

WHAT REMAINS OF A BUILDING
DIVIDED INTO
EQUAL PARTS AND DISTRIBUTED
FOR RECONFIGURATION

Surface Tension Supplement No. 2

EDITED BY KEN EHRLICH & BRANDON LABELLE

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ISBN: 978-0-9772594-3-4

Errant Bodies Press
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Design: James W Moore & Penny Pehl

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10437 Berlin
Germany

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Los Angeles, CA 90065
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www.errantbodies.org

Errant Bodies publications are distributed by DAP, New York
www.artbook.com

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Ken Ehrlich & Brandon LaBelle

Introduction

The second publication in the *Surface Tension Supplement* series marks the ongoing evolution of a platform for publishing and organizing exhibitions related to international contemporary spatial practices. Initially developed as a comprehensive anthology devoted to documenting a broad range of site-specific work in art, architecture and performance and reflecting critically on the history of the notion of “site”, the project has blossomed into a vehicle for engaging modes of locational exchange across a range of disciplines and media.

The current volume in the series takes as its title a modified and slightly subverted version of another title—the title of an essay by Jean Genet, *What Remains of a Rembrandt Torn Into Four Equal Pieces and Flushed Down the Toilet*. In this text, Genet muses on the complexity of emotion found in a momentary, shared glance on a train and what can happen in the eyes and body of a viewer gazing at late Rembrandt paintings. He states, “A work of art should exalt only those truths which are not demonstrable, and which are even ‘false,’ those which we cannot carry to their ultimate conclusions without absurdity, without negating both them and ourself.” Considering the subtle eroticism of the Rembrandt paintings, Genet reminds the reader of the complex ways that subjective experience and social formations mingle and co-contaminate. By trading the *Rembrandt* of the title for *buildings* and *flushing* for *reconfiguration*, we hope to draw attention to the built environment as both a dominant force in shaping spatial experience and yet one that is malleable and changing. At the heart of our on-going project related to “site-based” practices is an interest in exploring instances of intersections of the individual with the social and the private with the public. Might Genet’s formulations of an artistic experience that exalts certain truths even to the point of negation inform a perspective on spatial thinking that

incorporates the very subversion of its own assumptions? A view which encourages unorthodox strategies and articulations, practices that, in seeking to occupy or activate the site of their own production or performance, might come to negate their own “truth”? We resist the temptation to answer such questions prescriptively and instead hope to multiply and complicate the ongoing conversations about spatiality.

This volume is primarily focused on questions of built space with a view toward engaging its social and political dimensions. Ava Bromberg presents a personal account of her work in an urban planning office in the Chinese city of Shenzhen and reflects on the scale, pace and challenges of contemporary urban planning in China in general. Issues pertaining to contemporary urbanism and the related excesses of current building are brought forward, underscoring the ongoing tension between plan and use, concept and environment. A broad range of spatial questions are further explored by Jesko Fezer and Mathias Heyden in their analysis of participatory and interventionist architecture in Europe from 1945 to the present. This historical analysis presents a lineage of idiosyncratic spaces and plans that necessarily incorporate informal and often surprisingly generative methods of producing place. Carl Michael von Hausswolff, a Swedish artist working with the built environment, details the process of designing and building a house on The Land Foundation site in Chiangmai, Thailand. Through his reflections, an intimate portrait of The Land Foundation project emerges and readers are introduced to a community that takes a holistic approach toward social existence. Hausswolff’s house project becomes an embodiment of the community’s spirit of generosity, in which housing is both a vehicle for the imagination as well as a form of gift giving, where anyone may use the house and make creative additions to the site in general. Extending notions of participation and urban planning, artist and activist Nis Rømer presents documentation of a series of gardening interventions made in Copenhagen in 2006, raising issues of urban farming, green spaces, and city politics. His *Hot Summer of Urban Farming* group project offered tangible proposals from different artists, uncovering the degree to which urban space is often perceived as immutable while productively engaging with the material processes of spatial exchange. Finally, Los Angeles-based architect Rachel Allen presents documentation of a recent project and dialogues with Ken Ehrlich on aspects of contemporary architecture and the convergences and divergences between the practices of art and architecture.

As the primary site or terrain where bodies interact with physical environments and abstract notions of space conflict with lived experience, the built environment is constantly coded and decoded through interaction and exchange. Throughout this publication, architecture is theorized as a practice that can bring social histories and personal experiences to bear on urban policy and planning, challenging the drive towards an often short-sighted professionalism. Although the language, history and discourses of art and architecture are distinct, and such differences always influence the cultural reception of each, the disciplinary boundaries between certain forms of artistic practice and critical work being done in the context of architecture share an overarching concern with what might be called the intersection of social and spatial configurations. The work in this *Supplement* explores the uses and misuses of contemporary architectural and urban space, and in doing so highlights the generative unpredictability built into spatial experience. Our aim is to mark these experiments with potential.

