Trading between Architecture and Art

Strategies and Practices of Exchange
Studies in Art and Architecture

Vis-à-Vis
Valiz
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Acknowledgements
The artist Jorge Pardo’s 2014 exhibition at the neugerriem-schneider gallery, Berlin, included two bathrooms that were plumbed and sewered. The function, equipage, and the working water supply and drainage make these bathrooms works of architecture, but their exhibition in a visual arts gallery names them as art, and the many ambiguities of Pardo’s installation are laid over this paradox of disciplinary nominalism. My interest is not in Pardo’s work per se, but rather with the functionality of so-called ‘relational art’ where the aesthetic experience of a work lies in the interpersonal relations that are momentarily formed around some scenario of utility. This relation between the artwork and utility seems the perfect mirror to the phenomenon of architectural pavilions exhibited in visual arts institutions, such as those commissioned annually since 2000 by the Serpentine Galleries where the ‘artiness’ of architecture is expressed in eschewing utility.  

The bathrooms are steel-framed and sheeted in glass that, while screen-printed in decorative patterns, remains transparent. They were shown with the doors open and could

be entered. The ceilings are patterned like the glass, as are the floors, which are designed to drain below the shower head. They contain some lovely artisanal pipe plumbing, timber sinks, proprietary ceramic toilet pedestals, and are hung with some of the decorative lamps that are a signature of Pardo’s practice. They are quite attractive in a pop baroque way that is suggestive of the expressiveness demanded of bespoke interior design, and indeed of bathrooms as a site of conspicuous expenditure in domestic architecture. There are two rooms with the same sanitary equipment; one has a high ceiling, one low; one is in a blue color-way, one in red. These are not so much a pair or a series, but options of the kind typically offered in display of kitchen and bathroom appliances and fittings. But this reference to interior design is complicated by the sewer pipes that proceed from the cabinets across the gallery floor until they meet the wall which they follow to the exterior. On enquiry, neugerriemschneider gallery confirmed that the bathrooms were connected to Berlin’s sewage system, and, looking closely at the photographs, it indeed appears that the pipes are laid with sufficient fall so as to function, should that be required.

The works are more than a critical discourse on design by an artist. The insistence on their functioning is somehow vital to what otherwise might be a familiar transgression of disciplinary boundaries and media specificity. We can read in Pardo’s bathrooms a claim that: as comfort, need, and discomfort tumble one over another, the hierarchy of art and design is undone, and with that something of the opposition of aesthetic feeling to discursivity in art. But my interest in this work is that such a reading relies on aesthetic ideas being pushed up against categorical distinctions of institutions and professions—here is a not-architecture that is nevertheless in charge of its plumbing.

Pardo is prominent among the numerous artists who take the disciplinary distinction of architecture from sculpture as a topic or pretext. It is as if, after Rosalind Krauss’ semiotic square has been taught in art and architecture schools for four decades, the concept of the differential specificity of disciplines has itself become an art medium. What interests me in relational art, and in Pardo’s plumbing in particular, is how the concept of utility and the facts of use make a particular kind of trichotomy between art, architecture and the aesthetic concept of purposiveness. To perceive the purposiveness of an object is to apprehend a formal finality and closure that results from a purpose without thinking on how that purpose is performed. An example of Immanuel Kant’s is the judgement of the beauty of a horse without thinking of the uses to which we typically put horses. The traditional distinction between the disciplines is that a concept of utility precedes and governs the design of a building, limiting its aestheticization to an extent, but that artworks are free and self-determining. It is the complications around the definition of functionality that make fruitful opportunities for artists and architects. Architecture is said to be an art when it somehow exceeds its functional determination, and artworks themselves have social and economic uses which are usually considered to be extraneous. Hence there are close relations between the phenomenon of relatively functionless architecture, such as the architectural pavilions exhibited in visual art venues, and contemporary artworks that rely on participation and social utility, particularly those that have the appearance of building and interior design.

