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Letters

Tod Williams

Ricardo Scofidio

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Letters

Tod Williams and Ricardo Scofidio

21 January 1982

Dear Kelly,

Enclosed is a copy of *Window Room Furniture*. As we discussed, it is my belief that exposing this project and the search surrounding it is more appropriate for *Oz* than simply photographs or drawings of my own work. Along with it you will find rough unedited copies of three letters/conversations which Ric Scofidio and I made while attempting to postscript the Exhibit and to write an essay for your magazine. But what happened was that the letters took an unexpected direction — one which we and others found surprising and interesting which has an authenticity which does not wish to be compressed to a singular form. So we hope you can use these as they are; if so, let us know and we will send along necessary footnotes and illustrations.

Best to you,

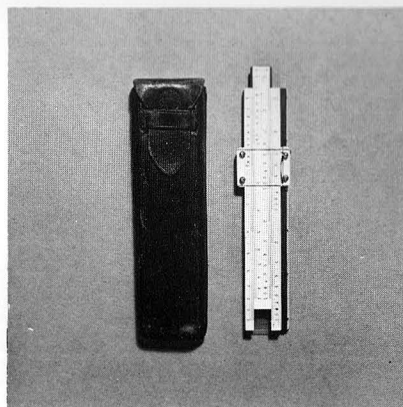
Tod Williams

Letter I
Scofidio to Williams

Friday, 11 December 1981
New York, New York

Tod,
Enclosed is a beginning for that article we want to write. This has been a struggle. Important thoughts still lie locked inside my head. The agony of forming letter into word into sentence makes me want to use this pen to draw and sketch, a language more readily accessible to me. What I have written is presented without the necessary reference to strengthen it. I think it is better to recognize my limits and use my time to make a drawing and to work on something with Elizabeth.¹ If the following is helpful, please use it ... I now understand why DaVinci wrote everything backward and unreadable.

A slide rule, Keuffel and Esser Company. Patent date June 5, 1900 (Figure 1). Logarithmic scales precisely etched into "ivoryite" facings secured to a mahogany stock that was aged for twelve years before being milled. The top hand edge flares into a ruler subdivided into 1/16th's of an inch. The bottom edge is flat and marked with a metric scale. Sliding across the top of the rule is a glass register with frosted edges. This flat glass plate is secured, by four brass round head machine screws, to two blocks of carved ivory which slide in grooves cut into the mahogany stock. On the bottom face of the rule is an insert



1. Keuffel and Esser Company Slide Rule and Case

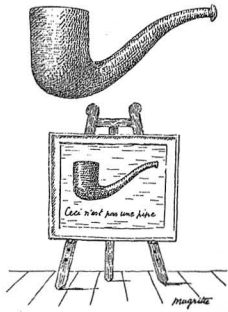
which contains printed conversion tables; gallons to cubic feet, ounces to grammes, etc. Also visible on the bottom face are three blue-steel flathead machine screws. These secure and allow for adjustment of the upper log scale to insure easy movement of the scale that slides between that upper scale and the scale below. The rule can be easily disassembled into thirteen pieces, cleaned and reassembled. The dimensions of this rule are 5-3/8" long by 11/32" thick by 1-1/16" wide. The weight is 3/4 of one ounce. The slide rule fits into a hard all-leather case. The dominant color of the slide rule is white.

An Electronic Calculator. Hewlett Packard - 21 (Figure 2). There is no discernable patent date. The upper face contains 30 push buttons. Ten buttons are sequentially numbered from the bottom edge up. Eighteen buttons are marked with mathematical signs or abbreviations. One



2. Hewlett Packard 21 Calculator with case and charger

button is blue and has no markings. The last button is longer and is imprinted with the word "enter." In addition to the buttons there are two switches. One is bracketed by the words OFF/ON. The other by DEG/RAD. There is a clear plastic face plate covering an area which contains a 12-digit light-emitting diode display. Power necessary to make the calculator function is supplied by two rechargeable AA nickel-cadmium batteries contained within. The battery recharger is a separate unit 2-1/16" by 2-7/16" by 1-5/8". Its weight is 5 ounces and it has no case for storage. The shell of the calculator and its buttons are a high impact (ABS) moulded plastic. The calculator's dimensions are 5-1/8" long by 13/16" high by 2-11/16" wide. The calculator weighs 5.82 ounces and fits into a vinyl, imitation fur lined, zippered case. The dominant color of the calculator is black.



