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Monumental/ Conceptual Architecture

The Art of Being Too Clever By Half, by **MARK KINGWELL**

Daniel Libeskind, now in the public eye for his World Trade Center winning design proposal, is also the muse behind a less spectacular project, the three-year, $150-million renovation—or "renaissance"—of the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto. In both designs Libeskind has shown himself a master of high-profile success. The ROM project especially, a striking crystalline structure, is a good example of the sort of mutation that a recent vogue for spectacular architecture, often for museums, has created. These projects—Frank Gehry's Bilbao Guggenheim, of course; Eisenman's Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University and Galician Cultural Center in Santiago de Compostela; Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin—have an influence disproportionate to their number, becoming the focus of much recent nonacademic (and much academic) debate about architecture.

This is not surprising. Their position astride major public spaces makes such projects highly visible. Like all urban architecture, they belong to everyone, including future generations. In many cases, they are driven by form rather than content. The Bilbao Guggenheim, for example, was not built to house or display an existing collection—there is none—but as a $100-million, 256,000-square-foot end in itself. The Galician Centre, with a projected cost of $125-million and 810,000 square feet, also has no existing collection, selling itself instead on basis of its 173-acre mountaintop site and Eisenman's thrusting stone walls that one commentator describes as looking "as if they were pushed right up through the earth."[1] All these projects and others of even more recent vintage—Diller + Scofidio's

Museum of Contemporary Art in Boston and their Blur Building on Lake Neuchatel at Yverdon-les-Bains, Switzerland—share a penchant for what we might agree to call the "monumental-conceptual." Many of the now-familiar architectural stars were first celebrated in a 1988 show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, assembled by Philip Johnson and guided by Eisenman, a show that marked a development of Modernism from within its own radical wings. Gehry, Libeskind, and Eisenman were joined in it by Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Bernard Tschumi, and Wolf Prix of Coop Himmelblau.

Monumental-conceptual architecture, as I shall use the term, is not to be confused with simple theoretical architecture. Waves of theory-driven architecture are hardly new, with ideas borrowed liberally from fashionable philosophical works emanating mainly from Paris, Bologna, and Berlin—think of Eisenman's use of Chomsky, Derrida, and Vattimo; Tschumi's debt to Debord and the Situationists; Diller + Scofidio's Lacanian probes; everyone's use of Heidegger and Benjamin.[2] From the admittedly judgmental perspective of professional philosophy, such "theory" architects and, especially, their lesser acolytes appear to be intellectual magpies, distracted by anything shiny and new. But at least their debts were, in most cases, openly stated; and if a Deconstructionist building or Deleuzian blob-and-fold structure was less interesting in reality than in theory, well, so what? We could note the theory, judge the building, and move on.

The newest large-scale works pose a different problem. Though Johnson's 1988 show purported to group Gehry, Koolhaas, Libeskind, and the rest under the banner of deconstructionist literary theory, in fact the group is united only in its facility with ideas and subsequent success, especially in highly contested museum commissions. With overt theory-debts now out of fashion, architects of the first order have taken to selling their game in terms of concepts rather than theories—a sketch or simulacrum of theory, a theory of theory, where ideas are often unmoored and scattered (also, to be fair, sometimes brilliant and bold). Theory/concept is a fine distinction, yes, but its essence is a matter of responsibility. Theory, whatever else it does, makes demands: of coherence, of consistency in application. Concepts, as I shall use the term, and the monumental-conceptual architecture they allow, are freefloating and undemanding, such that the mere play of ideas, the juggling of concepts, is seen as a sufficient justification, an end in itself.

The question then becomes: are the monumental-conceptual works living up to the responsibility of public money and public attention or do they verge toward con games, feeding the self-indulgence of a new breed of installation artists—architects as seers? To answer that question we must not only examine current architecture but also take a stroll through the early days of conceptual art, an important enabling condition for the latest generation of big-name architects.

