

Log

WINTER 2014
Observations on
architecture and the
contemporary city

30

37° 00' N, 25° 03' E

Antiparos, Greece

Take a half-day ferry ride southeast out of Athens to Paros, then a short trip across the Amfigeio strait and you will land on Antiparos, a hardscrabble Cycladic island that in 1981 was the unlikely site of a project by Elia Zenghelis, then of the fledgling Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Without the bigness or urban complexity that the firm had up to that point harnessed with vitality in its projects and drawings, the design and placement of 16 villas on the island begged the creation of some sort of fabric from the ground up; the site a blank canvas awaiting its first brushstrokes. In painter Zoe Zenghelis's oil-on-paper rendering of the project, 16 delicate shapes are scattered like confetti across an unearthly ground, barely hinting at the underlying composition by which the villas are arranged. Such a technique of representation led to what the architect today would call an emblematic image: a visual presentation that illustrates "architectural form juxtaposed with programmatic idealism" and "highlights the ideological features without relinquishing the real-life concreteness of a project." The project was not realized, but its image and idea endure.

\$15.00



oeisis. The gaze stops there, and the defensive advantage, often re- that it is impossible to understand t be, but the equal disadvantage also becomes apparent that any s any other, so none really matter. e to morale abstraction, played out ysisque-based judgment, places it ie non-Euclidean, the territory of rallel, yet meet. The continuously y topological; whether such work ot, topology regulates the digi- and underlies the judgment that full of the sorts of nonperceivable nut with a coffee cup and find the ingle-surface problem unremark- object's dreams of perfection are tree dimensions, the abstractions with its aspirations of Boolean ich breeds a certain permissive- nterest in exceptionality and affect. on otherwise constrained to physi- ss leads to necessary, but uncriti- he idea and the object and renders ceptional, however compromised. of topology, however, the smooth posed as mutually exclusive alter- ontains the more intuitive verities ist as Einstein's relative universe nce-frame of Newtonian certainty. gical view does not overturn or ew, it just broadens it to the point ses its absolute authority. Just as s broadened the world to include ecause they were physically impos- erience), so smooth architecture that were previously inconceivable. r perception and experience – the e operates – remains Newtonian, ural judgment to continue to avail led intuition. For now.

Todd Gannon

Pragmatic Radicalism, Aesthetic Bliss, and Other LA Stories

Last June, two weeks late and amid a welter of controversy, an exhibition ostensibly titled “A New Sculpturalism: Contemporary Architecture from Southern California” opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art’s (MOCA) Geffen Contemporary gallery in Los Angeles. Part of Pacific Standard Time Presents: Modern Architecture in L.A. – a series of exhibitions and related events sponsored by the Getty¹ – “A New Sculpturalism” focused on built work by Los Angeles architects from the last 25 years, but had been nearly unraveled by an embarrassing tussle between a faltering institution wishing to appeal to the general public and a skittish architectural community desperate for rigorous critical attention. In the end, the exhibition offered disappointingly little to its constituencies. MOCA publicly rehearsed its familiar pattern of dysfunction, the exhibition-going public received eye candy where it could have found edification, and the participating architects missed out on opportunities to productively assess their recent past and to nurture new audiences for the immediate future.

A MUDDLE AT MOCA

When the Pacific Standard Time Presents lineup was first announced in September 2012, “A New Sculpturalism” appeared poised to answer the Getty Research Institute’s sweeping historical overview, “Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940–1990,” with an emphatically contemporary conclusion.² MOCA received the largest grant from the Getty Foundation (\$445,000) and scheduled the latest opening date (June 2) of the 11 exhibitions.³ Press materials promised “the first scholarly and extensive examination of the prolific and often radical built forms that characterize buildings designed in Southern California during the last twenty-five years” and to showcase “emerging and younger talent” with a collection of pavilions designed by “less established firms in L.A.”⁴ Having jettisoned its curator of architecture and design in 2009,

1. The PSTP initiative provided sizeable grants to eight institutions in support of 11 exhibitions that examined Los Angeles architecture from 1940 to 1990. Grantees, in addition to MOCA, included the Southern California Institute of Architecture, where, I should note, I cocurated, with Ewan Branda and Andrew Zago, the exhibition “A Confederacy of Heretics.”

2. See Wim de Wit and Christopher Alexander, eds., *Overdrive: L.A. Constructs the Future, 1940–1990* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013).

3. SCI-Arc’s exhibition opened first, on March 29, 2013, with the Getty’s and LACMA’s opening just over a week later. Grants for the other exhibitions ranged from \$260,000 to \$430,000.

