

# The London Conceptualists

## Architecture and Performance in the 1970s

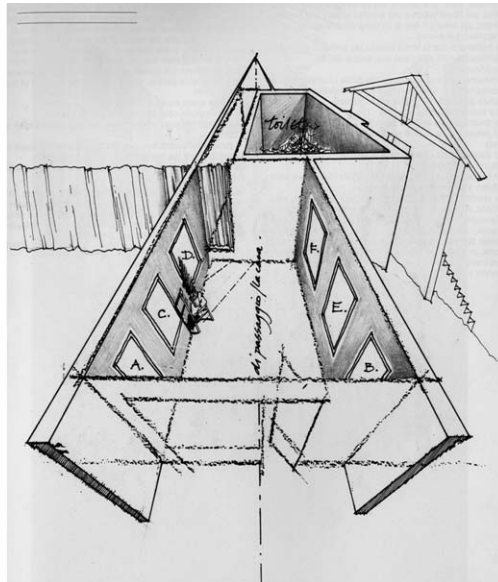
This article examines the formation, activities, and significance of a group dubbed the “London Conceptualists” by Peter Cook that were students of Bernard Tschumi at the Architectural Association School of Architecture during the mid-1970s. Through RoseLee Goldberg, director of the Royal College of Art, the students were introduced to theories of performance along with radical experiments in performance art. Goldberg’s conception of space as an arena for the realization of theory goaded the London Conceptualists away from writing and drawing toward installations and performance in disused buildings. This article situates their activities in London in the late 1970s and analyzes their relationship to other performance art practices and to conceptual architecture.

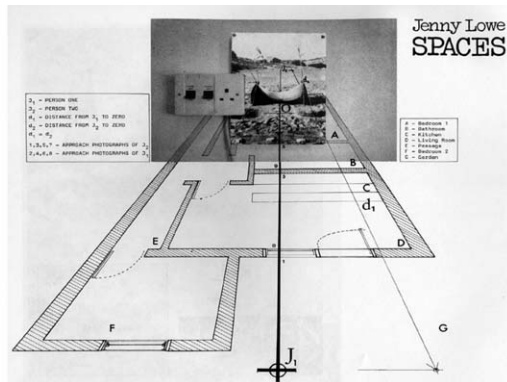
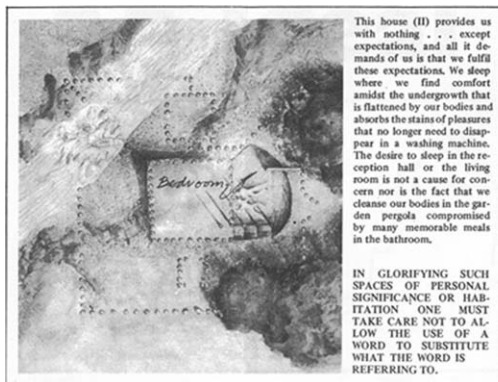
The “London Conceptualists” was how, in 1978, Peter Cook referred to the group of friends and former students of Bernard Tschumi from the Architectural Association—Jenny Lowe, Nigel Coates, Paul Shephard, Peter Wilson, and Will

Also and, peripherally, Leon van Schaik, Dereck Revington, and Jeanne Sillett.<sup>1</sup> Following their inclusion in the 1975 exhibition *A Space: A Thousand Words*, organized by Tschumi and RoseLee Goldberg at the gallery of the Royal College of Art