Biographies

RACHEL ALLEN grew up in San Francisco and received her architecture degrees from Princeton University. She went on to work with Gehry Partners, ultimately as Assistant Project Designer of the Stata Center at MIT. In 2002–2003 she received the Rome Prize in architecture, a yearlong fellowship. She currently serves on the Board of the Outpost for Contemporary Art and has taught at the Mountain School of Art, Princeton University, SCI-Arc, UCLA, UC Riverside, USC and Woodbury University. She is owner and principal of Rachel Allen Architecture, whose built work includes residential, retail, commercial and food service projects in Northern and Southern California, and collaborations with artists on large-scale installations.

AVA BROMBERG is an internationally recognized urban planning scholar, artist, and spacemaker. Her research and practice focus on creative economies, public and social space, community-driven planning, and responsible development. As a 2002–2003 Thomas J. Watson Fellow, Ava researched local incubators of culture, creativity, and community as public art in twenty cities around the world. She is a co-founder of Mess Hall, a storefront cultural center in Chicago, co-organizer of the Just Space(s) exhibition and symposium series, and co-editor of *Belltown Paradise/Making their own Plans*. Ava holds a Master's Degree in Urban Planning from UCLA, where she is a doctoral student.

KEN EHRLICH is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles. He has exhibited internationally in a variety of media including video, sculpture and photography. His work interweaves architectural, technological and social themes to play with ideas of invention and circumvention; superstructure and infrastructure; consumption and waste; and site, place and location. He often collaborates with architects and other artists in site-specific and/or community-based projects. He is the co-editor of *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site* (2003) and *Surface Tension Supplement No. 1* (2006). He currently teaches at The California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) and in the Department of Art at UC Riverside.

JESKO FEZER is co-manager of the specialist bookstore *Pro qm* in Berlin, Germany and co-editor of the political architecture magazine *An Architektur*. He was recently a Visiting Professor for Urban Research in the masters' degree course at the Academy of Fine Arts in Nuremberg. As an architect (*ifau und Jesko Fezer*), he realized re-designs and buildings for cultural institutions in Berlin, Munich, Stuttgart, Utrecht and Graz. His most recent publications are *Fezer/a42.org: Planungsmethodik gestern*, *Fezer/Heyden: Hier entsteht. Strategien partizipativer Architektur und räumlicher Aneignung*, *Fezer/Schmitz: Lucius Burckhardt: Wer plant die Planung?*, and *Fezer/Reichard/Wieder: Martin Pawley's Garbage Housing*.

MATHIAS HEYDEN is a carpenter and an architect with *ISPARA* (Institute for Strategies of Participatory Architecture and Spatial Appropriation). He is the co-founder of K 77, a project dedicated to self-determined and cooperative dwelling, work and culture in a formerly squatted house. His work is based on a commitment to direct-democracy and solidarity-oriented, sustainable and holistic production of spaces and use of the built environment. He organized an exhibition on participatory architecture and edited a companion publication with Jesko Fezer entitled *Hier entsteht. Strategien partizipativer Architektur und räumlicher Aneignung* in 2004. Other publications include *Wohnen in eigener Regie! Gemeinschaftsorientierte Strategien für die Mieterstadt* (with Bildungswerk Berlin der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung) and *An Architektur 19 – 21: Community Design. Involvement and Architecture in the US since 1963* (with *An Architektur*).

BRANDON LABELLE is an artist and writer working with sounds, places, bodies, and cultural narratives. He is co-editor of the *Surface Tension* book series, and manages Errant Bodies Press. His ongoing project to build a library of radio memories, Phantom Radio, was presented at Radio Revolten, Halle Germany in 2006, and his Prototypes for the Mobilization and Broadcast of Fugitive Sound was exhibited at the Enrico Fornello gallery, Prato in 2007. He is the author of *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* (Continuum 2006).

AROON PURITAT was born in Chiang Rai, Thailand and attended Silpakorn University in Bangkok, obtaining a B.Arch. in 1997. Since then he has realized several designs, including the “Annex House” in Chiang Rai (2001) and the “Mud House” at the Chiang Mai Art Museum (2002). Puritat's work involves the merging of art and architectural ideas. He also works as a freelance writer for the magazine Art4D and Wallpaper Magazine (Thai edition). He has recently completed Rirkrit Tiravanija's private house in Chiang Mai, Thailand and is currently working on a new book “THAI” as well as “MaMa house”, a new studio for him and his mother in Chiang Mai.

NIS RØMER makes public art in the city, on the web and in the news media. He has a special interest in the social and political organization of space and in how processes of globalization affects the city and our natural environment. He often works in groups and is a co-founder of www.free-soil.org working with issues of sustainability, and of www.publik.dk making art in public spaces in Copenhagen.

CARL MICHAEL VON HAUSSWOLFF is an artist based in Stockholm. Since the end of the 1970s he has worked as a composer using the tape recorder as his main instrument and as a conceptual visual artist working with performance art, light- and sound installations and photography. His interest in architecture and topography has also resulted in the films “Hashima, Japan 2002” and “Al Qasr, Bahriyah Oasis, Egypt, 2005” with Thomas Nordanstad. In 1993 he and Leif Elggren developed the ever-lasting conceptual piece “The Kingdoms of Elgaland-Vargaland” and in 2005 he completed his Starhouse project for The Land Foundation, Chiangmai, Thailand.