4. Press release for “Pacific Standard Time Presents: Modern Architecture in L.A.,” September 27, 2012. MOCA invited 12 firms to submit proposals for pavilions to be included in the show, of which three were executed. The proposals are documented in the exhibition catalogue. See Christopher Mount, *A New Sculpturalism: Contemporary Architecture in Los Angeles* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2013), 234–55.

5. See Bob Colacello, "How Do You Solve a Problem like MOCA?" *Vanity Fair*, March 2013.

6. Christopher Hawthorne, "MOCA's 'A New Sculpturalism' Faces Uncertain Future without Gehry," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 2013.

7. Mike Boehm, "Frank Gehry Back in MOCA Architecture Show, Coaxed by Thom Mayne," *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2013.

the museum tapped Christopher Mount, formerly both a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and executive director of the Pasadena Museum of California Art. The announcement was a welcome respite from the controversies that had plagued MOCA in recent years,⁵ and seemed to signal that the embattled institution had set a new curatorial course.

Unfortunately, that optimism was short-lived. Just a month ahead of the scheduled opening, following weeks of lurid gossip in the architectural community, the *Los Angeles Times* confirmed that Frank Gehry had pulled out of the show, citing discomfort with its "trivialization" of his work.⁶ The same article recounted Mount's fears that, owing to budgetary concerns, the entire exhibition would be canceled. Rampant speculation ensued: the show was off, then it was back on, but without Mount. The scope and venue would change. Thom Mayne had stepped in to curate. Neither MOCA nor the Getty could be reached for comment.

The rumor mill churned unceasingly. Even participants in the exhibition were unsure what would happen. Given MOCA's recent troubles, the collapse of not just the show but also the entire institution seemed within the realm of possibility. Nonetheless, there appeared to be ongoing activity related to the exhibition at Morphosis, SCI-Arc, and at least some of the offices that had been commissioned to build pavilions for the show. Anticipation – if not always for the exhibition, then at least for the next tawdry detail – swelled.

The day before "A New Sculpturalism" was due to open, the *Los Angeles Times* assured its readers that the show was on and Gehry was back in, having been "coaxed by Thom Mayne," who claimed to be acting not as a curator but as some sort of "facilitator." The article confirmed that MOCA would remain the venue and Mount the curator, despite Gehry's quoted explanation that he had returned only because Mount had been replaced (at Gehry's request) by Mayne.⁷

Confusion was amplified when the exhibition finally opened two weeks later. On the title banner outside the Gehry-designed Geffen Contemporary, the show's original title had been scratched out and replaced with "Contemporary Californian Architects." Inside, the gallery wall offered a third option: "Contemporary Architecture Comes from Southern California." Further muddling the situation, the wall text assigned only the "original concept" to Mount. Installation and production were credited to Stray Dog Café, with Anne Marie Burke listed as the project manager. No mention was made of any involvement by Mayne, but those

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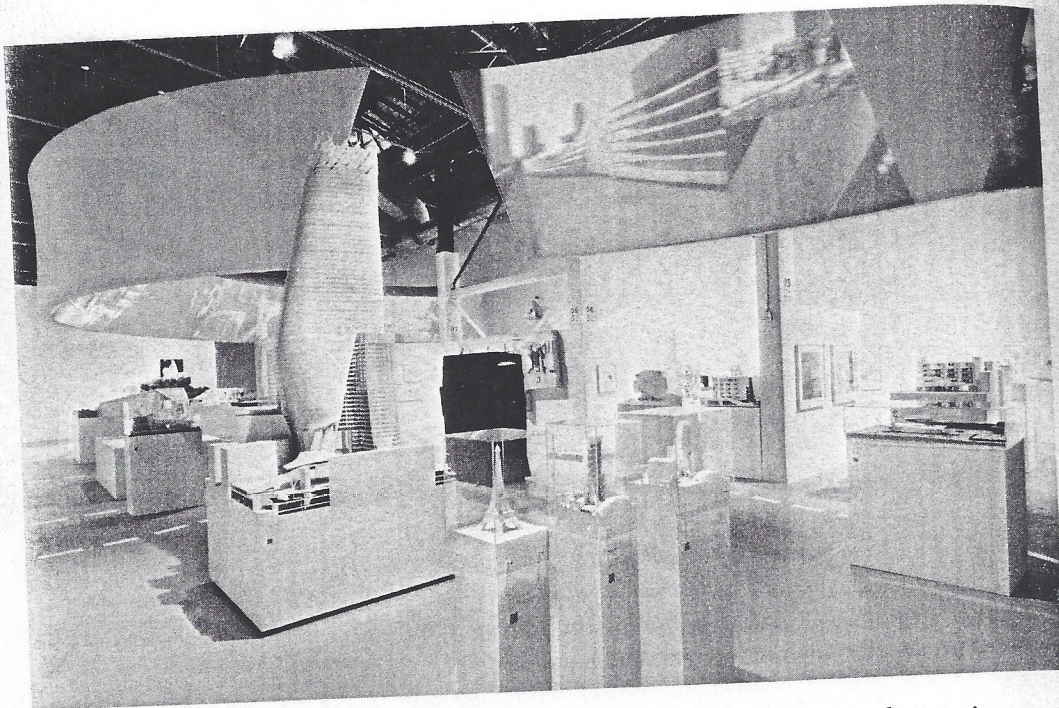


