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# The London Conceptualists: Architecture and Conceptual Art in the 1970s

Sandra Kaji-O'Grady

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- 1 The “London Conceptualists” was how Peter Cook in 1978 referred to the group of former students of Bernard Tschumi from the Architectural Association.<sup>1</sup> They first exhibited together in 1975 in *A Space: A Thousand Words*, organized by Tschumi and RoseLee Goldberg at the Royal College of Art where Goldberg was gallery director between 1972 and 1976. Among them were Dereck Rivington, Jeanne Sillett, Jenny Lowe, Leon van Schaik, Nigel Coates, Paul Shephard, Peter Wilson, and Will Alsop.<sup>2</sup> Shephard and Alsop subsequently formed the London Architecture Club and with Sillett, Lowe, Coates, and Wilson produced competition entries and exhibitions that supplanted the cerebral and documentary aesthetic of one strain of conceptual art with an intuitive, performance-based approach.<sup>3</sup> Their public experiments led Cook to affectionately describe them as a “little group of freaks.” He observed that a suspicious mainstream stood by while they made obscure and grubby exhibitions anywhere they can: disused houses, sheds, entrance lobbies, and occasionally bemused institutions like the Royal College of Art . . . No wonder [Tschumi] needs the USA after a few years of it.<sup>4</sup>
- 2 The 1975 exhibition and the curators’ essays, Goldberg’s “Space as Praxis” and Tschumi’s “Questions of Space,” was to be the first of ten events that would draw architecture and art together, yet in hindsight was the culmination of a three-year collaboration conducted through their respective institutions.<sup>5</sup> Tschumi was searching for new directions for architecture in philosophy, literature, film and art. To the Architectural Association, Goldberg introduced artists Boltanski, Abramovic, The Kipper Kids, McLean, Stezaker, McCall, Burgin, Marden, Acconci, Christo, Paolini, and the musician Eno. In the other direction, presentations at the RCA included Germano Celant, Peter Cook, and Pesce. This paper traces the evolution of Tschumi’s former students towards an independent position, outside of conventional architectural

practice and straddling the visual arts. The impact of Goldberg's conception of space as an arena for the realization of theory in practice will be assessed.

- 3 The paper is also concerned with the group's subsequent adoption of strategies of performance and installation. These were part of explorations by architects in Europe in performance and ephemeral events, yet the local political climate lent a particular colour to the activities of the London Conceptualists. The political left had betrayed the working classes in the mining strikes of 1974, youth unemployment was high, and political activism was being carried out through cultural protest, including the libertarian crusade of English punk subculture. Tschumi's declaration of the erotic character of decayed architecture and the value of the taboo has its most immediate parallels in the posters and lyrics of the punk movement and the T-shirts that mixed sexual taboos with Situationist and anarchist slogans sold from Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's shop Sex. The perceived destruction of London in the name of development gave additional force to their rejection of conventional architectural practice and values at the same time as England's economic struggles provided disused sites. It became both possible and arguable to reject theory for active intervention in the city through installation and performance in derelict buildings.<sup>6</sup> As Nigel Coates explains, "declining cities meant that you could invent the way to use them."<sup>7</sup>
- 4 The London Conceptualists were also engaged in an international discussion around conceptual art and architecture that had led to Peter Cook staging *Conceptual Architecture*—an exhibition and conference—at Art Net in 1975 and Peter Eisenman's *Idea as Model* exhibition at the Institute of Architecture and Urbanism in 1976.<sup>8</sup> Architects had participated in a number of groundbreaking shows of conceptual art and technology including *Cybernetic Serendipity* (London, 1968) and *Software, Information Technology* (New York, 1971).
- 5 The term conceptual art had been used from about 1967 to describe art in which the idea, and the process of making, takes precedence over the finished product. Lucy Lippard famously argued that conceptual art aimed at the dematerialisation of the object and weakening of the visual traditions of art.<sup>9</sup> Goldberg countered that the various modes of presentation in which an idea may be executed—such as a written statement of instructions, a photograph documenting the instruction being carried out, or as live performance—were not neutral or interchangeable. She believed performance materialized theory in a physical context and offered the viewer a more challenging response to the perception of space in relation to the art proposition.<sup>10</sup> Goldberg identified a number of artists whose work presented a new sense of space, which she categorized under the following terms: "constructed space and powerfields" (Nauman, Acconci), "natural space" (Oppenheim), "body space" (Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer), "spectator space" (Graham), and work presented as "a critique of the uses of public and private space" (Buren, Dimitrijevic). These artists shifted their attention from situations to the perception of the spatial volume.<sup>11</sup>
- 6 It was from this position that Tschumi and Goldberg invited contributors to present their thoughts on the "production of space" and its mental apprehension. They dictated a uniform format consistent with contemporary conceptual art of one black-and-white drawing or photographic document of 36 cm x 24 cm and two typed A4 pages of less than one thousand words.<sup>12</sup> While the format and budget prevented performances and installations, Dan Graham, Franco Vaccari, and David Dye forwarded procedures that could be acted out in order to reconfigure the relationship between