I should immediately confess a complicated interest in the topic, especially as it relates to Libeskind and his ROM reconstruction in Toronto. I am chair of the ROM's Institute for Contemporary Culture (ICC), a semi-autonomous body within the museum. The ROM, founded from a private collection and first opened to the public in 1914, is one of Canada's most important cultural institutions, roughly equivalent, for Canada, to the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Its two neoclassical wings, built of warm Ontario sandstone and brick and adorned by grand optimistic slogans and friezes, occupy an enviable corner of downtown real estate. Libeskind's design will remove the undistinguished stack of 1970s-vintage pebbledash slabs that currently sits uneasily between the two original buildings, parallel to each other on a north-south orientation. Indeed, the resulting middle space was the focus of all the submissions, since the original wings are to be preserved. Proposed solutions ranged from a huge cantilevered roof with gallery space actually inside it to a kind of domed-shed design that would have made the ROM resemble the world's largest Quonset hut.

The ROM was organized to be both a fine art and a natural history museum, a condition that has proven tricky, to say the least, in terms of allocation of space and curatorial resources. Navigating the internal politics of the ROM is work of mandarin complexity, and the choice of Libeskind as the architect of its largest-ever renovation (I was only peripherally involved in this choice) was rife with controversy both inside and outside the museum. The new ICC, meant to link the old ROM and the wider reaches of contemporary culture, including art, film, fashion, architecture, and design, secured some prime real estate in the scramble for space in the museum's upcoming construction. It will have a dedicated gallery, its first ever, in one of Libeskind's sprouting crystal excrescences. These massive shards of glass and steel will hang out over the museum's currently neglected frontage on Bloor Street, Toronto's main upscale shopping area. Our gallery is a soaring cathedral space with no vertical walls and potential acoustical problems; but it will be a beautiful room and a foundation for the ICC's future growth. The plans also show that it is right next to a projected split-level bar and restaurant that will pleasantly look out over the University of Toronto's neogothic spires and the little ravine known as Philosopher's Walk.

The process by which this design came into being has become notorious and, while distinct from the result, nevertheless indicates the intellectual space of the monumental-conceptual. Libeskind settled on the crystalline entity in what has become a legendary act of bravura. Unlike the other short-listed firms—which included Italy's Andrea Bruno and Vancouver-based local favorite Bing Thom—Libeskind offered no plans or models. Instead, he briefly toured the museum, went to the in-house restaurant,

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grabbed a handful of large paper napkins, and swiftly produced six rough charcoal sketches. These were displayed in Lucite frames beside the elaborate elevations and table-sized models of the other, less inspired submissions.

Libeskind later said that the crystal idea came to him suddenly, prompted by a case containing geodes, which he passed in the ROM's geology displays, though cynics have pointed out that his design for the renovation of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London is remarkably similar. Perhaps lightning does strike twice, but the possibility of a lazy rehashing at once exposes and removes the conceptual basis for the design. Libeskind's practice is to find an idea rooted in the relevant site and expand it to building dimensions. The zigzagging walls and grim steel cladding of the Jewish Museum are modeled on the barbed-wire fences of concentrations camps, for example. The ROM concept attempts to link the building with its collections, crystal to crystal, but the idea is both conceptually weak (the museum's geology holdings don't dominate) and creatively suspect (does the V&A also have geodes prominently displayed between its entrance and restaurant?).

Since the competition, the design has been severely modified. The project engineers, a group of stolid Manchester problem-solvers, announced that the original glass design was impressive but unfortunately in violation of the laws of physics. Glass was anyway a poor choice to withstand the nasty Toronto winters, and it would expose rare artifacts to excessive sunlight. The crystals were shrunk and simplified. They will now be clad in metal with small slashes of inset windows. Meanwhile, overall gallery footage will not exceed the current cramped interior allocation and may even reduce it, leaving the museum's curatorial staff understandably disgruntled. Architectural savants may consider them philistines, but the curators have problems with non-vertical walls and exposure to variable humidity. These issues have not disappeared in the flurry of publicity over the new building, any more than they have at Libeskind's other monumental museums—his only two completed buildings so far—the Jewish Museum and the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester. The former, zinc-clad, offers lightning bolt window slashes and disturbing, sharp, dead-end spaces. It is not a house of artifacts or even of memory, rather what one critic calls "an abstract chamber of horrors," including a thirteen-foot-wide, building-high void in its center to symbolize the absence of murdered Jews.[3]