It is not recorded if anyone took their ablutions in Pardo’s bathrooms, but that is surely not the point. Any designer bathroom is a paradox—what counts as aesthetic pleasure when engaged in the most fundamental functions?
Pardo’s wider body of work, and his statements about architecture suggest that he aims for an actual interdisciplinarity or post-disciplinarity. The house he designed on Sea View Lane (1998) in Los Angeles and the adaptive re-use of the seventeenth-century hacienda Tecoh in Yucatán are unambiguously works of architecture. However, what interests me about the neugerriemschneider bathrooms—in the gallery space but connected to the sewer—is that they suggest not a merging of disciplines, but rather one laid over the other so that differences and similarities are laid bare. That Pardo is an artist who says he makes architecture is unusual because the disciplinary distinctions have, for much of the twentieth century, in many nations, been written into legislation that made architecture a ‘closed’ profession restricting the use of the word architect. The categorical distinction of the architect from the artist has increased the earlier more fluid distinction of architectural works from sculpture and painting. Around 1900, on the issue of professional registration, plumbing was a point of debate. The argument that won the debate in favour of registration, against the idea that architecture was an art and could not be legislated for, was that the public required assurance as to the technical competence of architects in sanitation. It is these disciplinary differentiations which are at play in Pardo’s plumbing, as much as any transgressive scatology. Perhaps Pardo had read the interview where Gordon Matta-Clark said:

One of my favourite definitions of the difference between architecture and sculpture is whether there is plumbing or not. So, although it is an incomplete definition, it puts the functionalist aspect of...
Plumbing pulls the conceptual issues around function and autonomy back down to a matter of historical categories. Making plumbing a definition of architecture pulls aesthetic theories of the hierarchy of the arts back into the stew of professional self-interest, technical development, and administrative convenience.

Functionality in general, and even plumbing in particular has been a recurring theme in commentary on the Serpentine Pavilions. The hackneyed questions ‘is it architecture’? and ‘is it art?’ both arise out of the very light and even trivial uses ascribed to the pavilions, and their frequent failings. The Serpentine Pavilions have all had some function. They began as marquees for drinks receptions, have been tea and coffee vending sites, discos, and venues for the Serpentine Marathon of talks and debates. In general, they perform these functions very poorly. They drip rain water and heat the champagne while providing uncomfortable seating. In the reception of the buildings in the popular press, there is a trope of complaining about their functional failings. The few that have offered some weather protection have often leaked, such as Selgascano’s 2016 pavilion which not only leaked, but flooded, due to its drainage having been overlooked. The Times critic wrote of Jean Nouvel’s 2010 pavilion ‘I would have thought that the last place you’d want to chill out on a scorching summer’s day in a park is a giant blazing-red tent slathered in plastic. And I would be right’, describing the experience as ‘like a wedding in hell’. Marina Otero Verzia has documented the difficulties and the ingenuity of Fortnum & Mason’s staff in what she sees as an ongoing struggle between experimental design and coffee. It is as if the architects deliberately chose an occasion to be negligent of utility in order that the conceptual difficulties of appreciating advanced architecture would be matched by a degree of physical demandingness, and that the prosaic uses of the structure should be in some way trivialized in order to direct attention to the conceptual and aesthetic agenda of the project. Perhaps the most extreme version of a pavilion evading its function was that of Peter Zumthor in 2011, which functioned as a café/tea-house without plumbing, electricity or a barista, but merely by parking a mobile coffee cart nearby. Silvia Lavin has claimed that the pavilions are symptoms of the enervation of architectural culture ‘as the economic collapse has meant that few can afford more than a tiny building (and are glad not to have to pay for the plumbing)’. I have argued elsewhere that the negligent or incidental treatment of building functions in the Serpentine pavilions relates them to the longer history of ornamental buildings in gardens, and in particular, to Kant’s claim that landscape gardens could be objects of aesthetic judgement in that they had merely ‘the semblance of use’. To briefly recall the relevant part of Kant’s theory: if we judge an object with regard to a determinate concept, then we are not judging its beauty but its perfection; and we have engaged our powers of reason rather than those of the aesthetic faculty and the imagination. Thus, even if we are properly disinterested in the use of one of the Serpentine pavilions in obtaining coffee, listening to a talk and so on, we should also not judge the architecture against some pre-existing concept which has determined what the building should be. The pavilions are thus what Kant calls dependent or adherent beauties, like the horse mentioned earlier, a concept of what the building should be is necessary to understand its purposiveness, but this concept, somehow, falls short of determining our aesthetic judgment.
concepts, Kant thinks that we should discern the aesthetic ideas that an artwork presents. The unfolding of these ideas that have no determinate concept or use, entwine our faculty of reason in the free play of the imagination. I argue, then, that the Serpentine Pavilions, like ornamental park structures of old, need to produce a kind of distance from whatever functional uses they have. So Fortnum & Mason’s wet clients, the sore-arsed listeners and sweaty reception goers; each of them plays a double role. Their use of the structure enlivens a scene of which they are also disinterested observers. The inadequacy of the functional arrangements of the pavilion are what is required to regard the use one is making of the building as a matter of semblance or appearance rather than purpose.