ENTRANCE BANNER FOR "A NEW SCULPTURALISM: CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE FROM SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA," AT THE GEFKEN CONTEMPORARY AT MOCA, JUNE 16-SEPTEMBER 16, 2013. PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST. © THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES.

8. MOCA had commissioned Ball Nogues Studio to design and install an entry pavilion, but budgetary and scheduling issues in the months leading up to the exhibition forced its last-minute cancellation. Ball Nogues' proposal would not have changed the path through the Fischer installation.
9. Moving past the pavilions to the opposite end of the hall, visitors first encountered residential projects, then housing, commercial, civic/governmental, cultural, educational, and "research" projects.

in the know recognized Stray Dog Café as the obfuscating label on the facade of Morphosis's studio back in the 1980s, and were familiar with Burke's long tenure as Morphosis's communications director.

The exhibition's installation was equally puzzling. Despite being housed in the cavernous side gallery at the Geffen, it felt strangely insignificant. To access the space, visitors had to tiptoe through a field of several thousand crumbling clay figures installed in the main gallery by Swiss artist Urs Fischer.⁸ Beyond this unceremonious vestibule, visitors were greeted by three pavilions – by Tom Wiscombe Design, PATTERNS, and Atelier Manferdini – before being deflected into a vast collection of often poorly lit models and drawings. The show included a broad sampling of internationally recognized names, including Eric Owen Moss and Neil Denari, lesser-known local firms such as Brooks + Scarpa, and "younger" practices such as Griffin Enright and Predock Frane. A large model of Morphosis's Phare Tower proposal for Paris loomed near the center of the space, part of a wide selection of the firm's earlier projects on display throughout the room. Dashed lines painted on the floor loosely divided exhibited projects into oddly conventional programmatic categories.⁹ Projected images of buildings flashed on curved panels overhead, while a recording of commentary by the exhibiting architects echoed throughout the space. Gehry's contribution – a suite of presentation materials from his second-place scheme for the National Museum of China competition – was detached from the side gallery altogether. To find it, visitors had to leave the space and again negotiate Fischer's clay-figure labyrinth.

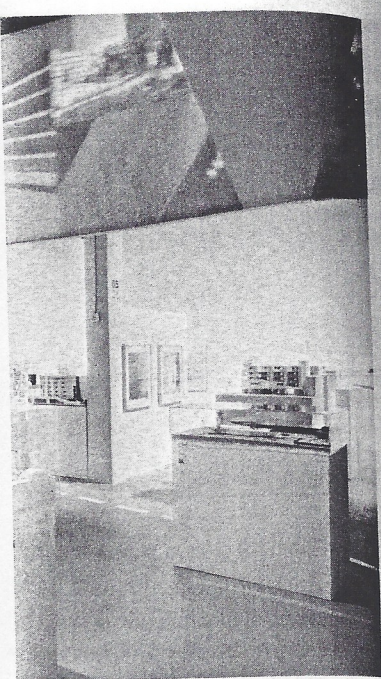


"A NEW SCULPTURALISM." INSTALLATION
VIEW OF MORPHOSIS'S PHARE TOWER.
PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST. © THE MUSEUM
OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES.

10. Mount's initial selection of architects and his general ambitions for the show were made available several weeks ahead of the exhibition's scheduled opening by the early release of the exhibition catalogue.
11. Christopher Hawthorne, "Review: MOCA's Revamped Architecture Show a Model of Insularity," *Los Angeles Times*, June 29, 2013.

Following several conflicting accounts of Mayne's involvement, it became clear that Mount remained curator in name only, and that Mayne's team had more or less reimaged the installation from scratch. Though Mount's initial selection of firms remained almost unchanged, his intent to include only built projects was abandoned and the focus of the exhibition shifted toward drawings and models.¹⁰ Mayne's intervention certainly improved the largely superficial affair that MOCA appeared poised to deliver, but the failure to clarify Mount's casual sampling of firms and, worse, to offer a substantive alternative to his concept of "sculpturalism" left many of the show's initial shortcomings glaringly intact.