In both his buildings and his methods, then, Libeskind—like Gehry and Koolhaas, Tschumi and Hadid—is emblematic of recent monumental-conceptual architecture's tendencies to fuse personal style with distinctive silhouettes (or, in the case of Koolhaas, distinctive books and interiors). Personality can seem as important as buildings. We have been told that the latest celebrity architects are the new rock stars, but in fact they are more like artists. They are not theorists, exactly, yet they have seen the influence of Theory and absorbed its useful bafflegab. (Gehry, vocally antitheory, is an exception; but such hostility is a habitual conceptual art move, too.) They know that massive public buildings can no longer be sold on solid technical principles alone; there must also be a frisson of Bright Ideas, architecture as a dashing intellectual exercise with a twist of self-promotion.

To say this is decidedly not to cast down any and all theoretical architecture, of course. There is ever a balance to be struck between theory and practice. It used to be that the highest expression of architectural purity was drawing a building that would never be built, say in Neil Denari's mode of "visionary" works of unbuilt architecture, almost a form of pure mathematics, that illustrate ideas from (as it might be) Deleuze and Guattari, Heisenberg, or Gödel.[4] Not surprisingly, such moves proved influential with the most impressionable members of any profession: its students. The popsicle-cool architecture majors I knew during graduate school at Yale designed underground shopping malls with a single door or houses accessible only from the roof. These drawings might be published, but that was as much as the rising young architects desired. Building was for the crude, a ham-fisted exercise in compromise, and Howard Roark would never have been forced to dynamite anything if he'd just stuck to publishing drawings.

It's easy to mock such self-important purism or excuse it as a forgivable tic of the young. After all, we all know that architecture is about building things, and drawings are tools, not ends. But of course it is never that simple. A drawing may embody as many revolutionary notions and prompt as much significant reaction as a built form—indeed, may do far more, given how many merely banal buildings we are forced to live with. Intellectual purism, meanwhile, may also take many forms, not all of them so forgivable as youthful excess or as limited in effect as a drawing published in a scholarly journal. The hallmark of monumental-conceptual architecture is that its Bright Ideas are realized at full scale and huge public expense, often buttressed by some gifted fast-talking.

To be sure, this can be hard to resist. In a recent talk on "The Architecture of Meaning," sponsored by the ICC, Libeskind addressed an audience of 500-plus at the ROM and spun a weird extemporaneous web of words and theories, rambling and vivid, which had the effect of thaumaturgy. He mentioned Celan, Dickinson, Shakespeare, Derrida, and the Marx Brothers—but not, for all his evident debts to him, Heidegger. He compared architecture to music, to fire, to time, to human consciousness. He rejected the idea of a unified theory of meaning and a unified theory of architecture. His presentation was literally mesmerizing, in that one felt held, then released, by a sort of hypnotic intellectual gaze, and emerged with no clear sense of what had transpired.

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Libeskind told some good stories, indicative of how monumental-conceptual architecture secures commissions and works in practice. Bidding for the WTC commission, he asked to be taken down into the excavated Ground Zero site—something he says no other architect did—and looked up. Immediately he called his studio in Berlin and told them to tear up all their preliminary drawings: the entire project would have to be reconceived from this subterranean perspective. In Switzerland, competing for a shopping mall contract, Libeskind recalled watching "Room Service," the 1938 Marx Brothers romp in which Groucho and company take over a department store and make it their combined home and club, subverting the logic of shopping. The clients, he says, gave him the job without further ado, without a single drawing being created, even on a napkin. They knew that, thinking this way, Libeskind would produce a place people would want to visit; the shopping would look after itself. So, for that matter, would the building. The bright idea is everything.

