing on art or architecture is automatically criticism. Avoiding these two possibilities necessitates developing a specific understanding of particularity. The particular work is a material event. However, it is also incorporated within a network of relations. Material events—paintings, sculptures, buildings, etc.—recall, of necessity, the genre of which they form a part. Events acknowledge that relation even though they are not determined by it. Criticism, precisely because it is concerned with the way a work works—for example, the way in which a work works as sculpture or painting or an act of memorialization—locates the material event within that act of recall. What matters is the work. The work's mattering—matter as an active principle—is the interplay between material specificity and the network relations that become a given work's own specific act of recall. Neither that network nor the work's mattering can be excluded. Their interplay is the object of criticism. However, that object is always particular. Neither a particular that stands alone, nor a particular that is determined by a form of universality. Rather the particular as a material event.

An important component of these writings is the exhibition, specifically the exhibition of architecture. Exhibitions are never neutral. What they always involve is the display of a conception of what architecture is taken to be. To that extent an exhibition is always a response to the question of criticism. That question concerns how works work as architecture and therefore the way materials and programme interconnect in the creation of the work as a material event. Consequently, the decision of what to display and how to display it has to be understood as a response to the

question of how, in a given instance, the material event is being understood. Responding to the exhibition of architecture is a critical response to that understanding. There is, however, an additional element. The architectural exhibition recalls the fact that the history of architecture is inextricably bound up with practice of representation. Architecture cannot be divorced from the technical means of representation. Drawings, models and now computer generated diagrams form an essential part of that history. Understanding that history and therefore working with the display of architecture has to acknowledge that history. What that acknowledgment means is working with the recognition that the digital now plays an essential role within the practice of design and therefore will also figure in the critical response to architecture's own self-presentation. The ubiquity of the digital gives rise to another way of understanding questions concerning representation in general, the relationship between the digital and the material and thus the display of architecture in general. Accepting this as the setting for the exhibition forms an important part of any critical response to specific exhibitions.

To suggest that these writings are experiments is to say that they are continual attempts to define and enact the project of criticism. They are therefore a form of practice. Criticism as a practice is of course distinct from the practices around which its own project is orientated. In fact it is a connection that is also disjunctive. This complex sense of location marks out the particularity of criticism while at the same time positioning this mode of writing as experimental. Criticism cannot close the opening between writing and its object. However, the fact that closure is impossible and that it cannot complete the object generates a form of responsibility. The responsibility is to maintain the object as a material event. If it is conceded that this is the only way to maintain particularity then any other approach—description, mere historicization, subjective response, etc.—will in the end efface what is specific to a particular work. Particularity does not just emerge within the activity of criticism, criticism as a practice sustains it.

ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN

ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURE

Opening

Perhaps the most well known line from Adolf Loos's famous essay: 'Ornament and Crime' is the claim that, '[a]s ornament is no longer organically related to our culture, it is also no longer the expression of our culture'. This move, which separates ornament and culture, links modernist architecture to the culture of modernity. As with any link it can be as much championed as disavowed. Nonetheless, two things emerge. The first is a statement of intent. The second is a question. In the first instance, and unavoidably, modernist architecture defines itself in relation to culture. The definition is clear. And yet, despite this definition, the question of how today that relation is to be understood has a persistent quality that is usually noticed in its occlusion. In other words, to the extent that the link is denied, and that architecture is seen as no more than building and thus thought in terms of a differentiation of the economic from the cultural, the possible presence of architecture's relation to culture emerges as a question whose acuity cannot be readily escaped. What then is architecture's relation to culture?

In purely strategic terms the question has relevance since policy—usually in terms of Government policy and even architectural criticism—often uses straightforwardly economic criteria to make decisions or draw conclusions. Approaching architecture as an industry, while apposite in certain instances, fails to allow for the presence of the architectural to form part of a nation's, or a community's, culture. And yet, it is clear that the presence of architecture in the daily lives of citizens only underscores its ineliminable cultural presence. The task here is to address that presence and then draw conclusions that could have relevance as much for policy directed decisions, as it would for evaluative ones. Prompting

this essay was not just the refusal of public money to the Australian pavilion at the 2004 Venice Biennale, but the need to engage with the issues to which such a refusal gives rise.¹ For the most part, the issues do not pertain to the relative strength or weakness of Australian architecture but to the way in which it defined itself. While there is no one self-definition there is a prevailing perception. Countering that perception and therefore reopening the need to link architecture to the wider world of policy—policy other than simple planning regulations—involves reopening the question of architecture's relation to culture.

Within the range of this essay there are two senses in which the word 'culture' will be used. The first relates to the activities that are often taken as specific to architecture. The other is inextricably connected to the realm of human existence. In respect to the latter what it demarcates are the ways in which human life relates itself to 'nature'. While there may be two different senses of the word culture what matters is the way concerns of one can be—perhaps should be—intruded into the other. There is little point holding to the exclusivity of the culture of architecture as this denies its presence as part of human society. Equally, architecture cannot be thought as nothing other than merely cultural as this would preclude any consideration being given, for example, to the way different materials realize different effects within architectural practice.

The way through this complex set of considerations will result from recognizing that these two different senses of culture are interrelated. Insisting on that interrelation introduces another defining element into the equation. Indeed, it marks the point of relation: namely, the public. Architecture is essentially public. While this is hardly a surprising claim since it seems to be true by definition. As with many truths the acceptance of what it asserts is conterminous with the refusal of its consequences. A choice emerges: Architecture can take the construction of objects that are positioned as only ever private and thus which only open up the already circumscribed worlds of individual activity—e.g. the domestic house—as that which defines its sphere of operation. Or, there

1. In response to this exclusion a Virtual Australian Pavilion was created and exhibited on line for the 2004 Biennale. The exhibition was designed by John Gollings, Tom Kovac and David Pidgeon. The exhibition was curated by me. I have discussed some of the issues raised by the 2002 Biennale in 'What Next? Notes on the Venice Biennale', *Architecture Australia*, January/February 2003.

can be an insistence on its inherently public nature. Emphasizing the public does not mean that the construction of the house is in some sense a denial of that self-defined location. Rather, the argument would be that architecture's continual opening onto the world—an opening which can have an important role in the construction of that world—is one of the main ways for there to be a possible nexus between the culture of architecture and the inherently public nature of human sociality. What have to be explained therefore are the differences between these two positions.

This distinction is not between architecture as an academic activity on the one hand and as a worldly activity on the other. At work here are different conceptions of practice. The difference is crucial since in both instances there can be a championing of materials over programme; in both, a concern with the environmental consequences of building can be paramount; equally, issues pertaining to sustainability can drive them both. The distinction involves the extent to which there is an affirmation—with all the difficulties and complexities that this term brings with it—of the inherently public nature of architecture.

Opening In

Architecture can be described as *opening in*, when it defines itself in terms of an activity of construction for individuals to suit individual needs. In working from the outside in, space is created that reproduces the desires of clients. In so doing, that world takes on the veneer of the private. The privacy in question has a public register. However, that registration is of a conception of the private as the world in which the individual—either singularly or as a unit—has primacy. Moreover, it generates a conception of the public, as a collection of individuals all of whom aspire to the creation of their own 'private' world, which in being created would then be the locus where their own unique desires would be satisfied.

Architecture begins to define itself in these terms when this conception of practice—and world creation—becomes the basis for future discussions and evaluations. Once the object is understood as created for the individual, bringing with it a conception of the public as the totality of individuals, it follows that architecture is both the expression of personalities, and that the built object expresses the personality of the client. (Or at least that this would be the desired intent on both sides.) Equally, because construction, once understood in this light is always defined by a

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