(RCA) where Goldberg was director, Shephard and Also formed the London Architecture Club with Sillett, Lowe, Wilson, Coates, and his friend, the set and costume designer, Antonio Lagarto. Individually and in collaboration, they produced competition entries and exhibitions such as those in Figures 1, 2, and 9 by Jenny Lowe and in Figure 11 by Peter Wilson and Julia Bolles. It was their proclivity for making “obscure and grubby exhibitions anywhere they can: disused houses, sheds, entrance lobbies” that provoked Cook to affectionately describe them as a “little group of freaks” and to insinuate that Tschumi had fled to the United States to escape their demands.<sup>2</sup> Tschumi’s relocation coincided with Goldberg’s appointment as director of the experimental performance space, The Kitchen, in New York, and was motivated in part by their attraction to the city’s art scene.<sup>3</sup> However, Cook is correct in discerning a growing intellectual disagreement between Tschumi and his former students. He imagines this disagreement to be around Tschumi’s return to designing objects and the London Conceptualists’ insistence on incompleteness and ambiguity. This article reveals a more complex, intellectual, and intensely personal argument that pitches the cerebral approach favored by Tschumi against an intuitive, performance-based practice that

1. Images of Jenny Lowe’s contribution to *Architectura Correcta*, Zone Gallery, Florence, 1977, organized by Gianni Pettena and partly funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain.





2. Jenny Lowe's contribution for the "Ideal Home" exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1977, organized by the London Architecture Club.

Goldberg introduced to Tschumi and his students. She contributed theories of performance, along with the most radical experiments in performance art. Her conception of space as an arena for the realization of theory drew them toward action through installations and performance.

While this article attends closely to the development of an independent position by the former "followers" of Tschumi and Goldberg, its larger concern is with the traffic of ideas and practices between architecture and both conceptual and performance art in the period. This is not simply a question of influence but of the portability and translatability of techniques and ideas between architecture and art. For Tschumi, the difficulty of achieving a "conceptual architecture" lay in the "paradoxical relationship between architecture as a product of the mind, as a conceptual and dematerialized discipline, and architecture as the sensual experience of space and as spatial praxis."<sup>4</sup> He argued that it was impossible to be "simultaneously questioning the nature of space and, at the same time, making or experiencing a real space."<sup>5</sup> Tschumi ascribes this paradox specifically to architecture. Moreover, this contradiction in terms is at the heart of the conceptual art of the period and led many conceptual artists toward performance.

### The English Setting

The London Conceptualists emerged against two significant contexts—the English cultural milieu and the international debates about conceptual architecture. The British Conservative government had been brought down in 1974 by a miners' strike to be replaced by Harold Wilson's Labour Party that immediately imposed restrictions on industrial action. This betrayal produced a wave of anger and political disorientation at a time of rising youth unemployment and social divisions. Cynicism and disenchantment with bureaucracy among young people fueled the punk movement. The Sex Pistols

depicted this world with savage accuracy and a bitter humor proclaiming, "There's no future in England's dreaming."

The activities of the London Conceptualists were enmeshed in a climate of political activism among their peers that was being carried out through cultural protest, including the libertarian crusade of English punk subculture. Tschumi recently recalled that punk music was the "sound track" of that period.<sup>6</sup> His essay "Architecture and Transgression" cites Georges Bataille's *Eroticism*, yet its illustrations of the Villa Savoy in a state of dilapidation with captions declaring the erotic character of decayed architecture imitate the posters and lyrics of the punk movement. Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood had opened their shop Sex in 1974, dealing in T-shirts that mixed sexual taboos with Situationist and Anarchist slogans. Architecture's role in carrying out the perceived destruction of London in the name of development gave additional force to the rejection of conventional practice. Moreover, the economic and political struggles of England in the 1970s provided disused sites. It became possible and arguable to reject theory for active intervention in the city through installations and performances in derelict buildings.<sup>7</sup>

