“Chaos Contrived: João Ó and His Entropic Chamber”
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Introduction

Macau-based artist and architect João Ó refers to the creative side of his studio practice with the label ”Buildings Are Not Enough,” a dispassionate claim appearing to suggest that the nominally independent territory of art could in some way constitute a spatial supplement for the more utilitarian--albeit less necessary--field of construction-oriented architectural design. The supplement marks a very particular logic that will be familiar to practiced readers and writers alike: following Derrida’s analysis, it “adds only to replace,” both justifying and transforming the naturalized mythology of the original term it follows only to overtake (Derrida 144). João Ó notes, in this obligingly neat elision of the architectural, that other forms of practice like photography, sculpture, and installation actually contain much of the aesthetic and conceptual energy of buildings, leaving the reader to wonder what, precisely, these supplementary alternatives contribute to the field of architecture that the building does not. It is a strikingly asymmetrical parallel; whereas the photograph and the installation sit comfortably above and behind the building, the functional categories to which these terms belong, namely art and architecture, are somehow positioned in terms not of intellectual grounding but rather of professional practice. The artist and architect work side by side, the one naturalizing the work of the other.

Adjacent to this rhetorical claim, which defines how one might productively situate art and architecture within João Ó’s practice, there is a political claim relating to the current status of Macau and the Pearl River Delta as sites for this discussion. As has been well established, the Pearl River Delta mega-city, stretching from the twin corners of Macau/ Zhuhai and Hong Kong/ Shenzhen through Foshan and Dongguan to the apex of Guangzhou, once provided a fertile ground for experimental discourses of future urbanism, feeding everything from curatorial projects like Hou Hanru’s “Canton Express” and Tobias Berger’s “Pearl River City,” not to mention multiple iterations of the Shenzhen Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism, to artist collectives and spaces like Big Tail Elephant, Yangjiang Group, Vitamin Creative Space. For a variety of reasons, however, in the intervening years this sense of energy in bridging art and architecture has dissipated, particularly in the mainland portions of the region. Macau and Hong Kong seem to represent the last enclaves of a once-thriving conversation, and João Ó is one of the more outspoken figures to remain involved.

Image

In terms of artistic practice, João Ó seems to split his efforts primarily between photography and installation, two fields that the viewer might retroactively assign to the artist’s relationship with architecture. Photography, broadly conceived as image-making, can be a method of both capturing space and creating it. For the series *Thresholds* (2011-ongoing), he uses large-format prints, typically produced at a scale just slightly smaller than the human body that does not intentionally overpower the viewer but rather creates a window or door through which one may pass, to catalogue a species of spaces that may be endemic to the sort of East Asian metropolis through which the artist and his audience so often find themselves passing. These are spaces empty of human presence, but the photographs are not composed as paeans to the mechanical or industrial. Instead, João Ó focuses on the semi-public, semi-private non-spaces that characterize flow throughout the city: columbaries, backstage areas, HVAC facilities, courtyards, pedestrian tunnels, and so on. There is a distinctly science fictional quality to these images, as if the artist were preparing a psychogeography of some

recently rediscovered space station. As a designer and supervisor of public housing construction projects in his architectural project, João Ó is certainly influenced by the logic of repetition with difference, and has gained the ability to create new spaces even as he documents and categorizes existing spatial modalities. Information is organized to the point that it becomes nonsensical, not to say chaotic.

In his latest project, *Entropic Chamber* (2012), João Ó would appear to forego photography altogether in favor of a very clearly installation-oriented exhibition. A roughly cubic structure, dark and industrial, can be approached from two facing sides. Between these two open faces, two movable wings and four fixed shelves modulate the flow and visibility of light emerging from several bright bulbs. The wings rotate slowly and in tandem, moving to an experimental sound composition, brusque and terrifying, that seems at odds with the well-oiled technical grace of the installation itself. In a way, each of the open faces of the structure constitutes a shifting photographic image, a strictly controlled pattern of light that alternately freezes and shifts again. Here, of course, sound and vision interact in a way that would be impossible working with the traditional photograph, but what remains is the logic of what João Ó calls "deception." The chamber offers the impression that, somewhere within its internal mechanical workings, there is a light core dominated by chaos (or over-organized information), transforming any particular vision of its interior into a limited position. It is the fundamental proposition of phenomenology: the viewer calls the object into being by virtue of his or her position, but, in this case, the available options are limited to the simple categories of "front" and "back."

Space

If *Thresholds* could be considered an ethnographic survey of non-spaces, then with *Entropic Chamber* the artist has moved into the production of non-spaces. Notably, that this occurs not only in his architectural practice (where we can be sure that João Ó has been involved in the realization of a certain category of utilitarian public urban space) but also now in artistic practice marks a major step towards the embrace of already existing spatial logics--that is to say, a recognition of the meaning of the supplementary. Of course, João Ó is no stranger to installation either. His piece *My Favorite Single Room* (2011), conceived as part of a broader collaborative project with Ho Ming-Kuei in which both artists modeled or otherwise recreated spaces playing a significant role of the other's memory based on textual description alone, in fact produces just such a non-space. Pushing aside a velvet curtain, the viewer enters a small, round room in which the walls are formed by largely empty shelves, on some of which sit aquariums populated only with pieces of wood and bare speaker cones. Again, the experience is structured through sound and the position of the body, but, in this slightly earlier work, the viewer is allowed a slightly broader variety of positions.