Naturally, the critics pounced. *Los Angeles Times* architecture critic Christopher Hawthorne derided Mount's notion of sculpturalism as "supremely narrow . . . singling out form and aesthetics at the expense of all the other ways that buildings are made and operate in contemporary Los Angeles." True to his dependably negative stance toward Mayne, Hawthorne also attacked the installation's banal organization and leveled accusations of insularity, not just at Mayne, but at the entire "architectural ruling class in Los Angeles." The show, he intoned, was "unapologetically a celebration of white-male architecture, floating in a bubble of its own making, hardly pausing even to glance in the direction of contemporary Los Angeles and its cultural complexity."¹¹



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12. Aaron Betsky, John Chase, and Leon Whiteson, eds., *Experimental Architecture in Los Angeles* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991). Frank Gehry provided an approving introduction.

Some of Hawthorne's indictments rang true. Sculpturalism is, no doubt, a crude and clumsy concept. It adds very little to a discussion of Los Angeles's vibrant tradition of formal, material, and tectonic innovation, and instead brands the manic diversity of the city's architectural output over the last three decades with a single, woefully inadequate slogan. Mount was rightly, if inelegantly, taken to task for it by the architects. Hawthorne was also right in pointing out that Los Angeles's predominately white, predominately male, architectural community has been inattentive to its historically homogeneous and privileged demographics. But it is unwise to imply that overt references to topics such as race and gender (or "ecology" and "public interest design") are necessary components of an architectural exhibition, and downright foolhardy to understand the show's "insular" architecture as somehow divorced from Los Angeles's "cultural complexity." Hawthorne is too attentive a student of the city's (and, one hopes, architecture's) long history of productively private cliques to be permitted such a lazy assertion.

As the impact of the so-called "LA school" and countless other groups here and elsewhere attests, small, self-contained communities of formally obsessive architects have a far better track record of producing lasting political and cultural effects than even the most earnestly "engaged" practitioners. The error of "A New Sculpturalism" was not an excess of aesthetics and insularity, but rather an inadequate assessment of just how aesthetically diverse and tribal Los Angeles architecture has become.

RADICALISM REDUX

By the end of the 1980s, the bad-boy iconoclasm conjured a decade earlier by Gehry, Mayne, Moss, and other LA offices had matured into a formidable and, for some, even profitable mode of professional practice. As offices grew and young assistants craved independence, a generation of fledgling practices was spawned. In 1991, the newly formed Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design assembled a broad cross-section of these new firms in its first major publication, *Experimental Architecture in Los Angeles*.¹² Some in the collection, including Josh Schweitzer (ex-Gehry) and Michele Saeed (ex-Morphosis), delivered idiosyncratic single-family houses and bespoke restaurant interiors to LA's Westside in the familiar idioms of their mentors. Others, such as Victoria Casasco, dabbled in overtly postmodernist themes, while Charles and Elizabeth Lee returned to a more orthodox, modernist idiom. A few, including Neil Denari, the Central Office of Architecture,

and AKS Runo, devoted significant energy to ambitious speculative projects and painstaking drawings and models, which projected the more visionary aspects of the previous generation into bold new territory.

Alongside this proliferation of stylistic and tectonic diversity, a significant number of Los Angeles architects turned their attention toward the city's urban fabric and the unique structures of public and private life it engendered. In 1999, John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski released *Everyday Urbanism*, also through the LA Forum.¹³ The everyday urbanists paid particular attention to low-income neighborhoods such as Watts and East LA, and favored vibrant street life, ethnic and economic diversity, and do-it-yourself initiatives over the automobile-centered and developer-driven affluence that underpinned many of the Westside experimentalists. Complementing these urban initiatives was an unabashed enthusiasm for Los Angeles's peculiar, anonymous architecture. Chase's 2000 anthology, *Glitter Stucco and Dumpster Diving*, is perhaps the most serious attempt to plumb LA's quirky vernacular underbelly, and offers an important treatment of the midcentury "dingbat," the city's pervasive stucco-box-on-stilts apartment typology that has served as an organizational template and ideological scapegoat for LA architects since the 1950s.¹⁴

Through the 1990s, these varied strains of LA architecture were producing new work at a rapid pace. Concurrently, the Westside client base of artists, entrepreneurs, and post-'68 hooligans that the older architects had seduced through the 1970s and '80s had given way to a well-heeled creative class eager to stake a claim (and often, to turn a fast buck) in the now trendy enclaves of Venice, Santa Monica, and Silver Lake. Intoxicated by skyrocketing real-estate values, a generation of amateur speculators and unimaginative copycats set to work converting hard-won disciplinary achievements into viable commercial products. A particularly effective tactic hybridized the full-custom idiosyncrasy of the experimental residence with the vulgar efficiency of the everyday dingbat. Eames chairs, Nelson lamps, and fashionable couples were arranged and photographed in white-walled and alarmingly interchangeable interiors throughout the formerly grungy neighborhoods that had sustained the eccentricities of the earlier generation. By the end of the decade, a huge swath of Los Angeles had been made over and recast as a homogeneous, high-dollar, postradical *Dwell*-scape.

