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## Architectural Art: Affirming the Design Relationship

Organized by the American Craft Museum, in affiliation with the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects

American Craft Museum, New York  
12 May - 4 September 1988

Reviewed by Peter C. Papademetriou

New York's American Craft Museum was the summer home for the exhibition "Architectural Art: Affirming the Design Relationship" (its opening coincided with the presence of the AIA national convention) and it was curated by architect/architectural historian Robert Jensen. Jensen, who co-authored the book *Ornamentalism: The New Decorativeness in Architecture and Design* (Potter, 1982), proposes that "architectural art" retains its own inherent integrity, emphasizing a dialogue between the work and its setting. This art often has a programmatic basis, such as actually functioning as an architectural element (column, wall, floor, door, etc.), and it may participate in the spatial requirements of a place. Such art is not like traditional ornament, which is meant to enhance the form of a building, and its conceptual underpinnings set it apart from the material programs of postmodernism. In fact, the artists represented largely derive their approaches from the "new tradition" of modern art's abstraction of form.

Reconciliation appears to be somewhat the theme of the exhibition. Early modern architecture in the heroic period of the International Style removed all ornament as an ideological purge, attempting to create the forms of a technological and industrialized society. This eliminated the skilled craftsman,

whose role had been to produce ornamental programs from a traditional language of conventions. The "modern artist" also emerged, with a burden of constant individual creativity, what has been characterized as the "anxiety of influence." What "Architectural Art" proposes is the positive benefit of collaboration between architects and artists, and in some cases, fabricators (craftsmen).

The exhibition is organized in four sections: a historical preface of examples from New York, such as Rockefeller Center; work by eleven artists; four sites, both exterior and interior; and four "regional" collaborations from young artists and architects. The historical examples, spanning from 1900 to the early 1970s, would suggest a seminal basis for architectural art. A metal screen by Harry Bertoia of the mid-1950s seems closest to the mark, while Tiffany's windows somewhat muddy its definition; the Rockefeller Center works recall the WPA period, which is in itself another analogy. If the artists themselves were not inherently interested in expanding beyond the gallery or studio venue, then "art in public places" from recent corporate/developer or "one percent for art" government mandates have created new opportunities as they did in the Depression. The contemporary artists generally succeed in validating the exhibition's premise, from Scott Burton's granite "boulder" chairs, or Richard Haas's more literal works (puns, almost), to Muriel Castanis's figurative pieces that sit well in Burgee and Johnson's PoMo 580 California Street, or Stephen Antonakos's neon piece for Harrison & Abramovitch's Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, executed 25 years after the building, which literally teaches an old dog new tricks.

Houstonians will note Albert Paley's pylons and hardware for the Wortham Theater Center, pieces which likewise compensate for a missing level of detail. The "sites" section includes the extensive exterior spaces of New York's Battery Park City, the festive range of elements for the Rainbow Room, and the stations for Detroit's People Mover System, which include several tile works executed by Diana Kulisek in regional Pewabic pottery. In addition, James Carpenter's minimalist chancel window for Edward Larrabee Barnes's Christian Theological Seminary Chapel show how integrated a work may be yet still exert a powerful presence which expands the architect's initial intention.

The four collaborations close out the exhibition; the architect/artist teams were given a specific budget and a volume 8-by-8-by-8 feet. The "program" was for an enclosure, although no project review was held previous to installation; other specific instructions included the capacity to be installed and relocated easily. A videotape interview with each of the teams, part of the overall exhibition installation, is interesting as it shares with the visitor a view into the collaborations, and similar misgivings expressed among them. Among these are a feeling by the architects that there wouldn't be enough constraint, and among the artists that there might be too much.

California's Frederick Fisher and Tony Berlant's *Earthquake Shelter* (fabricated by Pamela Burgess) is a construction in almost two scales; a "normal" bed is skewed or sheared from the footrest of an oversized drafting table (on which sits a little house). The South's Clark & Menefee with artist Judith Morrill Hanes's *Chapel* more literally evokes the volumetric context, providing a

mysterious mini-labyrinth room, executed in two lovely finishes of copper, providing a setting for stiffened fabric pieces. New York's Tod Williams and Billie Tsien and Mary Miss's *Telephone Booths* is a mandala-like kiosk (with functioning pay telephones) executed in nearly unfinished wood (fabricated by Steven Iino) and metal (fabricated by Petar Jevremov). The Southwest is represented by Rice University's Peter Waldman (an associate professor of architecture), the University of Houston's Christopher Genik (an assistant professor of architecture), and Edward Wilson (who teaches in the Department of Art & Art History at Rice). Originally entitled (according to the video) *Three Transformations or Totem to Tomb*, the piece was to be three separate elements, but the pragmatics of execution resulted in a single object, *A Spatial Tale of Origin*. A light wood and metal box, open like a kind of drawbridge ramp, contains a mechanistic element activated by sand; this is "enclosed" by a large-scale wheel, with exposed pieces that appear as gears or gyroscopic components. Its static presentation in the exhibition belies the obvious dynamic possibilities of the piece (it solves the question of mobility, certainly); unfortunately, it also demands space around it and has wound up cramped in its setting. Most of the pieces exhibit aspects of fabrication, with connections generally expressed. The Waldman-Genik/Wilson piece has a slight elaborated frenzy about its pieces (one of the wittiest being an array of 48 peepholes used as "rivets"), while the Williams-Tsien/Miss piece is perhaps the most lovingly considered set of connections (since its components were fabricated in two places and brought together). The Fisher-Berlant and Waldman-Genik/Wilson pieces remain as art objects, however; although the former is "spatial," its overscaled metaphor contributes to its being a kind of large toy, while the latter's imploded energy makes it an object in space. While the



