

PABLO BRONSTEIN AND ANNA CRAYCROFT

PABLO: So, Anna, I was worrying, about art that makes the point about “the world is but a stage...” and was wondering what you thought problems that might arise in such work (yours and mine, if you like) would be.

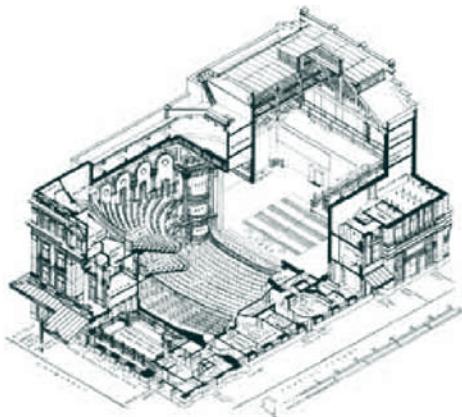
ANNA: It’s funny because when you write the “but a stage” phrase, I’m picturing some older (barely) gentlemanly type in some reverie about the performance of youth... so that would be specifically about the actors I guess.

But then considering the phrase in terms of art, and particularly the work that you or I make, I’m imagining more of a direct one-to-one: like the artwork is a plastic

I guess I just constructed a whole theatre company



which isn’t exactly an answer to your question, but is perhaps a nod to the fact that I buy into the whole “but a stage” reality.... So, I’m asking you a question back. A clarification perhaps. Are these distinctions I’ve made disparate, or part of the same? Where is your worry exactly?



model of the physical world.

So in this case: a stage set and its 2 dimensionality... so that’s the art object. (Or maybe also the art as an image of an object—like your drawings.)

It’s entertaining for me to think of this distinction, I guess because of my desire to collapse a physical and performative space into one entity.

But also the idea of you approaching the question as a subject for concern introduces another manifestation of the “stage”: the theatrics of making (and being the maker).

And then lastly, how I am currently sitting here entertained by considering it all: so there’s the audience too, being the audience.

PABLO: The worry hovers around the political implications that a statement about facades or artificiality or the decorative brings up. I'm worried that work that turns everything into a comedy of conventions and manners is at risk of declaring that there is no truth, only appearances. This sounds old-fashioned, but I have a nagging issue with the idea that it is all facades and that nothing lies beneath. Isn't this political escapism? How can an artist make work about superficial or scenographic aspects of their surroundings without it becoming an endless system of images? Or a house of mirrors? As if this isn't a man-made system, but a natural phenomena that we get trapped in.



ANNA: Can the word facades translate here to mean quotations: as in an expression or idea taken out of context and therefore isolated from its meaning?

I'm thinking in terms of a conversation we had when you were in New York about the dominance of the artist's hand, or the search for a signature style. Would the alternative to this be a series of stylistic quotations? Which are all mirrors....

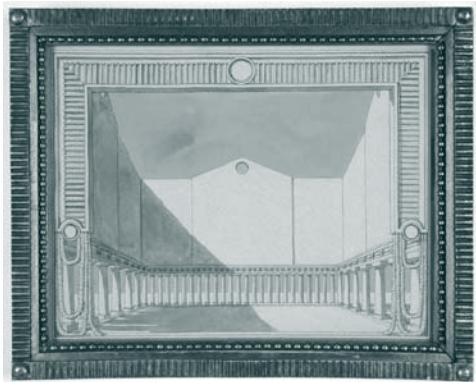
This is reminding me of Harold Bloom's "the anxiety of influence," about the inevitability of mis-interpretation in the pursuit of art making, and the "mirroring the past" aspect of it.

So again I am talking about the hand... which could also be described as vanity's intervention?

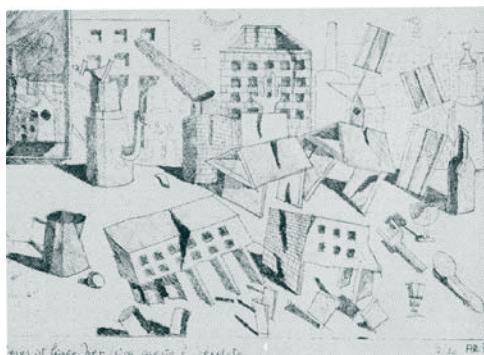
Maybe you aren't talking specifically about vanity... but somehow I feel like vanity and escapism are intertwined.... Also doesn't the perception of the artificiality of the world require that your self-perception would be that which you are judging against? The experience of the substantive has to be had somewhere, right.... So if everything else is bullshit.... What you got is basic teenage angst.

I think you are making too broad a leap from "facades" and "artificiality" to the "only appearances" camp. For me there is a whole cosmos of associations between those two. And maybe that's about interpretation. And about vanity.

PABLO: In my current work I deal with the relationship these ideas have to the 1980s in architecture. How to make it clear that facades benefit and are created by particular ideologies.