abstract space and private, experiential space. The work of Tschumi's students closely resembled these in method and content. They explored sociological questions about architecture and the city using firsthand narrative and, as van Schaik described, "drawings that I have lived."<sup>13</sup> Revington, Lowe, and Shepherd submitted ecstatic recollections and dream sequences. Revington describes playing with fire and snow in northern Canada—experiments whose effect, he writes, collapsed the boundaries between subject and object, percipient and perceived, pleasure and pain.<sup>14</sup> Lowe details in text and drawings her imaginary search through successive compartmentalized spaces for "something else that hadn't been located in these divided spaces," a space of desire rather than design. Wilson describes a "Living Room that exists because it is perceived to exist." Coates, too, concludes, that "nothing is there other than my perception of the landscape." He details an experiment with the distortion of spatial perception allowed by mirrored reflections that recalls the contributions of Dye and Graham. Using four mirrors reflecting each other, Coates finds that the viewer, entering the space between the mirrors, becomes both an intruder and a prisoner of the reflected image. He concludes that space has no imagination and is blind to its occupation.

- 7 For the subsequent Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition of 1977 the London Conceptualists entered scenarios that called into question the theme of Comfort in the Metropolis. Again they tested the limits between real and imagined spaces. Lowe proposed a house on a disused London train turntable. Mirrors and radiating corridors set up a discomfort that could only be resolved when the visitor passes "through the door that looks like a mirror and assumes the position that seems to be center of my home."<sup>15</sup> Wilson submitted a submerged house in Covent Garden that he described as "only able to be experienced in the imagination."<sup>16</sup>
- 8 These young architects shared many of the concerns and strategies of conceptual art, yet they became increasingly disenchanted with the high art circulating in galleries and instead looked to youth culture. Coates refers to this period, coincident with the "angry phase of punk," as their sinister period, characterized by drawings "with blizzards of black" so dense that the buildings disappeared.<sup>17</sup> The group rejected Tschumi's commitment to literature and text. For them ideas required materialization in space and, although this did not necessarily involve building, Coates later argued that "theoretical references had to be avoided if they could be found in the city as it exists," found by "the action sensed with an ear to the ground."<sup>18</sup> While Tschumi had encouraged exploration of the sensual and subversive underbelly of architecture, his methods were scholarly. With the exception of a performance at the Real Space conference with Brian Eno—Tschumi read a text while Eno played music increasingly loudly until the lecture was drowned out—Tschumi was not involved in theatrical events such as those organized by his former students. Propositions for using space in a contradictory fashion—"Pole-vaulting in the chapel, bicycling in the Laundromat, sky-diving in the elevator shaft"<sup>19</sup>—remained conceptual devices. He was not to be found, as was Lowe, "acting out space" at a drawing board wrapped in black gauze in the four-day long occupation of the Air Gallery in a show titled *We Thought Le Corbusier was a Bottle of Brandy*.<sup>20</sup>
- 9 The group took advantage of the British Arts Council's new enthusiasm for performance art and London's economic downturn to carry out a series of