With potent lines of development thus largely exhausted

13. John Chase, Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, *Everyday Urbanism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Monacelli, 2008).

14. John Chase, *Glitter Stucco and Dumpster Diving: Reflections on Building Production in the Vernacular City* (London: Verso, 2000). Chase's book builds on a long tradition of campy connoisseurship, which stretches back through UCLA's two postmodernist Charleses (Moore and Jencks) at least to Denise Scott Brown, who "discovered" the Santa Monica Pier for serious architectural consideration while teaching at UCLA in the late 1960s.

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of disciplinary interest, many LA architects turned their attention to more unconventional approaches. Greg Lynn's arrival in the mid-1990s brought intensive digital design and fabrication research and an expansive catalogue of novel forms and materials, while Gehry's experiments with CATIA software demonstrated how unprecedented formal complexity could be deployed in commercial practice. Equipped with this formidable computational arsenal, Gehry's work began to shift from the figural aggregations he explored through the early '80s – for example, the California Aerospace Museum near downtown and the Schnabel House in Brentwood – toward the more voluptuous, curvilinear forms of the Team Disney Building in Anaheim and the Disney Concert Hall. Moss and Morphosis also changed course through the '90s, with the manic articulation of the former's Gary Group Building and the latter's Crawford House giving way to a more gestural abstraction apparent in Moss's Stealth Building in Culver City and Morphosis's Diamond Ranch High School.

At the turn of the millennium, another cabal of young architects began to come into its own. Freshly graduated from progressive programs at Columbia and UCLA, thirty-something practitioners such as Hernan Diaz Alonso, Jason Payne, and others espoused few of LA's familiar mannerisms and instead adopted more intellectualized, East Coast concerns that traced their aesthetic and ideological roots largely through Greg Lynn to Peter Eisenman. Steeped in digital production and fabrication techniques, their working methods quickly displaced the painstaking handicraft espoused by older architects, and the mechanistic, ad hoc assemblages of the late 20th century gave way to smooth, shiny, and increasingly cornerless compositions developed in the virtual space of 3D modeling and animation software.

A TALE OF (AT LEAST) TWO CITIES

All of these strands of development (if not all of these architects) were represented in "A New Sculpturalism," and any number of frameworks might have been deployed to elucidate them. Unfortunately, the exhibition elided significant differences in favor of portraying Los Angeles architects as one big, happy family. This genealogical ambition was reinforced by the "Professional Timeline" published in the exhibition catalogue, which tracks the emergence of new firms from older ones in a disciplinary family tree.¹⁵ This diagram is particularly revealing when compared to the revised version prepared for the gallery guides. The original – multicolored

15. Mount, *New Sculpturalism*, 230–31.

and somewhat difficult to decipher – attempts to illustrate the complex, overlapping trajectories through which many LA practices developed. The revised version is much clearer, but in pruning Mount's original tree, it reduces the complex lineage of each practice to a single source. The revised version also highlights five firms (Gehry Partners, Morphosis Architects, Eric Owen Moss Architects, Hodgetts + Fung, and Greg Lynn Form) as apparently more significant than the others, but offers no insight as to why that might be the case. Stranger still, well-known developments such as Craig Hodgetts' exit from Studio Works in 1983 and Michael Rotondi's exit from Morphosis in 1991 pass unacknowledged. The agenda, as with the exhibition itself, seems to be one of tidy, if inaccurate, simplification.

Problematic though they may be, the timelines could have offered a workable framework with which to engage the exhibited work. Arranged more strategically, the exhibition could have illustrated how the various master/protégé relationships introduced by the timelines played out. Unfortunately, the typologically organized installation largely canceled the possibility of such comparisons, and ultimately favored passive consumption over engaged scrutiny.

Despite the overriding impression of continuity advanced by "A New Sculpturalism," few could miss the anomalous note struck by Lynn's work at the far end of the hall. The playful, brightly colored plastic of his Blob Wall and Toy Furniture contrasted with the slick, predominantly monochrome models elsewhere in the exhibition, while the mirrored surface of Lynn's Sociópolis Housing Block answered the show's overarching tone of self-seriousness with the twinkling insouciance of costume jewelry. Three medusoid Numinous Lamps floated overhead to complete the scene. Where much of the work in the exhibition pointed deferentially to previous generations, Lynn's stood irreverently independent, pointing forward to an alternative LA agenda that is just now coming into focus.