The London Conceptualists took advantage of London's economic downturn and the Arts Council of Great Britain's new enthusiasm for experimental art in order to carry out a series of installations and "occupations" of derelict buildings. Kathy Battista observes that among artists, London was "a hive of this kind of activity in the middle to late 1970s," particularly for women who eschewed or could not get access to the gallery system.<sup>8</sup> For the architects, the derelict or abandoned building was not just an alternative exhibition space. It was the material and symbolic outcome of what they perceived as the destruction of London by unchecked capitalist development during the boom of the previous decade. They searched for alternatives to measuring

space by its dollar value, and this led to a new emphasis on the history and experience of a site. The results were closer in spirit and form to that of the Great Georges project in which community performers had processed in Victorian costume through derelict parts of Liverpool to lay wreaths on the sites of once important buildings that were now in ruins. The aesthetic anarchy of Vivienne Westwood's clothes and punk music correlated with the conditions of their lives since many of the group were living in squatter housing. Shephard observes that the experience of squatting lends an architectural fluidity to, for example, the work of Jenny Lowe since she was accustomed to imagining into existence things she lived without.<sup>9</sup> Lowe's holiday house for "An Ideal Home Show," Shephard notes, "is made by simply going to the beach and demanding that it exists."<sup>10</sup>

### Conceptual Architecture

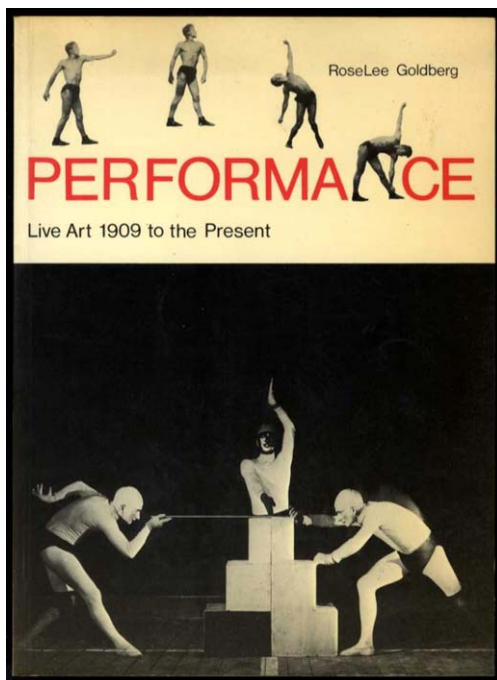
The activities of the London Conceptualists, while responding to the local scene, were also engaged in an international discussion around conceptual art and architecture. In the decade prior, there had been several major exhibitions focused on new technologies that had placed contributions by conceptual artists alongside architects and other exhibitors outside the visual arts. Architect John Weeks had exhibited in *Cybernetic Serendipity* held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in 1968. Nicholas Negroponte of the Architecture Machine Group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology had contributed a reconfigurable environment for gerbils to the 1971 exhibition, "Software, Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art." Held at the Jewish Museum in New York, the exhibition included work by conceptual artists Les Levine, Hans Haacke, and Joseph Kosuth as well as nonartists such as hypertext inventor Ted Nelson. Its curator Jack Burnham saw Software as "an attempt to produce aesthetic sensations without the intervening object," an ambition that resembles

that of conceptual art, yet for him was motivated by cybernetics and systems theory.<sup>11</sup>

The mid-seventies saw a new set of exhibitions that attempted more direct parallels between conceptual art and architecture. The results were tentative and inconclusive. Peter Cook staged a show of conceptual art at his gallery, Art Net, in the summer of 1974 and followed it in 1975 with "Conceptual Architecture." Cook recalled that at the conference for the 1975 exhibition, the subject was "manoeuvred by all the speakers back towards the discussion of 'concepts' in real architecture."<sup>12</sup> Tschumi derided the fact that the majority of contributors came to the less than useful conclusion that "all architecture is conceptual."<sup>13</sup>

Peter Eisenman's "Idea as Model" exhibition was held at the Institute of Architecture and

3. Cover of RoseLee Goldberg's seminal text *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (1979) with photograph of Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadische Ballet* of 1926.