wholeheartedly experimental installations and “occupations” of derelict buildings. Coates, with Antonio Lagarto, carried out films, performances, and installations throughout the mid-to-late 1970s. For the two-week occupation of a derelict house, Lagarto filled the attic with pigeons, brought in a grand piano and, in flamboyant dress, played Satie. Coates installed a Christmas tree in the room he occupied for the same event, called *Housework*. For the *Just a House* project with Coop Himmelblau, a white PVC drape obscured the house, an inflatable anchored from the roof, and a rhododendron garden was installed inside with a graveyard of domestic objects by Coates.

- 10 London was, Kathy Battista observes, “a hive of this kind of activity in the middle to late 1970s” among artists who eschewed or couldn’t get access to the gallery system.<sup>21</sup> For the architects the derelict building was more than a gallery alternative—it was the material and symbolic outcome of unchecked capitalist development during the boom of the previous decade. They searched for alternatives to measuring space by its dollar value in the history and experience of the site and were also involved in squat housing. They perceived their world as one of “great industries leaving decay and barren landscapes” and of the vagrancy of youth culture embodied in the aesthetic anarchy of Westwood’s clothes and punk music.<sup>22</sup>
- 11 Stuart Sillars notes that in London the primarily self-referential strain of conceptual art in the early 1970s gave way to work with a specific social, political and moral impetus exemplified in two exhibitions in 1978, *Art for Whom* at the Serpentine Gallery and *Art for Society* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery.<sup>23</sup> The Whitechapel show included Tony Rickaby’s *Fascade*, a series of drawings of London buildings, each the headquarters of a right-wing organization. The images themselves were of rather bland buildings, yet the stress on idea, not image, of conceptual art opened it to political critique. The London Conceptualists were making similar inroads, at the same time they were attempting to do away with the strictures of polite society and the expert role of the architect that distanced him or her from grubby intervention. Their allegiances were with the individual over the powerful institution, the imagination over economic rationality.
- 12 Each member of the group remains active and their legacy for architectural history is incomplete. Yet as early as 1983 Cook pondered their significance as a group, questioning if “the period of the seventies was for [Tschumi] and his students, a great cleansing operation in which, despite their protestations to the contrary, they were preparing the ground for the creation of a second modern architecture.”<sup>24</sup> This is incorrect. Their activities were not the intellectual precursors for the serious business of making buildings, despite several of them going on to do this. Performance and installation were vehicles for materializing architectural concepts, preserving ambiguity, and acting directly upon the city. The use of houses as sites for temporary exhibition and performance was one way of unsettling architectural determinations of private and public, audience and performer. Rejecting the view that architecture was an autonomous institution and postmodern practices of self-reference, their activities revealed architecture as simultaneously the product of larger economic forces and of individual action and perception<sup>25</sup>.