But here's the trouble with bright ideas: sometimes they're not flashes of insight or challenging sallies, just highwire waffling, often in the service of the current arrangement. The shopping mall commission provides an excellent example. The Marx Brothers would have been dismayed to know they were enlisted in a project to facilitate shopping, not mock it. Instead of undermining consumerism's dominance, Libeskind's scheme merely gives it new gloss, supplying a sheen of cleverness to probably the most pervasive fact of life in the First World. The only subversion here is the subversion of satirical energy entailed by borrowing, then reversing the polarity of a much more hard-won and authentic comic genius. Disconnected ideas may impress the clients, but they are not honest if their awkward implications are left unpursued, if their critical effect is neutralized by glibness. The discipline of linear thinking, following the demands of logic, isn't just hard work one might or might not care for; it's a political responsibility, especially when there are obvious public consequences, so that (at a minimum) subversion isn't sold back to us as commodity, or mere plausible facility taken as genius. In fact, another name for those sly moves is propaganda, once wisely defined by the classicist Francis Cornford as "that branch of the art of lying which consists in very nearly deceiving your friends without quite deceiving your enemies."[5] But now we can never be quite sure who is a friend and who an enemy, because distinctions tend to run together when mere cleverness is sufficient to secure the job.

Toronto audiences, though usually polite, can be hardheaded. In the question-and-answer period following his talk, Libeskind faced various challenges. (Because I was selecting the questions from submitted index cards, I was able to weed out a few outright hostile ones, such as "How did you get so good at fooling your clients?") It was clear that many people were less than thrilled about the design, though often enough intrigued and provoked by it too. But provoked how? The design is neither revolutionary nor witty. It sits oddly in the current urban fabric but without really challenging or recasting the surrounding skyline. It's just there, already something of a mere novelty, whose value will wear off more quickly than its remaining windows will be scored by winter salt and acid snow. There is nothing truly shocking here, none of the invigorating disdain of a theorist such as Eisenman, say, who refused to alter dangerous, ankle-breaking staircases in one building so that people "would never take stairs for granted again."[6] In a familiar paradox of recent monumental-conceptual architecture, like Gehry's "Bilbao-Lite" projects in Seattle and Cleveland, the building is difficult without being interesting.

I dwell on Libeskind here because his project is close to my interests, but also because he exposes most clearly the intellectual tendencies of current public building on a grand scale. And the ROM project shows, more than any other current major building, how monumental-conceptual architecture shares the problem of evanescent novelty with conceptual art. Indeed, conceptual art is an important enabling condition of the current architectural scene. Without the pioneering slyness and precedent of clever self-promotion in the Seth Seigelraub stable of 1960s New York post-Pop artists, today's architectural highwire artists would probably not exist or function in the global limelight. In a new book, art historian Alexander Alberro usefully unearths the roots of conceptualism in American art. Seigelraub, an accomplished impresario, successfully packaged Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, Sol LeWitt, Douglas Huebler, Carl Andre, Robert Barry, and Joseph Kosuth, and sold them as a new art-world brand.[7] Their group exhibitions at Windham College in upstate New York and at Manhattan venues, from Seigelraub's downtown galleries to the School of Visual Arts, established new norms of intellectual playfulness in an art scene at once moribund and confused.

The various tendencies of these early conceptual gestures resist generalization, but certain common (and now familiar) themes emerge: irreproducibility, occasionality, immateriality, resistance to the "aesthetic fascism" of beauty, the importance of titles for understanding artists' intentions. The groups and subgroups considered by Alberro were responsible for many groundbreaking moves in conceptual art. Their works included lined-up bales of hay, grids laid over fields, chunks of plaster removed from gallery walls. Titles and descriptions took on new importance, overshadowing, even contradicting, the "works" themselves. Ads or mock contracts referring to artistic works *became* the works. Often elaborate imperative or passive-voice instructions—"A can of aerosol paint is sprayed for exactly two minutes six inches from the floor"—defined the projects, making their actual

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execution more and more irrelevant. Indeed, the primary information of the piece was not just supplemented but eventually dominated by the secondary information of the concept suggested, allowed, by the object. Art shed its bonds in beauty or even the visual. First it became text (Wolfe's "painted word"), then eschewed even text, real or implied, to become pure idea: a free-floating non-material concept in theory available to anyone and everyone, anywhere and everywhere. In theory and as theory.