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Right: "Totem to Taboo" by Peter Waldman, Chris Genik and Edward Wilson; left: "Chapel" by W.G. Clarke

Clark-Menefee/Hanes piece approaches art as architecture, the Williams-Tsien/Miss kiosk succeeds in reading both as object and as enclosure; its fearless use of Bell Telephone hardware may be the critical element of realism that fuses the crossover.

As an antidote to the decorated nostalgia festooning recent American architecture, the possibilities of "Architectural Art" suggest that an approach more based in the heritage of modern experimentation is an alternative to expanding the material, representational, and aesthetic properties of the built environment.

The exhibition will be shown at the Trammell Crow Center in Dallas from 4 November to 30 December 1988. The New York-focused historical section will not travel. ■

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A View From Brooklyn, 1954. Photograph by Rudy Burckhardt.

## Rudy Burckhardt A Survey, Photographs from 1937-1985

*DiverseWorks, Houston*  
27 February - 2 April 1988

Reviewed by Joanne Lukitsh

*See with photographs, you can do... The same day you can take a conventional composition, and you can take a wild anti-composition. It's very easy with a camera you know... You can jump from one mode almost immediately to another. You can take a photograph like Titian, another like Van Gogh, another like Mondrian - all in the same day... That's why photography is slightly unsatisfactory, because it's too quick, too instantaneous in some ways, unless you get something special.* - Rudy Burckhardt<sup>1</sup>

Rudy Burckhardt's preference for the pleasures of the camera's representational options over the achievement of a distinctive authorial style has contributed to his relative obscurity within standard histories of photography. *DiverseWork's* exhibition (as part of Houston's FotoFest) of a survey of Burckhardt's photographs (initiated by Phillip Lopate, who contributed an essay in appreciation of Burckhardt's work) introduced Burckhardt to both local and national audiences and gave a sense of his work in the context of New York City artistic culture since the late 1930s.

In 1935, at the age of 21, Swiss-born Burckhardt moved to New York City with Edwin Denby, later a dance critic, poet, and great admirer of Burckhardt's work. Initially astonished at the difference in scale between buildings and people in the streets of New York City, Burckhardt took two years before beginning to photograph the city, using both a view camera and a hand-held Leica. He began to make 16-mm films in 1937, and studied painting after wartime military service. A member of the Photo League, for 25 years Burckhardt made his living

photographing artists and art works for New York City galleries. The *DiverseWorks* survey included Burckhardt's photographs from in and outside of New York City, a selection of his portraits of artists, including members of the New York School, and the reinstallation of a collaboration (originally displayed at the Gotham Book Mart) sequencing his photographs around a poem by Denby.

Burckhardt's subject matter - commercial signs, New York City buildings, architectural details, people in the street - is related to the work of such photographic contemporaries as Walter Evans and Bernice Abbott. But Burckhardt's difference from the social referencing of their documenting projects is suggested by his pleasure at moving from the Titian to the Van Gogh mode, from anti- to conventional composition. Burckhardt understood photographic instantaneity as a metaphor for perception, for artistic value. In this regard, Burckhardt's initial astonishment at the difference in scale between building and people in New York City, a disparity he initially resolved by taking street-level views and later, building and street, is telling. In the best of Burckhardt's photographs, particularly in the images montaged with Denby's poems, he represents the passages of pedestrians and city spaces animated, rather than suffocated, by surrounding architecture and light. ■

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Conversations with Rudy Burckhardt About Everything*, New York: Vehicle Editions, 1987.

# Quisie's

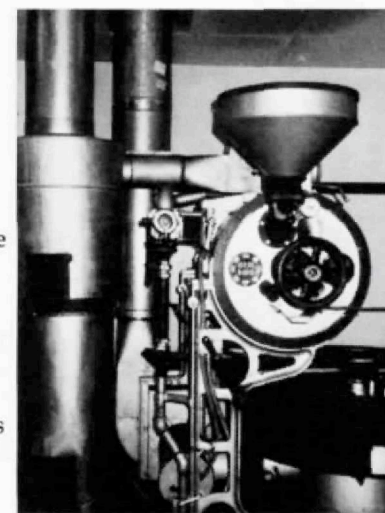
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