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NOTES DE FIN

1. Peter COOK, *The Japan Architect*, 250, 1978, p.11.
2. Van Schaik and Alsop graduated from the Architectural Association in 1971, Jeanne Sillet in 1972, Paul Shephard in 1973, Jenny Lowe, Peter Wilson, and Nigel Coates in 1974, and Dereck Revington in 1975. All taught there for periods between 1972 and 1986 and have continued to teach and practice in Canada, Europe, and Australia.
3. Shephard describes the young architects in the London Architecture Club as “for better or worse, independent flywheels.” (Paul SHEPHEARD, “An Ideal Home,” *Architectural Design* 47 (1977), pp. 7–8).
4. Peter COOK, “Unbuilt England—Its Structural Background,” *Architecture and Urbanism* 83 (1977), pp. 20–21. Lowe and Wilson were Australians.
5. Goldberg and Tschumi met in 1973, the first year that he ran Unit 10 at the Architectural Association and began a personal and professional partnership that ended in New York in 1977. The essays immediately followed the exhibition and were published in September 1975 in a special issue of *Studio International* 190/977 at the invitation of Richard Cork.
6. Peter COOK, “Unbuilt England—Its Structural Background,” p. 20.
7. Nigel COATES, “Narrative Break-up,” *The Discourse of Events*, Architectural Association, London, 1983, p. 13.
8. Peter COOK, “Unbuilt England—Its Structural Background,” p. 18
9. Lucy LIPPARD, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, New York, 1973.
10. RoseLee GOLDBERG, “Space as Praxis,” *Studio International* 190/977, 1975, p. 130.
11. The shift is first articulated in the show *Spaces*, curated by Jennifer Licht at The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1970. The exhibition comprised six projects by Michael Asher, Larry Bell, Robert Morris, Dan Flavin, Franz Erhard Walther, and the group Pulsa.
12. Conceptual art rejected the visual emphasis of previous art but unwittingly developed a recognizable informational aesthetic characterized by lists, collections, numeric and alphabetic ordering, sequential procedures, serialization and repetition, documentary photographs, and captioning.
13. RoseLee GOLDBERG and Bernard TSCHUMI, *A Space: A Thousand Words*, London, 1975, unpaginated catalog.
14. Dereck REVINGTON in RoseLee GOLDBERG and Bernard TSCHUMI, *A Space: A Thousand Words*, London, 1975, unpaginated catalog.
15. Peter Cook judged the competition and gave Lowe a special award and Peter Wilson fourth prize, “Sense of Theatre.” “Comfort in the Metropolis, Winners of the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition, 1977,” *The Japan Architect* 250, 1978, p. 31.
16. “Comfort in the Metropolis, Winners of the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition, 1977,” *The Japan Architect* 250, 1978, p. 21.
17. Nigel COATES, “Narrative Break-up,” *The Discourse of Events*, London, 1983, p. 15.
18. Nigel COATES, “Ghetto and Globe,” *AA Files* 5, 1984, p. 61.
19. TSCHUMI, “Spaces and Events,” p. 10
20. Jenny Lowe interviewed by the author in Bradford, England on July 11, 2004.

21. Kathy BATTISTA, "Domestic Crisis: Women Artists and Derelict Houses in South London, 1974–1998," *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site*, Ken EHRLICH and Brandon LABELLE, eds., New York, 2003, pp.109–113.
22. Nigel COATES, "Ghetto and Globe," pp. 60–62.
23. Stuart SILLARS, "Visual art in the 1970s," in BART MOORE-GILBERT, ed., *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?* London, 1994, pp. 261–264
24. Peter COOK, "Strange Pavilions of the Mind: The Discourse of Events—The work of Diploma Unit 10, 1973–1983," p. 102.
25. Acknowledgments : The author would like to thank Bernard Tschumi, RoseLee Goldberg, Leon Van Schaik, Jenny Lowe, and Paul Shephard for their time and generosity in interviews.

## RÉSUMÉS

Between 1973 and 1976 Bernard Tschumi and RoseLee Goldberg undertook a program of cross-fertilization between architecture and art at their respective institutions, the Architecture Association and the Royal College of Art. This paper examines the repercussions for Tschumi's students of an approach to architecture that embraced the methods and ideas of the experimental performance art that Goldberg championed. The students, dubbed "The London Conceptualists" by Peter Cook, included Will Alsop, Nigel Coates, Paul Shephard, Jenny Lowe, and Peter Wilson. This paper examines their subsequent experiments in the context of London and draws broader conclusions from this intense, historic and personal exchange.

## INDEX

**Index chronologique** : XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, époque contemporaine

**Index géographique** : Europe, Londres, Royaume-Uni, Amérique, Etats-Unis, New-York

**Mots-clés** : architecture, performance, Art Net, Institute of Architecture and Urbanism, Whitechapel Art Gallery, anarchisme, conceptual architecture, conceptual art, cross-fertilization, installation, London Architecture Club, London Conceptualists, Punk, situationism, architecture conceptuelle, art conceptual

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