Kant’s distinction of free and adherent beauty would help us distinguish Pardo’s bathrooms from architecture if we could agree that the sewer connection was mere semblance, a representation or image. But such an explanation would be greatly at odds with the usual discussion of Pardo’s work as consistent with a post-Kantian relational aesthetics. Pavilion architecture has strong parallels with the relational art mentioned earlier. Just as in relational art, but by understatement rather than over-statement, a particular use is made to be indexical of an idea of utility. Relational art according to Nicholas Bourriaud is political in the sense that the art engages a disparate audience in a common task, and thus a real, if transient, micro-utopia. For Bourriaud the immediate social and participatory aspects of relational art—such as Tiravanija’s *Soup/No Soup* (2012) in which a communal public banquet was held in the Grand Palais in Paris, are also a rejection of the austerity of avant-gardism which critiqued the present in the name of a future. This claim to a kind of social freedom produced by art can be also contrasted with the freedom of the self that Kant and Friedrich Schiller thought individual aesthetic contemplation provided, and which formalist modernism thought to be the aim of art. However, it can be argued that what Bourriaud proposes is nothing more than a projection of the split subjectivity of a person observing themselves onto the social, and thus no more political than Schiller’s idea that aesthetics could be the basis of civics.

The claims for a relational aesthetic that would refute, succeed, or even merely differ from, the Kantian aesthetics of art, raises questions for architecture. What would a relational architecture be when architects imagine that their profession already does much of what Bourriaud claims for relational art? What would the claim of aesthetics to explain art be if it did not apply to architecture? It is usual to think (following Walter Benjamin) that buildings form the infrastructure for the immediate experience of the social, and are political at the level of the body; and that this distinguishes a work of architecture from the contemplation said to be required by a work of the visual arts. At one level drinking coffee in one of the Serpentine Pavilions is the same as sipping Tiravanija’s soup. Claire Bishop writes that relational art privileges ‘function over contemplation’, but this was already the formula of modern architecture, so from an architectural viewpoint, relational art then looks like the contemplation of function. But their categorization, one as art, the other as architecture has conceptual effects.

For most of the past since the eighteenth century, architecture was ‘art’, or one of the ‘arts’ just as the performing arts still are, and just as a contemporary ‘Arts’ Policy aims to govern a wide gamut of cultural disciplines. The use of the contraction ‘art’ to describe the ‘visual arts’ is quite recent, and although the distinction of architecture from ‘art’ is
inescapable in common discourse today, the presentation of architecture as art is not quite the same as other category-busting Art Museum practices such as exhibiting motorcycles or couture. It is a memory of the recent past when Wölfflinian definitions of art as ‘the visual arts’ was made up of painting, sculpture and architecture. The not-art status of architecture today is a part of what allows its play with art institutions, but the paradox of this is that the dialogue works because of a history where architecture was ‘art’.