3. René Magritte

The development of logarithmic scales led to the invention of the slide rule. Those scales are etched into its facing. The calculator's numbers are etched abstractions on "chips" inside a box, linked to external numbered signs. But, "ceci n'est pas une pipe" or a deux, three or four (Figure 3). The numbers represent a combination of zeros and ones. The slide rule, limited visually to the precision of answer, becomes an accurate and poetic presentation of mathematical concept; concepts which are visually denied by the calculator, although its answers define precise. The contrast between the two ask meaningful questions about external, internal, and substance. Substance: physical material, and substance; essence. One being the exterior of the other; "form being substance rendered visible."² To create is to seek essence, to fully comprehend it by stripping a thought to an irreducible quality, and then to render an answer (simple or complex) visible. In etymology image and idea are the same word.

The simultaneous appreciation of the physical and the metaphysical. The interior of the slide rule is metaphysical reflected on its exterior, physical.

Victor Hugo eloquently stated "if there is no substance, of what is form the form? ... if the image excluded the idea, Homer, Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare, who spoke by images alone, would be empty."³ It is those objects that vibrate with both meanings of substance that are important to us.

Ric

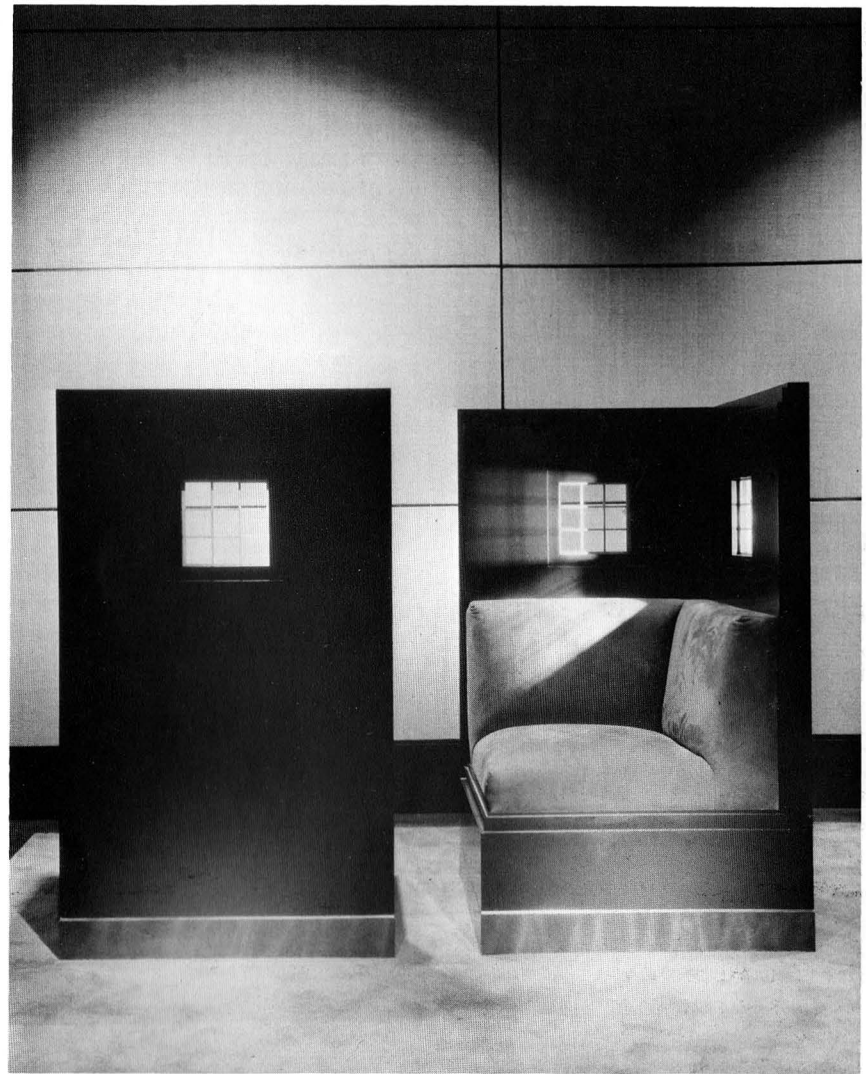
Letter II Williams to Scofidio

Monday, Dec. 14, 1981

Dear Ric,

Your letter/article is terrific. I think you have the beginning of something much larger. Perhaps though, it's nearly complete in itself. Some observations: I had imagined — when you spoke in the hallway about external and internal (metaphor, the slide rule and the calculator) — that suddenly a great deal of work which I appreciate could find itself in one of your categories — overt/covert, open/closed, exposed/hidden. But, after reading your note, I feel afraid that it might be damning — to myself — to others also, but especially myself. Well, it's not a tenable problem — others have it as well, that is, not being able to be substantial in the way you see it. In fact, I know you, Liz, and many others to be better those ways ... being both substantial in the physical/material sense and in the essential.¹ It nearly seems (dare I say it) religious in its apparent condemnation of that which has only one (or less than one) of the two substances. I'm sure this is wrong (my personal baggage). My fears may have a lot to do with not wanting to be judged. In this period of my life, I have chosen to be action-oriented and being judged is terrible hindrance to action. So your article, in my eyes, judges me inferior. But that is what attracts me both to you, your life, Billie and this article.⁶ This is for me a difficult journey — in determining what is elemental and what is essential. That's partly why I teach. I know I'm constantly in the light of judgment, in being judged, and judging.