Further hints of what this agenda might hold were provided by the three pavilions at the opposite end of the hall. Tom Wiscombe's untitled scheme explored his interest in both the tectonics of composite materials and the spatial effects of complex volumes and surfaces. Three impossibly thin black panels, constructed of a water-based polymer with carbon- and glass-fiber reinforcing, leaned toward each other to form a loose pyramid. Strange, trefoil shapes appeared to have been pushed through each panel from the outside. Inside, a

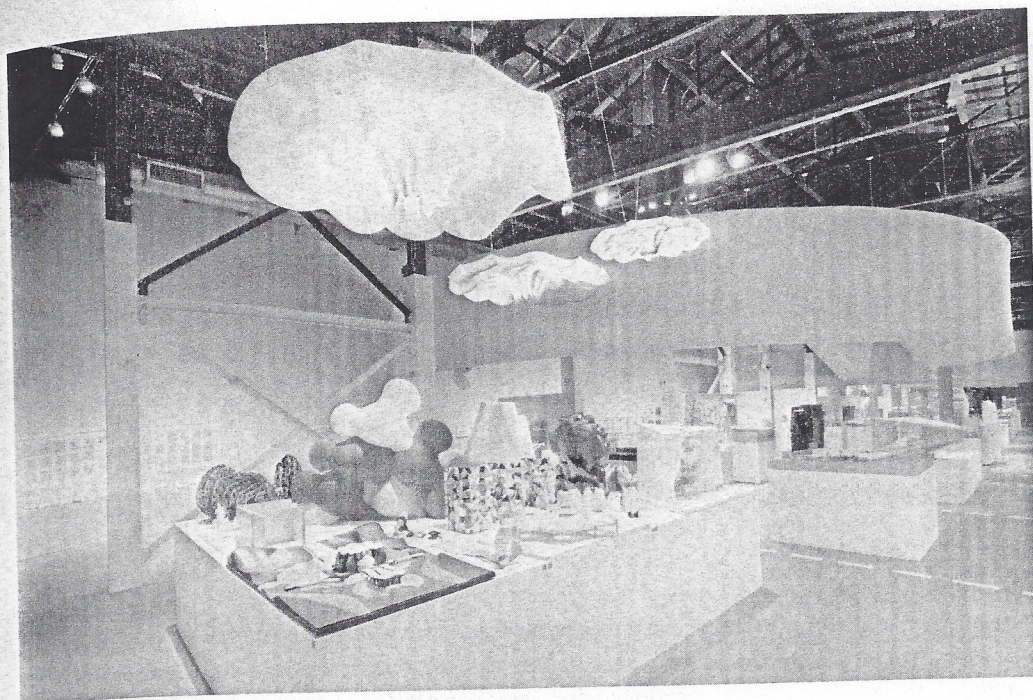
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"A NEW SCULPTURALISM." INSTALLATION
 VIEW OF PROJECTS BY GREG LYNN FORM.
 PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST. © THE MUSEUM
 OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES.

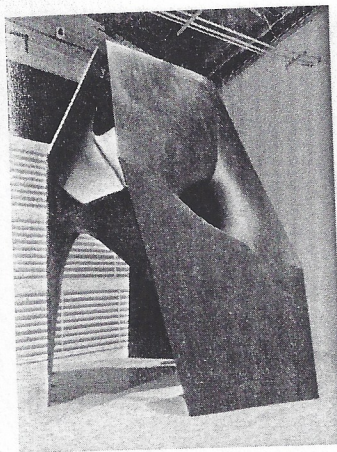
16. "Textile Room 03 Full," <http://vimeo.com/71997211>.

momentary sense of stable centrality was quickly undone by
 the intrusion of these trefoil shapes, which seemed to in-
 sist that occupants move to the perimeter, where a series of
 elegant interstitial spaces defined the puckered zone between
 the surface of the panel and the mass of the impacted shapes.
 Taken together, these peripheral spaces implied a kind of
 nascent ambulatory, which reasserted the initial feeling of
 centrality and set in motion the next cycle of alternating cen-
 trifugal and centripetal sensations.