The Serpentine Galleries say that the pavilion program makes the Galleries more accessible to a wider public. In part, this is achieved spatially by the pavilions standing free of the Galleries’ thresholds in the space of Kensington Gardens, but there is also an idea at stake, an assumption that the aesthetic experience of architecture is less intellectually demanding than that of the visual arts. Architecture is typically seen as more accessible than contemporary art, making it more immediately aesthetic, more present, and more like traditional ideas of the appreciation of art objects which assume a passage from sensory pleasure to intellectual contemplation. The Serpentine Pavilions thus suppose an aesthetic subject that has been under erasure in art since Minimalism critiqued the dialectic of perception and cognition and the Anti-aesthetic critiqued the value of pleasure in art. Architecture provides a simpler, more familiar model of the relation of aesthetic experience to a work, but this is a model that, from the point of view of contemporary art discourse, is superseded.

This distance from art is reinforced in the Serpentine Pavilions by their frequent quotations of canonical works of contemporary art. The Koolhaas-Balmond pavilion of 2006 was an attempt to build Yves Klein’s proposed Air Architecture (1961). Sou Fujimoto’s 2013 pavilion refers to Sol LeWitt’s white cubic spatial constructions, while Smiljan Radic’ 2014 structure was conspicuous not only for its formal resemblance to Friedrich Kiesler’s Endless House (1947–1960) but also to the sculpture Rock on Top of Another Rock by Fischli/Weiss that was simultaneously exhibited on the lawn of the Gallery. Selanguage’s 2015 pavilion seems something of an homage to Pardo’s Oliver, Oliver, Oliver of 2004 (which, apart from the formal similarities, must have been equally hot and leaky). Whether these relations to artworks are genuine homage, or some trickle down of 1990s appropriation art into architecture, their effect is to reference a sphere of art that is elsewhere. Like Pardo’s plumbing, the experience of the Serpentine pavilions as artworks is not an imitation but an index of another discipline that is not present. The sewer pipes leading from Pardo’s bathrooms are indexical in the same way. Their non-functioning functionality refers to what is not present—architecture and the idea that building could be aesthetic and not be conceptually determined by its use. Pardo’s plumbing is real in order to give the semblance of being architecture so as to critique the supposed autonomy of art from life. The Serpentine pavilions have real uses but poor plumbing so that they can produce the semblance of being the kind of artwork that much contemporary art stands in critique of.

Claire Bishop has critiqued Bourriaud’s claims for the emancipative politics of relational art, which seems to value communication and sociability. She writes that relational artworks rely on the pre-existing commonality of an audience of gallery goers who can easily agree to experience themselves completing the artwork and who are obliged to be complicit by the social and spatial structures of the gallery and the art world. Of works such as those of Tiravanija she writes that the ‘...works are political only in the loosest sense of...’

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advocating dialogue over monologue … . The content of this dialogue is not in itself democratic, since all questions return to the hackneyed nonissue of “is it art?” I agree with Bishop’s critique of the putative politics of relational art, but what is more relevant here is the nominalism into which she claims this collapses. ‘Is it art?’ might indeed be a hackneyed nonissue if we understand this to be a question of whether a particular art work is an instance of a general concept of art. Pardo’s bathrooms and the Serpentine pavilions ask a more specific question: ‘is architecture art?’ This too is a hackneyed question, but it is a much less metaphysical one, mixing aesthetic issues with historically developed disciplinary categories and revealing something of the unstable history on which contemporary practice is built. The symmetry of relational art’s utility and the token functionality of architecture presented as art is as much an historical artefact as a conceptual difference. The use of art may be an inevitable horizon to any discourse on art and architecture, but it is a distant horizon to the view of Pardo’s plumbing.
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The vis-à-vis series provides a platform to stimulating and relevant subjects in recent and emerging visual arts, architecture and design. The authors relate to history and art history, to other authors, to recent topics and to the reader. Most are academic researchers. What binds them is a visual way of thinking, an undaunted treatment of the subject matter and a skilful, creative style of writing.


2015

2016

2017

2018

2019