Urbanism in 1976. Here the "idea of architecture" as a generic model was complicated by Eisenman's focus on physical architectural models, which he hoped might be able to draw out questions of ideality. He called for models that served as "studies of a hypothesis." However, with the exception of his own speculative contribution, all the models exhibited were for built or commissioned works. In any case, in the essay he had written several years earlier "Notes on Conceptual Architecture: Towards a Definition," Eisenman had concluded that conceptual architecture was an impossibility.<sup>14</sup> Conceptual art too was doomed since, lacking an agreed system of signs, it failed to achieve the transparency of medium available to language. Conceptual artists were engaged with the opacity, materiality, and instability of language, yet Eisenman did not address this in his writings or in the way he framed the exhibition. Eisenman concerned himself with the distinction between function and form but not with the gap between the perceptual and the conceptual as did conceptual artists. Against the inconclusive and tentative nature of the exhibitions and writings on conceptual architecture, itself reflective of the instability of conceptual art as a term and a direction, Goldberg and Tschumi proposed their exhibition.

### Goldberg and Tschumi

Goldberg and Tschumi met in 1973 at a function at the Architectural Association during her second year as director of the RCA gallery. Established by the college to show the work of staff and students, Goldberg had recast the college gallery as an experimental venue akin to the Lisson and Camden galleries. Lacking a budget for visiting artists, she nevertheless persuaded Christo, Vito Acconci, and Carl Andre to visit in the first year and later Brian Eno, Agnes Martin, The Kipper Kids, Brice Marden, and Giulio Paolini among others. Moreover, Goldberg introduced a roster of artists to the Architectural Association, with whom she was engaged at the RCA, including Christian Boltanski,

Marina Abramovic, The Kipper Kids, Bruce McLean, John Stezaker, Eno, Anthony McCall, Victor Burgin, Christo, Daniel Buren, and Paolini, and was herself a regular presence. Presentations at the RCA by Tschumi's architectural associates included Germano Celant, Peter Cook, and Gaetano Pesce. At the conference held in conjunction with the exhibition, speakers included Celant, McLean, the group Nice Style, Eno, Rosetta Brooks, Stezaker, and others.

Tschumi's training at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, and his experience working for office of Candilis, Josic, Woods in Paris, had not exposed him to contemporary art practice. However, the influence of the milieu of artists and students he was associating with in London became immediately apparent when, at twenty-nine years of age, he ran the first year of his design unit at the AA in the new unit system of the Diploma School initiated by Alvin Boyarsky. The studio "Theory, Language, Attitudes," for Tschumi, "played on an opposition between certain political, theoretical and critical concerns about the city (those of Baudrillard, Lefebvre, Adorno, Lukacs and Benjamin, for example) and art sensibility informed by contemporary photography, Conceptual Art and performance." He came to see the movement of bodies in space as important as the building, and this attention to program, event, and space became central to his thinking. Media and strategies were also gleaned from the arts and were evident in the first exhibition of student work from the unit where "texts, tapes, films, manifestoes, rows of story boards each with its own independent conventions, and photographs of ghost-like figures intruded an exhibition space arranged according to codes disparate from those of the architectural profession."<sup>15</sup>

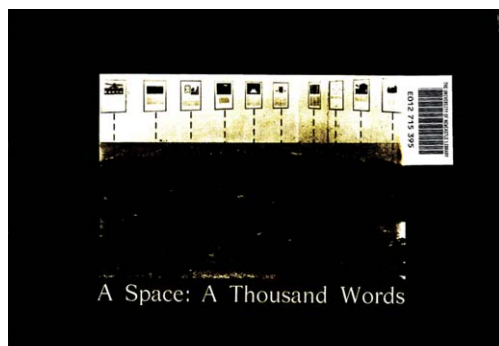
Goldberg was similarly enriched. A graduate of the Courtauld Institute of Art, she had undertaken a thesis on Oskar Schlemmer's performance design at the Bauhaus, and her discussions with Tschumi and other architects coincided with the period during which she was researching contemporary