So, is it in fear or in a search for truth that I ask — what about the rabbit in the hat? — Is that substantial? How does the Asia Society chair fit in, Liz's chair, your lamp, Scott Burton's table, John Hejduk's wall house, his Berlin Masque, and much



4. Asia Society Chair (Tod Williams with Billie Tsien)

(all) of Le Corbusier's work, etc. (Figures 4-8). Can we sort it out? In truth or in fear I ask what this might mean to my very next step. Interrelationships are so messy, can they ever be substantial, or can we say ... it's all relative. Perhaps, haunted by this, it is difficult for you to work. You are/you do/you like to work with those things which are substantial; — is that why it's difficult to take on bigger projects?

A possibility, an out, a hope, which saves one a little from the burning judgment of your notes is that not everything should be substantial in this way. Could we not argue that real substance comes from knowing the difference between the hidden, subconscious world and the open,

conscious world. That life cannot be totally comprised of exposed systems. It is, after all, shown to be a fallacy of modern architecture from Poissy to Beaubourg. All exposed can't actually (nor shouldn't) be done, nor should things be hidden as post-modernism covers the fact of the base of modern architecture and the truth of technology. I read an article this weekend — Marvin Minsky, father of the study of artificial intelligence, says that he believes that the mind has mechanisms (genes) which shut off the storing of information. Adults need this to close out childish overload in later years. "I suspect there is a gene that shuts off that learning mechanism when a child reaches sexual maturity. If there

weren't, parents would learn their children's language, and language itself would not have developed. A tribe in which adults lost their ability to imitate language at sexual maturity would have an evolutionary advantage, since it could develop a continuous culture, in which the communication between adult and child went in the right direction."⁵ My point is that the calculator, unconsciously, but thankfully, is black to shield us from having to know what is inside and why watches with their mechanisms exposed are not essential to us, and why black boxes which hold mystery are good. Why I hope it's our pleasure, our responsibility, our duty to know as much as possible the things which are near us and not demand that all is exposed/that all is expressed. The burden would be too great. So the goal is to know what is and what is not substantial. Our lives can be a combination of the entertaining and the profound. It is for us to orchestrate these things.