A few steps beyond, PATTERNS' Textile Room also
 experimented with the tectonic and affective possibilities of
 synthetic materials. Black carbon fiber and yellow aramid
 filaments were stretched taught around a multisided steel
 frame with video images (culled from popular films shot in
 Los Angeles) calibrated to and projected on the pavilion's
 radially patterned surfaces by media artist Casey Reas. As
 seen in an online video clip, the effect is mesmerizing.¹⁶ But
 as installed, with a cacophony of other objects competing for
 attention, the intended effect largely evaporated into the
 surrounding milieu. PATTERNS' investment in advanced
 material and fabrication technology also underwhelmed.
 Relegated to the role of cladding and dematerialized by the
 projections, the robotically laminated surfaces were over-
 powered by the blunt physicality of steel-frame structure,
 particularly on the interior, where large, bolted connection

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TOM WISCOMBE DESIGN, MOCA
PAVILION, 2013. PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST.
© THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART,
LOS ANGELES.

17. An earlier version of the scheme employed an additional interior skin of stretched filaments that concealed the steel structure and the video projectors. Unfortunately, budgetary constraints foreclosed this more provocative proposal. See Mount, *New Sculpturalism*, 252.

plates reminded visitors that, regardless of the technical and affective achievements of the cladding, conventional construction remained at the heart of the endeavor.¹⁷

The final pavilion, *Tempera*, by Atelier Manferdini, distilled various strands of the firm's recent preoccupations with tessellated geometries and painterly surface effects into a beguiling cocktail of affective fancy. The scheme comprised a cubic volume tilted up and pried open to reveal a florid interior, with a cascade of color spilling onto the adjacent floor and wall. On the exterior, floral excrescences bloomed from meticulously detailed aluminum panels. Within, all indication of tectonic craft was effaced to foreground a billowing graphic printed on the aluminum panels and punctuated with an array of inset mirrored disks. At first, the mirrors appeared as perforations in the printed panels that gave way to a strange inner layer of additional printed surfaces. Drawing closer, visitors discovered through their own unexpected reflections that they were already immersed in that inner space, which produced (at least in me) a jarring shock that failed to dissipate even after the trick had been discovered.

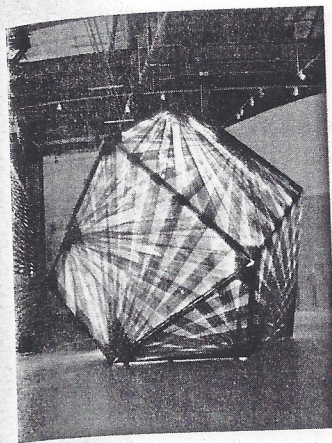
The three pavilions combined with Lynn's projects to bracket the main body of the exhibition with a kind of plastic exuberance that I suspect lay at the heart of Mount's notion of *sculpturalism*. Because of its last-minute erasure, this reductive term hung stubbornly over the work in the show, particularly the anomalous offerings at the periphery. The installation's deadpan categorizations – “pavilions” and “research” – and the pavilions' lack of programmatic specificity only reinforced the possibility of their being seen as less than fully architectural, or worse, as *merely sculptural*. Thus, the installation inadvertently rehearsed exactly the trivialization for which Mount had been sidelined. Even worse, I overheard a few visitors reverse this implied hierarchy, parsing the show into the “sculptural” – that is, complicated, interesting – and the “architectural” – ordinary, boring.

These unfortunate side effects notwithstanding, partitioning Lynn's “research” and the three pavilions from the rest of the exhibition highlighted an important swerve in recent LA architecture. Whereas these works were developed largely unencumbered by the stultifying realities of commercial practice and quotidian use, most of the other projects in the exhibition are remarkable primarily for their artful engagement of exactly those constraints. Indeed, it was through inventive wrangling with unbuildable sites, inflexible construction systems, and unreasonable budgets that LA's

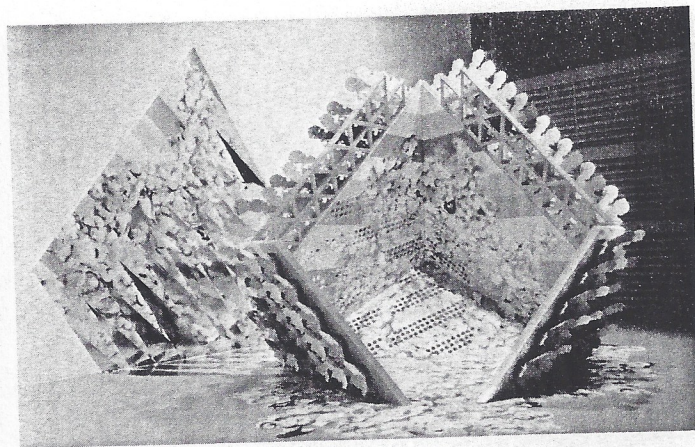
regardless of the technical and cladding, conventional context of the endeavor.¹⁷

era, by Atelier Manferdini, the firm's recent preoccupations and painterly surface effects into a fancy. The scheme comprised a series of panels, some of which were open to reveal a florid interior, while others spilled onto the adjacent floor. The overall effect was one of organic excrecences bloomed from a grid of aluminum panels and punctuated by circular disks. At first, the mirrors on the printed panels that gave way to additional printed surfaces. Drawn through their own unexpected transparency, they were already immersed in that inner space (in me) a jarring shock that the trick had been discovered.