performance art for the book published in 1979, the cover of which (shown in Figure 3) features Schlemmer. Her intellectual explorations on the theoretical consequences of space in different modes of conceptual art were focused through her contact with architects. She returned to thinking about the body in space and Schlemmer's notion of a "space filled with sand," a physical volume that responded to the smallest shift.<sup>16</sup> Emerging in the late seventies as the preeminent theorist of performance art, immediately she saw its value for young architects unable to build their ideas. She subsequently observed of the 1970s that "artists had far more concrete outlets than those available to the architect: live performance and installation. In lofts, on streets, in empty downtown parking lots they realized their ideas in actual space, satisfying to a large degree the desire to experience their cerebral propositions."<sup>17</sup> She cites works such as Trish Brown's *Man Walking Down the Side of a Building* (1970) and Bruce Nauman's *Corridor* (1970) as performance art works that allow ideas about space and buildings to be put into practice. Her position was clarified by her interest in both architecture and performance; each greatly influenced the 1975 exhibition.

### A Space: A Thousand Words

Tschumi and Goldberg planned ten events that would draw art and architecture together. "A

4. Cover of the catalogue of *A Space: A Thousand Words*, RLA gallery, London 1976.



Space: A Thousand Words" was to be the first, and the exhibition led to an invitation from Richard Cork to put together a special issue of *Studio International* on art and architecture. In hindsight, the exhibition and the essays—Goldberg's "Space as Praxis" and Tschumi's "Questions of Space"—were the culmination and turning point of the three-year program of cross-fertilization between their respective institutions.<sup>18</sup>

Goldberg aimed to expand the dialogue between conceptual art and architecture, yet her view of conceptual art differed from the popular notion given by Lucy Lippard—that it comprised the dematerialization of the object and weakening of the visual traditions of art.<sup>19</sup> Averting the visual and formal emphasis of art in favor of conceptual import was always an elusive ambition that saw artists attempting a neutral documentary approach as the most transparent means of communication. By the early 1970s, the documentation of ideas and their performance had become so involved that artist Robert Barry complained they were "like a little art object itself."<sup>20</sup> Barry resorted to transmitting his artworks telepathically, a method with its own set of problems.<sup>21</sup> Others simply insisted, as did several of the exhibitors in Tschumi and Goldberg's exhibition, upon the unimportance of the aesthetic of their work. Brian Muller, for example, saw his work as "sorting out existing data" and "presenting it simply as real time information."<sup>22</sup> Despite, or rather because of, these efforts, a readily identifiable informational aesthetic emerged that was characterized by numeric and alphabetically ordered lists, documentary photographs and descriptive captions, diagrams that emulated those of science or mathematics, and predetermined or sequential procedures. It reached its culmination in the filing cabinets, manila files, and typewritten pages of the British Art and Language group.<sup>23</sup>

The informational aesthetic of this early phase of conceptual art is evident in the black and white catalogue and contributions of "A Space:

A Thousand Words." Tschumi and Goldberg invited contributors to present their thoughts on the "production of space" and its mental apprehension within a uniform format comprising drawings or photographs 36 cm × 24 cm and two typed A4 pages of less than one thousand words. Differences between the contributors emerge in their observations about the juxtaposition between ideal and real, text and visual material. The discussion of space was divided between personal, nonrepeatable experience and the language of the political manifesto in which public space was conceived of as a broad category. Intimate narratives accompanied by enigmatic photographs sat alongside drier contributions illustrated by diagrams or architectural plans. The pages of the catalogue were identical to the works in the exhibition, a strategy devised by the American dealer Seth Siegelau.<sup>24</sup> No explanatory essays or biographical information were included other than short introductory statements by each of the curators. The works were presented without hierarchy or thematic groupings, and each contributor had the same amount of space.