With regard to *Entropic Chamber*, João Ó refers to the concept of "mechanical abstraction." Naturally, it is always constructive to intentionally misread an artist's approach to his or her own work; in this case, the viewer will be rewarded by considering not an abstraction created through mechanical materials but rather an abstraction that is produced by virtue of its own mechanization. The machine at the center of this exhibition is, technically speaking, neither abstract nor representational. It is, after all, an object, not a sculpture. But the artist is not necessarily mistaken in that this particular machine gives off very little information; we are faced, perhaps, with a system so complex that its chaos is reduced to visual simplicity, or perhaps, on the other hand, a machine of such utter simplicity that it can only be masking chaos. Possible experiential positions for the viewer are limited to essentially two, while the wings and shelves of the machine can be stopped in virtually any number of positions

and combinations, suggesting that the installation is the truly open term in the otherwise viewer-centric relationship of the gallery. This results in a certain violence towards the viewer, an attempt at marginalization that is reflected in the militarized aesthetics of the aeronautical wings and armored body of the machine. It must be noted, of course, that this is not a building; a building would not have been enough.

Void

As viewers we return here to the notion of an asymmetrical parallel, as the pairs art/ architecture and installation/ building line up facing each other on the rigid carcass of this entropy machine. One of João Ó's primary references with this project is the early Robert Smithson series *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1965), small boxes of mirrors positioned at various parallel and skew angles (the exact specifications of which, unfortunately, have been lost to time) that would interpellate the viewing subject as the subject of the work through a process of objectification, fundamentally transforming the viewer into an image within the sculpture. João Ó expands this logic, not all the way to its ultimate end as a building but to a halfway point, a large structure that the viewer can walk around without entering. In the *Entropic Chamber*, however, the viewer is not invited to play such an active role in the constitution of the viewing relationship. Instead, he or she sits around the outside, passively receiving raw data constantly emitted from within the chaotic core. For the artist, this is all to be construed as information lost in comprehension, knowledge that cannot be grasped by the conscious mind as it flows by--a specter of the experience of perception.

What if, to the contrary, we were to push this question of the architectural unconscious to its illogical limit? Rather than information lost on the viewer as he or she is doused in a waterfall of unprocessed perception out in the mechanical wilderness, what if the title of this structure were taken at face value, as a chamber rather than a machine? It has all the hallmarks of a classical void piece: small white lights at the end of a endless darkness, uniform visibility from all angles, and the tantric hum of the infinite. Here, however, the viewer aligned along one of the open faces of the chamber is neither gazing back at his or her own reflection in a mirror box nor staring into the unimaginable void; instead, the viewer looks straight through the gaps between the wings and sees nothing in particular. This is a controlled void, a constriction, a contrivance that João Ó has devised to mirror the thresholds out of place found throughout the empty metropolis. It is a claustrophobic space of memory that need not be remembered because it is always present, at least throughout the more enduring corners of the corridors for the flow of people and goods linking the nodes of forgotten urban laboratories like the Pearl River Delta. Where chaos already exists, to imagine it anew is to function as its supplement. In this case, by diverting the chaotic energies of the architecture of a region into artistic production João Ó establishes that buildings exist primarily for us to move between them, just as the light manages to filter through the wings of entropy.

Coda

Viewing the first physical iteration of this project at the Macau Museum of Art it becomes clear that the emphasis of its machinic capacity is on constraint rather than chaos. Sound composition and environmental affect aside, the device itself is strikingly simple in its movement, cycling as it does through a series of moves in which the wings at the center of the installation turn with, toward, and away from each other. João Ó brings to the project parallel possibilities for its reception: typically, this ballet is choreographed in advance, and the audience is free to circulate around its ongoing maneuvers. During live performances, however, the movement of the wings, quality of lighting, and aspects of

sound are controlled manually by the artist from a DJ booth adjacent to the work, allowing in notions of human error. Here, it is the body of the artist that comes into a slow conflict with his work, adjusting its presentation only minimally but still activating it in such a way that it is no longer simply a cold, dead apparatus but rather becomes technologized--a tool. If the object itself focuses on the constraints of its extremely limited range of motion and lighting, it is the artist who returns chaos to the work, seeming to act in parallel with the droning noise composition as he assists the installation in its performance of its own being. Art brings chaos to the constraints of architecture, calling upon the sculptural and performative properties of the work. After the performance the piece sits silently, not abandoned but no longer living, and the audience is again free to approach its safely controlled confines.

References and Further Reading

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