Artists in the Seigelraub stable indulged in much play, again now familiar, with logical contradictions and visual paradoxes. Perhaps the most emblematic works are those in the series by Kosuth called "Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)," which comprise wall-mounted black slabs inscribed with dictionary definitions of key words (*water*, *painting* . . .) and of the word *nothing* as given by various dictionaries. Kosuth here mixes everyday experiences (the dictionary definition) with the expectations of the arid traditional gallery space, where we expect to see not definitions of *water* but representations of it, not the word *painting* but paintings. In the array of *nothing* slabs, the thought is deepened: we can define *nothing* but only at the cost of tangling ourselves in paradox. (As the definition of *nothing* in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has it, "Nobody has a lot to say about nothing; but then, he would.") Kosuth's visual flirtation with self-reference and revealing paradox is typical of this first generation of conceptual artist—unfortunately typical, we might say, since "Titled (Art as Idea as Idea)" soon collapses—the little joke at its center is too quickly "got," and the air of intelligence too quickly dispersed. It becomes pretentious, not provocative.

The celebrated Xerox Book show, which Seigelraub organized in 1968, presents a similar series of logical tangles, a main route of exploration for this generation of conceptual artists. Each of the seven artists, including Weiner, LeWitt, and Andre, was allowed a series of 8.5 x 11-inch sheets of paper. Whatever they produced would be xeroxed and displayed in cheesy plastic-sleeve binders, the whole show intended to exhibit a democratic and anti-elitist accessibility. Xerox was chosen precisely for its then-novel combination of cutting-edge technology and in-practice poor reproductive quality—an intoxicating duality for antiestablishment aristocrats of the art world. An attendant irony was that the cost of xeroxing the Xerox Book was prohibitively high, and so the mechanical reproduction that was supposed to undermine the auratic uniqueness of the displayed works was carried out by old-fashioned offset printing. The casual reproduction techniques of Xeroxing created works that looked casual but were, in practice, as unique and irreproducible as any art object of the traditional fetish sort.

More than that, though the works are as self-consciously downmarket as the presentation, "aesthetic fascism" nevertheless creeps back into the binders in the form of incidental beauty. Carl Andre's sheets, xeroxes of wooden blocks dropped semi-randomly onto the machine's glass surface, are casually gorgeous, their power a result of a virtuoso combination of material and talent. Lawrence Weiner's graph paper maps and scribbles, by the same token, though accompanied by his usual explicit codes and instructions, rise above words and overtake them. They are, quite simply, beautiful, not because of the ideas set out in the accompanying text but despite them. In both cases, very traditional norms of composition, balance, and significant form are involved. We see the play of possibility within constraint that is a hallmark of all art, and in addition feel the compulsion of art that both uses and reflects on its medium—without falling into the trap of other contributors to this project, who make reflection on the medium their sole concern. Conceptual art can be strong only when the concepts are subordinate to the art rather than dominant.

Hence the central paradox of all conceptual art, a far more important one than the usual problems of self-imposed exile, wherein artists cast themselves out of one art establishment simply by taking up residence in another, and elitism, whereby works intended to break the monopoly of art end up being far more forbidding and inaccessible than any mainstream museum show. No, the fundamental paradox is that conceptual art fails just to the extent that it succeeds, and vice versa. If the works are visually beautiful and compelling, if they excite a prehensile wonder that cannot be translated into or reduced to words, they reward our interest but violate the artist's intentions. If the work fades and the ideas obtrude, on the other hand, then the work risks self-annihilation, disappearing in a puff of zero-degree smoke. Or, as Jean Baudrillard nicely put it, "xerox-degree" smoke.[8] The work is no longer necessary, and the only logical outcome of this thinking is a series of nonshows in nonlocations featuring nonworks. That endgame would be embraced by serious conceptualists, of course, but then their work (and the work) is done—art is over. But art is not over, and conceptual art embraced by the art world loses its original critical purchase (which was never large) and becomes the main stream. Works continue to be shown, naturally, but they are no longer comprehensible or interesting without the backing ideas of the catalogue essay and critical intervention. The Canadian artist Ian Carr-Harris, for example, a darling of contemporary art, offers works such as a table of old books, all stamped with the title *Index*, that surrender their meaning (the variability of meaning—what else?) only in the accompanying text.