Goldberg's selection was not, though, an objective survey of conceptual art but steered toward artists whose work focused upon her own renewed interest in performance. In "Space as Praxis," she argued against the alleged "dematerialization" of the object, proposing instead that conceptual art contained the premise that the idea may or may not be executed.<sup>25</sup> A work might be given as a written statement of instructions in a gallery or a photograph documenting the instruction being carried out or, alternatively, performed in a gallery or other setting for an audience. For Goldberg, each of these presentations had different implications; they were neither neutral nor interchangeable. Rather than do away with media and form, she argued that conceptual art didactically exploited the ways in which choice of artistic medium impacted upon ideas.<sup>26</sup> She believed performance offered the viewer a more challenging response to the perception of space in relation to

the art proposition.<sup>27</sup> The move from theory to practice was located in performance where space provides a physical context “in which to experience the materialization of that theory.”<sup>28</sup> Goldberg identified a number of artists whose work presented a new sense of space, which she categorized under the following terms: “constructed space and powerfields (Bruce Nauman and Acconci),” “natural space (Oppenheim),” “body space (Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer),” “spectator space (Graham),” and work presented as “a critique of the uses of public and private space (Daniel Buren and Dimitrijevic).”<sup>29</sup> The last three, Graham, Buren, and Dimitrijevic, she included in the exhibition.

While the format and budget prevented actual performances and installations from taking place, Graham, Franco Vaccari, and David Dye forwarded procedures that could be acted out in order to reconfigure the relationship between culturally imposed, abstract space and private, experiential space. Her selection was based on her interest in the intersection of performance and conceptual art, while the architects invited by Tschumi were personally known to him and did not form a coherent group. There were Italians Gianni Pettena and Ugo La Pietra, the founding members of the interdisciplinary design research group Global Tools, and others involved in the Radical Movement, including Pesce and Guisseppe Chiari.<sup>30</sup> A second group were

colleagues from France and Western Europe who shared commitments to the political potential of architecture—Antoine Grumbach, Fernando Montes, Roland Castro, and Christian de Portzamparc.

All the architects were familiar, if not aligned, with conceptual art’s emphasis on ideas and process. Yet, the contributions by the French and Italian architects were concerned with the ideas motivating projects in an expository sense. The French architects offered historicized projects, with Grumbach and Castro submitting conventional architectural drawings from their competition entries for housing in La Roquette. The contributions by the students and recent graduates from the Architecture Association (who comprised the youngest and largest group of exhibitors) were more confronting, less resolved, and less evidently architectural. Many had accompanied Tschumi, Colin Fournier, and Peter Cook on tours to Paris, the Netherlands, and Italy in the previous years, where they had met the other architects. Lowe recalls that they thought Tschumi’s French colleagues were tedious and irrelevant. Leon van Schaik, a fellow student, concurs that they were more interested in the intuitive approaches of Walter Pichler, Raimund Abraham, and the ritualistic experiments of the Viennese avant-garde, including Coop Himmelblau.<sup>31</sup>

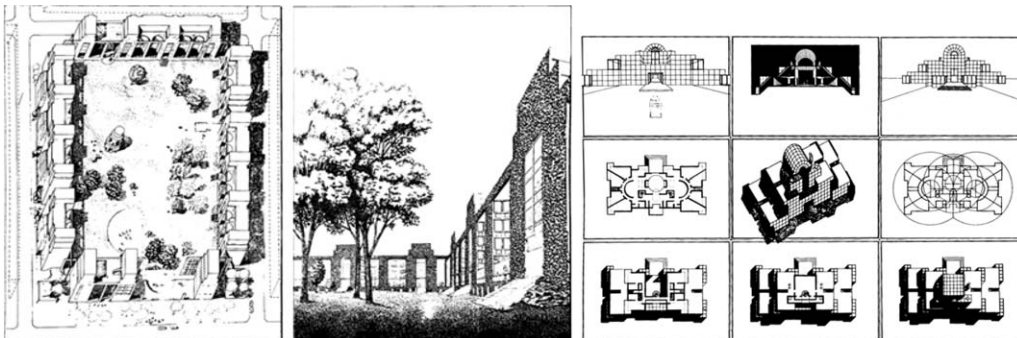
For the RCA exhibition, this group explored sociological questions about architecture and the