Tod

Letter III
Scofidio to Williams

Tuesday, 15 December 1981

Dear Tod,


Thank you for your letter. I don't think our ideas are that far apart.

Watch, Asia Chair, your search, calculator, what I see ... rabbit in the hat.

If you're referring to the "magic" of the rabbit from the hat then I think it's a confirmation of what I wrote. If magic exists, then perhaps a denial — a total and complete denial of "substance" and "substance" — would be the strongest possible statement about its existence.

But, I want to go back over your letter and answer each point. You must understand that you will be reading the thoughts of a repentant sinner (know that much of my life was spent avoiding architecture). Like all sinners, I may be overzealous about my conversion ... perhaps I shall spend the rest of my life trying to make that one perfect object, or in trying to draw on a blank sheet of paper in such a way that the paper may still be seen as a blank sheet with a drawing on it ... but I digress.

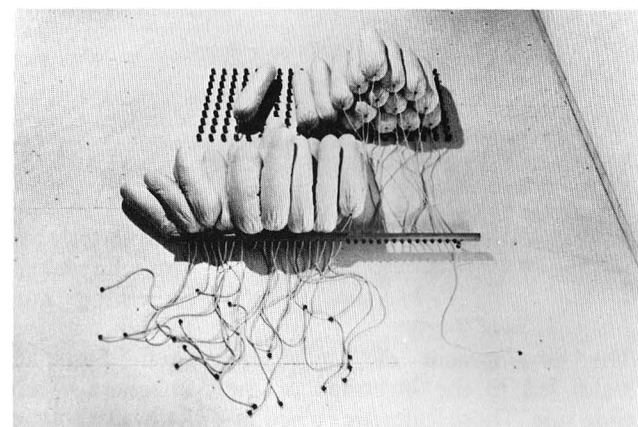
You mention overt/covert, open/closed, exposed/hidden. These words strike to the very heart those ideas that are important. Then you take what I wrote as damning to yourself, your work. That surprised me. I don't know — and here I put pen before thought — I don't know if I can think of any object that doesn't carry the weight of interior and exterior (in all their meanings). Interior expression is not an X-ray or a literal exposure. It is not the watch with the exposed mechanism, but the round watch with a face and markings and three hands, big, little, and second, that captures those qualities expressed in a slide-rule.

I believe that the idea informs and that there can be no built form, (and as I think about it) no natural form, that does not contain idea. It may be entertaining or serious, it may be simple or complex, it may be sacred or profane, and it may be hidden or obvious. Think about the Japanese tying a rope around a stone  to mark the end of a public path ...

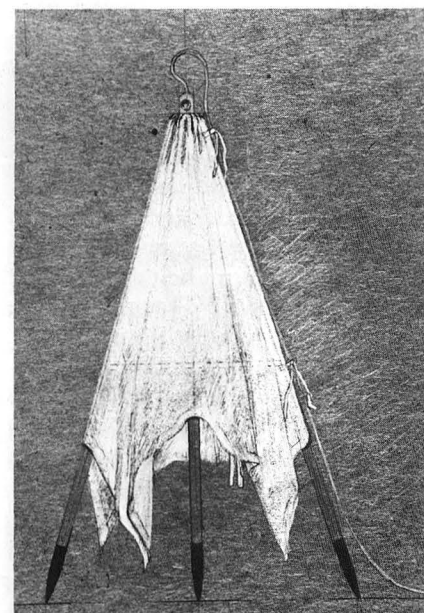
When you write about being action-oriented as some sort of pragmatic virtue and being judged as a detriment to action, then I am concerned about the distance between that which I know you understand and that which you do. This is not a judgment — only a question. I could write a full-page description of the Asia Chair. I know it better than your other work because I live with one chair. Externally it tells me that it is incomplete — a right hand without its left hand. I would know

that without ever seeing two of them together. Although it is externally black, I know its interior is not. I know that it says, "I am a private chair for public places because it is truly in public places that we are at our most private." I know that the Asia Chair belongs with the slide-rule and not the calculator.