We might dismiss the first generation of conceptual artists as silly Sixties-style rebels, more angry than bright, but their influence is too pervasive to bracket so easily, and their original ideas too apposite. The cult of the beautiful and the institutional pathologies of the big-gallery art world

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are ever in need of critical tweaking. But the succeeding generations have not improved on the original thoughts or resolved the ongoing paradox of presentation. The contemporary art world is still dominated by their nostrums of immateriality, anti-establishment posturing, and—too often—undergraduate thought. Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger, still more Tracy Emin or the Chapman Brothers, are celebrated for presenting ideas, but those ideas are neither unsettling nor new. In some cases, as with Emin, provocation itself is made empty, since she (unlike a genuinely disturbing artist such as Damien Hirst or Mark Prent) merely rides a wave of critical dismay: in a way, she is provocative not for being outrageous but for being outrageous in her claims of provocation.

In a sense, this continuing influence of banalized conceptualism is a problem of level-jumping, Hegelian dialectics run riot: instead of remaining at the level of sensuous realization of The Idea, as Hegel argued art must, these artists are trying to become philosophers, getting their art not only to embody ideas but also to speak them. While understandable—even in Hegel's terms, previous realizations of the truth tend to push upward, aiming at purer manifestation—this is a mug's game, because it is precisely the concrete sensuousness of the work that makes it art. Art may *point to* philosophy, but it cannot *become* it—not, at least, without sailing close to the wind of irrelevancy, since the work would thereby destroy itself. One can either follow through on the logic of conceptualism and become a philosopher, or one can ignore it and remain an artist. (There is, to be sure, a continuum of human expression about what it means to be here that embraces both artistic and philosophical efforts, and each can contain some measure of the other.)

There are interesting figures at the margins, whose work enacts an ongoing debate about the demarcation and even validity of the art-philosophy distinction: we might think here of the later Heidegger, say, whose thoughts about art and poetry acquire, through a hard search for reiterable philosophical truth, a unique artistic and poetic quality; or the raging incandescence of Nietzsche or Thoreau, who write with their feelings burning and images sharp. (It is perhaps no surprise that all three figures, plus others of the same proclivity, are not considered "serious" philosophers by the mandarins of the academic world.) From the other side, from the poet Rilke, we observe a thrilling marriage of images and ideas, the unimprovable expression of ideas that trouble as well as move us. No philosopher, no matter how talented, could hope to delve any deeper into the human condition. But of course poetry is text and therefore avoids the hard cases of visual-textual combat that the term "conceptual art" usually evokes. And in conceptual art, the distinction between art and philosophy reasserts itself despite all forms of play attempting to undermine it. Art without concrete sensuous presentation is text. And art whose concrete sensuous presentation is baffling without text is playing with ideas without really thinking them.

You may say: just another turf war between art and philosophy, more of what Arthur Danto called "Platonic aggression" against makers of images.[9] "You make the pretty pictures, and leave the thinking to us!" But I am not a Hegelian, confident that philosophy has higher *geistlich* truths to communicate; nor would I, like Plato, confine art to mimesis. Plato himself appeared to fall into contradiction, offering masterpieces of imaginative art that argue the inferiority of imaginative art—a contradiction acknowledged implicitly in the palinodic discussion of *The Phaedrus* and openly in the deathbed dialogue of *The Phaedo*. In the former, the Socratic arguments in the first half against the emotional appeal of rhetoric and poetry are subtly undermined by an extended poetic appeal to love in the second. In the latter, the condemned cobbler-turned-philosopher Socrates allows, apparently as an afterthought, that he would have enjoyed making music instead of just shoes and arguments. Nietzsche seizes on this stray remark with typical ferocity, saying that what we really need is not the arid rationalism of the Socratic method, dedicated to truth, but the lightness of "a music-making Socrates" dedicated, presumably, to Truth.