Joined with Lynn's projects to the exhibition with a kind of plasticity, the heart of Mount's notion of instant-minute erasure, this reworked over the work in the show, offerings at the periphery. The diversifications – "pavilions" and their lack of programmatic specificity of their being seen as less serious, as *merely sculptural*. Thus, they rehearsed exactly the trivial that had been sidelined. Even worse, worse this implied hierarchy, "sculptural" – that is, complicated, "sculptural" – ordinary, boring. Effects notwithstanding, parallel to the three pavilions from the exhibition, they highlighted an important swerve in the way these works were developed, multiplying realities of common use, most of the other projects were primarily for their artistic constraints. Indeed, it was with unbuildable sites, inflexible budgets that LA's



PATTERNS, TEXTILE ROOM. 2013. IMAGE COURTESY PATTERNS. RIGHT: ATELIER MANFERDINI, TEMPERA, 2013. IMAGE COURTESY ATELIER MANFERDINI.



architects secured some of their greatest achievements, ultimately inventing the receptive audience so necessary for their continued success. The tactical facility exhibited by so many in a context so unforgiving gave rise to the unique tradition of architectural innovation that "A New Sculpturalism" celebrated but ultimately failed to articulate. Let's call it "pragmatic radicalism." Such inventiveness is not unique to Los Angeles, but this city's disciplinary culture has evolved a distinctive valence of that quality. Pragmatic radicalism is the attitude that brought world-class architecture to the back alleys of Venice and the blank warehouses of Culver City, and launched Los Angeles architecture into the international spotlight.

LEARNING FROM *LOLITA*

As "A New Sculpturalism" demonstrated, pragmatic radicalism's potent tincture of ardent individualism, ad hoc ingenuity, critical skepticism, and unbridled ambition is occasionally fouled by debilitating bouts of anti-intellectualism and brooding insecurity, and is dangerously easy to dilute with slipshod execution, lazy imitation, and commercial opportunism. But under the right circumstances, it can sweep away the banal contingencies of the everyday, driving to the root of architecture (as radicalism's etymology dictates) to unleash primal, exhilarating effects one might refer to as "aesthetic bliss." The phrase comes from Vladimir Nabokov, who coined it in 1956 to describe his literary ambitions. "*Lolita*," he writes, "has no moral in tow. For me, a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm. There are not many such books."¹⁸ There are not many such

18. Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in *Lolita* (1955; repr., New York: Vintage International, 1997), 314–15.

buildings, either. Most have a moral in tow. That moral may have to do with the program, budget, or even bombastic ambition to advertise an architect's carefully constructed alterity. Whatever its source, such moralism always undermines the irreducibly architectural.

Just about all of the projects in "A New Sculpturalism" wore their aesthetic agendas on their sleeves, but only a few rose to that elusive state of aesthetic bliss. Manferdini's pavilion did, as did Wiscombe's, in a different way. I also noticed that blissful quality in Lynn's plastic aggregations, in Coy Howard's rich accretions of graphite, and in Johnston Marklee's curious building masses. I saw it elsewhere in the exhibition too, but I also saw plenty of projects that missed the mark. Some were solid examples of proficient professional practice – respectable buildings to be sure, but out of place in a major museum show. Others were the architectural equivalents of what Nabakov referred to as "didactic fiction" and "topical trash."

By mixing important innovations so casually with later, derivative examples, "A New Sculpturalism" inadvertently demonstrated that the pragmatic radicalism that proliferated in Los Angeles in the 1980s and '90s *used to be* an effective vehicle with which to pursue aesthetic bliss, and that today, this formidable attitude has skidded well past the point of diminishing returns and largely disintegrated into a collection of stylistic clichés. Indeed, Gehry, Mayne, Moss, and the other early innovators of the manner have long since moved on to more productive ways of working. While I look forward to the offerings the elder generation has in store, I will be keeping a closer eye on the largely untested inventions of Lynn and the younger generation, who have diverged even more sharply from LA's now conventionalized mode of radicalism. Had "A New Sculpturalism" directed more attention to differences rather than similarities, the exhibition could have clarified the many important distinctions among contemporary LA architects and offered an opportunity for both professional and popular audiences to cultivate their receptivity to the rarefied inflections of aesthetic bliss. That it did neither should be seen as a dereliction of institutional duty that this city and our field can ill afford to repeat.

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