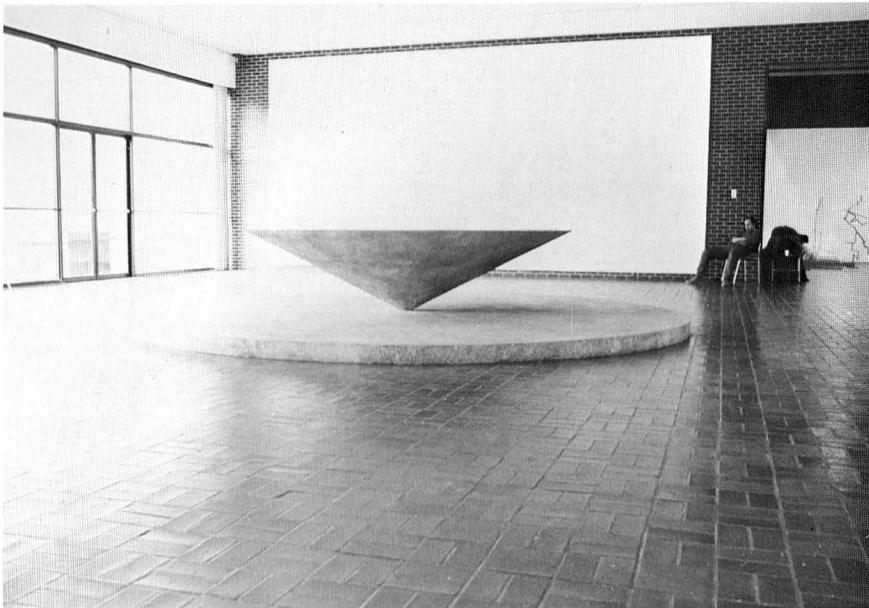
I agree that life is not, cannot be, comprised of what we shall call exposed systems. I am not an adherent of pasting skeletons on the outside of one's skin. I only suggest that true interiority can inform an exterior. I do not suggest that we are always capable of understanding or reading that exterior/interior relationship. No, perhaps further, I wish to not



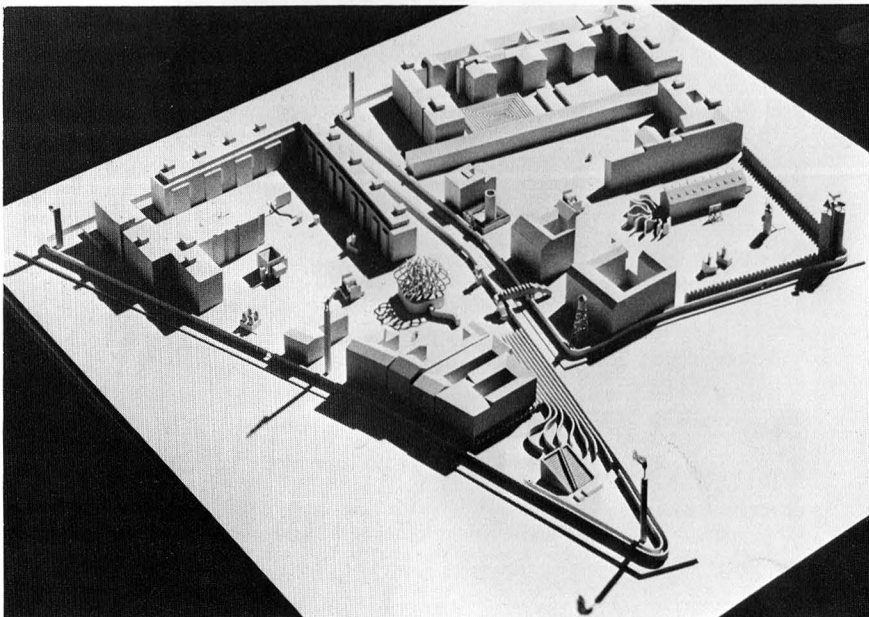
5. Chair (Elizabeth Diller)