Talking about this relationship, there might be a link to an idea of the "natural" creating the ruin. In other words, it is the forces of nature that help create the fragment that remains of a building, be it rain, time, and so on. Whereas this reading always benefits the person/politics that invests in the ruin, a projection of how they will be seen in the future. Its far better for Napoleon to see the ruins of Egypt in such a state because of a millennia of erosion and decay (and his empire so romantically treated in hindsight) than as a result of a collapsed political and economic system that would otherwise preserve buildings. Look how hard it is to touch one brick of an eighty-year-old house, which captures one image of the past, and how easy it is to demolish a defunct factory of the same age, which speaks of failure and collapse.



ANNA: So on this point about the ruin... the limp dick of architecture's potent past:



Does architecture serve the artist as a tool rather than a triumph in and of itself? Something that is acted upon or within. Acted upon: the ravages of nature and the result of the ruin. Acted within: the theatre (or politics) of the given culture building and inhabiting it. Somehow talking about architecture seems wrong—like a secondary subject.

PABLO: I'm reminded of the feminist aspects of your installations that deal with the decorative. What informed your approach to the decorative in your recent installation at the Bloomberg offices? Was the installation in part a reaction to the architecture? It sounds like a goofy question, but I think I'm trying to get at the hostility I felt in your work (its confrontational aspects) towards the immediate surroundings. In particular the easy lifestyle, cool, "hi-tech" modernity of the office building. Can your installation work be viewed as a wider comment on prevalent architectural style?



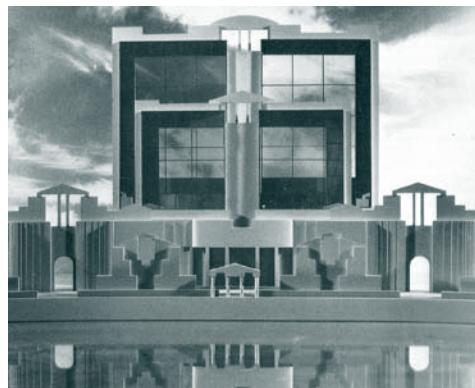
ANNA: The piece was totally a response to the stylistics of Cesar Pelli's building for Bloomberg LP and yes: something of an aggressive response: the architecture of the Bloomberg building is overbearing on the whole in a sort of generic—too much style/no style, too much content/no content contemporary architecture.



I was particularly struck by how the names given to the materials used in the hallway (where the installation is) were referred to with a disquieting preciousness. Specifically: the hallway's "lacquer" wall panels and "terrazzo" tiles. These materials in their traditional form can be sublimely beautiful and complex—in their function as decorative adornment, as representations of craft and the handmade, and most poignantly for the incredible social inequities that their industry requires. But in the Bloomberg building the materials given these titles were just a chipboard laminate, and some sort of machine pressed, uniform stone-like squares. So I took this inflated vocabulary to its contextual conclusion for decorative opulence.

And, since you mention the subject of the decorative... and feminism? I have to admit that I'm somewhat tired of what I see as a forced pairing. I don't think that the decorative is necessarily feminist. To me this seems underhandedly diminutive to both parties. However I do consider how I use the decorative in my work because of the complicated reaction I have to this association.

PABLO: I have no intention of equating feminist critique with the decorative, as I am also tired of the argument. I merely brought the two together as a way of moving the question on from a comment or play on architectural style. In other words, what is being said. Both of us are ultimately interested in people's relation to architecture, and not in architecture per se. I am interested in the way architecture constructs, or helps to construct, images of power and control, and ways in which it fails to do so.



For example I am interested in the Thatcherite architecture of the 1980s, and the way that the supposedly left-wing reaction to the high modernism of international finance, was in itself made the official house style of corporate banking. I am interested in the 1980s also because it is visible as a generic style, and is no longer around as current practice. What I find difficult to do is become involved in contemporary architecture, as I can't get distance from it, I can't visualize the surrounding economic and social circumstances because I am a part of them. One of the things that has happened in my drawings as a result of this is that they, in their historical stylistic aspects, move away from a utopian vision and enter a discourse of utopia—they remove themselves from practicing the full fantasy of heralding an architectural future, and become about ways in which architecture was heralded in the past, or ways in which the present could have been different if the architects of the 1980s, or 1780s or whatever, had had their way.

In my installations at the moment the overbearing historical motifs, because of the horror that po mo invokes in people at the moment, the question revolves around intrusion; i.e. how present the intervention becomes in the space. For Tate Britain I've recently designed these large architectural screens that house books and advertising motifs. The screens have new-classical door and triangle motifs cut out of them, and are painted a beige-stone color so that it looks like they are trying to blend into the

surrounding stone color. The screens are highly visible because they try hard to be architecture. They refer to the 1980s addition to the Tate building, and the ways that that particular architectural intervention by James Stirling tried to blend into and refer to the older Tate building. Failure is a part of them, and inherent to the success of the piece.