And yet, and yet—there is a grain of truth here, in that art's power to excite wonder is, and should be, qualitatively different from philosophy's. They may often be related, as when a powerful work calls forth a train of thought impossible otherwise or situates one suddenly in a world of meaning, "lifting a corner of the veil," as Einstein said of numbers. Wonder has many sources and occasions, including natural ones. But the special status enjoyed by art, much disputed though it is, rests finally on its artificial and sensuous arousal of "rapt attention," to use Heidegger's phrase. It opens a clearing of thought and feeling. The mistake at the heart of too much conceptual art is its lack of openness, the implicit project of intellectual control, as if ideas could always be prethought and precaptured. The work is not allowed to be simply the work, and the result is not an act of philosophical aggression against art but an act of aesthetic aggression against us—not playfulness but its simulacrum, not possibility but manipulation.

Naturally, even this claim is a little crude, for it does not account for the important exceptions to these generalizations. Everyone has their own lists, but mine would include works by Yoko Ono and her Fluxus Movement colleagues, funny and moving pieces from John Cage, Ad Reinhardt, and Joseph Beuys, contemporary works by Liz Magor, Walter de Maria, and James Turrell. A Cage video included in the 2000 Whitney Biannual, for example, was a deceptively simple success: an extended "talk-show" sequence, complete with cheesy set and back-and-forth camera cuts, in which the "host" and "guest" did nothing

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but stare thoughtfully into space. Over thirty minutes, this becomes first hilarious and then unnerving, the grammar and ingested assumptions of televisual "debate" exposed with deft precision and silence. Contrast that with, say, Jeff Koons's giant metal sculpture of an inflatable rabbit or Matthew Barney's Cremaster films, both included in the same show, which seem to have little point beyond their surface cleverness and some impressive technical skill. It is not that one work "translates" well and the others don't; rather that one has something to say that could not be said otherwise, and the others are showy and "smart" but empty.

Such lists could go on, not least because good art of ideas (to use a phrase decisively distinct from *conceptual art*), which enlarges thought through the sensuous excitation of wonder, is to be found in many places, almost despite the influence of crude conceptualism. Claims for "good art," when particular, are inherently controversial. I find Fluxus collections of mislabeled ephemera and strange functionless tools compelling and somehow emotional, as evocative as Joseph Cornell boxes; others will see pretension and obscurity. I think Jeff Wall's photographs of unkempt bedrooms or bestrewn workspaces offer subtle intuition about the banality of appearances; others think they are themselves banal. The making of such lists and debates about which works belong on them and why are matters for appreciation and rigorous critical debate, not philosophy. The main philosophical point—and the only valid one that can be made in general—is that aesthetic success hinges on how much the work opens up, rather than closes down, the spaces of thought and wonder.

Which brings us back to architecture and its peculiar tensions as concept. Here the stakes are higher (buildings obtrude on everyday life more than artworks) and the conceptual tangles more complicated. As with conceptual art, there is always a creeping danger that a bright idea is really just a piece of fleeting self-importance, that the apparently virtuoso intellectual play that seemed diverting at first will seem limp at last. When the circus leaves town for the next show and the excitement dies down, we still have to live and work in idea-buildings. We have to hang things on walls and clean windows and preserve brittle artifacts. Above all, we have to walk by and in the building, look at it, accept it, try to bring it into our everyday lives. Monumental-conceptual architecture, though compelling and inescapable, is too often a form of prestidigitation. A fleeting feeling of wonder, perhaps, but then, like the joke we already know or the trick we've seen before . . . poof. □

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NOTES

1. Jayne Merkel, "The Museum as Artifact," *Wilson Quarterly*, Winter 2002, 67.
2. For the details of these appropriations, see Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997).
3. Merkel, 78.
4. See Neil Denari, *Gyroscopic Horizons: Prototypical Buildings and Other Works* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).
5. Francis Cornford, *Microcosmographia Academica* (Cambridge, England: Bowes & Bowes, 1922), preface.
6. Eisenman on stairs, quoted by Geoffrey Harpham, Tulane Symposium on Architecture and Ethics, Tulane University School of Architecture, 2000; proceedings forthcoming from Spon Press.
7. Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).
8. Quoted in Alberro, 120.
9. Arthur C. Danto, "Dangerous Art," in *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in a Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992), 185 ff.

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