6. Lamp (Ricardo Scofidio)



7. Table (Scott Burton) Courtesy of Max Protetch, photo by Scott Burton



8. John Hejduk, Berlin Masque, Model built by Gregory Palestri

split them into two separate entities — i.e. conscious - vs. - subconscious. For me the Ying/Yang symbol would not be a hard curved line within a circle but a shading. And how do you describe subconscious? (Dark can never be represented with the language of light.) What forms my thoughts and words cannot, finally, be written about because

their expression is not with words. And so we make drawings — and we make objects. Interior/exterior is finally only a translation — a reference, a celebration, a moment or a memory — sometimes a communication of agreement and perhaps in that communication we know that interrelationships, are not always messy and there can exist in

art, in architecture, a feeling that we normally attribute to love. A CONNECTION. A verification that what is secret to one is shared or known by another, and perhaps, by many. Unfortunately, as there are books that tell us what makes love good, there are books that tell us what makes architecture good. Thank someone, that there are black boxes which will always hold mystery and Lochness Monsters and now dinosaurs in Africa. But, I refuse to believe that a calculator is a black box which holds a mystery. A calculator is one exterior inside another exterior. Even more than the mystery of a true black box is the mystery of a clear crystal ball. The greatest mystery is in the most transparent! And, I believe that a crystal ball has an incredible interior.

To clarify: Substance; physical material, and substance; essence. One being the exterior of the other; form being substance rendered visible. I didn't say readable or understandable, I only said visible. This touches upon the question of translation and transformation. That which we seek to describe has no visual form — only an essence. Like blind men trying to describe an elephant, that description's validity has become dependent upon a consensus of opinion which we call taste. We can use materials which already carry a "loading" and we use symbols and icons.

I know when I listened to Mozart's "K515" played by the Griller String Quartet with Williams Primrose, or Bach's "Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo" played by Arthur Grumiaux, that my head stops, words stop, all thought ceases and yet, — and yet, I fully understand. It's frightening to have something enter you that you know you understand, but consciously cannot understand — knowing that it is becoming a part of you and affecting your being — that it's a direct plug in, from out there to somewhere inside. Essence talking to essence and you're an idle bystander. How much communication goes on, just like that?

Your architecture has an exterior that operates on my conscious level, engages my eye-brain in agreement or disagreement and makes me look ... and then I see other layers, like the slide-rule, that make me smile. And meanwhile there's a plug into me that's by-passed words and affected who and what I am ... and what I think about architecture.

Yes, perhaps I cannot deal with larger projects. Not because of scale but because I'm still trying to understand those smaller complex identities. But that is my personal preference and not a judgment. My danger is to become so uncertain that I cannot make a decision. Like the Navajo Indians, I know there is never a possibility of a perfect answer. If I lose my sense of humor, then I lose everything. And what could I write about you? Perhaps (?) your danger is that you feel you make beautiful things too easily. Yet I know you go through an exhausting struggle. An object, like a child, has its own life and it really doesn't care where or how much its parent has suffered. If you insist on introspection and justification don't lose *your* sense of humor.

In closing, although neither of our letters are about *Window Room Furniture* per our original intentions, I think that they are still very much about windows and rooms and our furniture.

Ric

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Diller
2. Victor Hugo, "Genius and Taste," *Victor Hugo's Intellectual Autobiography* [postscriptum de Ma Vie], translated by Lorenzo O'Rourke, first published Haskell House Publishers Ltd., New York, 1907.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Billie Tsien
5. Jeremy Bernstein, "Profiles," *The New Yorker*, December 14, 1981.