ANNA: What do you think is the relationship between failure, as a subject or aspiration and the self-conscious awareness of not being able to engage a discourse about contemporary architecture?

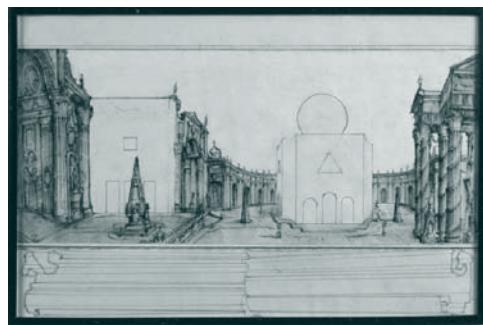
Is it possible to involve an audience in contemplating/recognizing the power of an ideology when you are looking at it from a critical distance.



This is back on the question of the facades perhaps... how talking in facades may simplify the task, or the language you are speaking through...?

PABLO: I think you absolutely can involve an audience in something despite critical distance, but I think the involvement is always ironic. I don't mean irony as parody, but as a series of mixed messages. We are familiar with art that deals with the failure of modernist architecture and town planning, and we momentarily share the wonder at its utopian vision, its ambition, its power, but we are simultaneously filtering it through a knowledge of its failure, its social cruelty, its age, and so on. But, it is necessary to understand and feel the power of it if the work is to have some emotional impact, if we are to feel pathos, empathy and involve ourselves with a more complicated set of thoughts around the subject. Art that creates too much distance (at least for our generation) is research without the practice. It is a museological essay without the Mark Dion. Either way, I think that for my work the feeling of critical distance to the architecture of the 1980s is absolutely mediated by a concrete belief in its power, which goes back to growing up in Thatcher's London.

In relation to not being able to engage in a discourse about contemporary architecture, I think that statement exists for architects working strictly within a conservative field. The question of failure in relation to my installation, and maybe to yours also, is in architectural terms, but not in artistic ones. By architecture, here I mean "spatial solutions." One of the reasons why I am asked to do architectural interventions is because although both the architect and I respond to a brief, the artist brands a particular sort of criticality that is lost in the architect's bid for a "solution."





ANNA: Can you talk about how your drawing techniques and fancy frames disguise your interest in the power embedded within the architectural innovation of more recently corrupt politics? Using said aesthetics to make smoke and mirrors from that more confrontational, or direct critique and spotlighting the nostalgic reverie that is afforded a more canonical authority.

Does this serve the point of critical distance or the danger of seduction inherent in nostalgia?

I know you have a long-standing interest in buildings themselves and the architects who designed them. I might suggest that you have a resentful envy. But for me, architecture is a means to an end... which ultimately has very little to do with the building or the design.

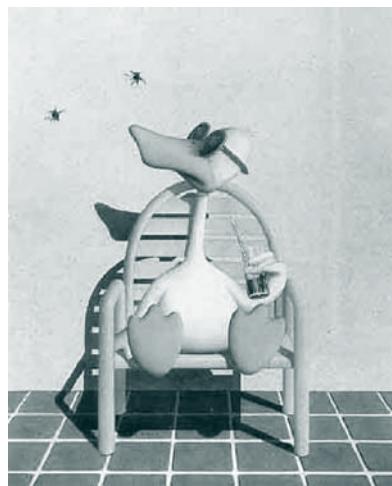
Like you, I'm interested in architecture because it can introduce the grandiose—suggesting the empires that erected it- and then distract through the seduction of the decorative, but beyond that delusional reverie a conversation with architecture doesn't hold my interest for much longer. Meanwhile, remove architecture as the format for the conversation (or for my work) and I am at a loss for that authoritative context to shamefully surrender to or rebel against, depending...

PABLO: The drawings and frames are of course slightly more removed from the focus of critique, but I think I have already said here that the distance necessary for critique also allows a celebratory aspect, and a practice embedded in ambivalence and an "acting out" of critique. If I become the Thatcherist architect and design a huge office complex on paper, I love the office complex, despite the corrupt politics, but the fact that I am not an architect and that we are not in the 1980s allows the critical aspect to exist simultaneously. The same could and may happen with contemporary architectural practice, but on a question of style I find it harder to visualize the contemporary debate.

I am sorry that architecture as a subject feels wrong to you. I like it because the relationship between power and people is obviously manifest and rendered literally in concrete.



ANNA: It's not that architecture as a subject feels wrong for me, it's that it feels secondary. No need to be sorry. I am really glad to be dissatisfied by architecture. I also think I cultivate this sense of insufficiency.



PABLO: I was talking to my friend Jonathan yesterday, and he said that architecture was a "sitting duck" and that it was everybody's target. He might be right.

ANNA: I don't know if I would say sitting duck. But definitely a decoy of sorts. ■