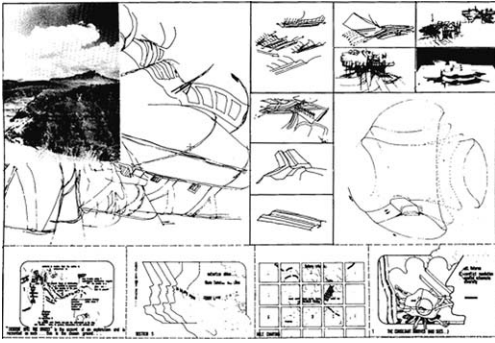
city from a personal and experiential perspective using firsthand narrative and freehand sketches as shown in Figure 6 that van Schaik enigmatically described as “drawings that I have lived.”<sup>32</sup> Revington, Lowe, and Shephard submitted ecstatic recollections and dream sequences. Revington describes playing with fire and snow on his day off from working in an asbestos mine in northern Canada; experiments whose effect, he writes, collapsed the boundaries between subject and object, percipient and perceived, and pleasure and pain.<sup>33</sup> His experiments with physical materials and the limits of perception were illustrated by a photograph of footprints in the snow. In the same year, Revington produced what he called “Scores for Action in Space” that he performed while studying at the AA.

Lowe details her imaginary search through successive compartmentalized spaces for “something else that hadn’t been located in these divided spaces.” She calls this the *Living Room* and in text and drawings (Figure 7) hints at its status as an impossible object of desire rather than a physical space yet to be designed. The paired illustrations fail to clarify the meaning of the text. One depicts a woman’s head in a cage above a section drawing that shows her body below ground grasping the roots of a nearby tree. The other pair shows the same street, once with a living room superimposed at incongruous scale and again with only the dotted outlines of that image remaining. Wilson (Figure 7) offers three spaces, one for his mother, one for an absent friend, and one for himself. The first he notes was “a present for the occasion of her marriage” and comprised a “Living Room that exists because it is perceived to exist” and is illustrated by a drawing of a room inhabited by a peacock with an open window looking out on a picturesque landscape. For him, space is nothing more than “perceptions unique to each instant.”

Coates, too, concludes: “nothing is there other than my perception of the landscape” and

5. Pages from *A Space: A Thousand Words* showing contributions by Portzamparc (left) and Montes (right).





6. Page from the catalogue of *A Space: A Thousand Words* showing contribution by Leon van Schaik.

describes an experiment with the distortion of spatial perception through mirrored reflections. Using four mirrors reflecting each other, Coates found that the viewer, entering the space between the mirrors, became both an intruder and a prisoner of the reflected image. He concluded that space has no imagination and is blind to its occupation. Coates' contribution is very similar to those of Dye and Graham (see Figure 8). All these efforts appear fragmentary and intentionally opaque in their insistence on a personal vision.

### After the Exhibition

"A Space: A Thousand Words" largely has been forgotten despite all the contributing artists and architects having gone on to successful careers. None of the artists list the low-budget show in their resumes.<sup>34</sup> The curators themselves wrote the most favorable reviews; elsewhere it was met with incomprehension or polite indifference. Graham Shane, reviewing the show in *The Architects' Journal*, ignored the presence of the artists and claimed the exhibition was concerned with modern architecture's relationship to technology. Shane reported, "Mildly decadent antidotes were projected to counter the machine's image of efficiency and impersonality."<sup>35</sup> Following the

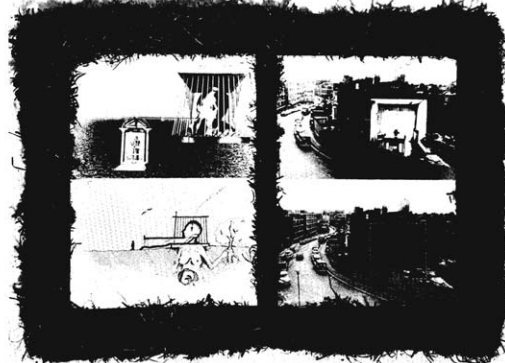
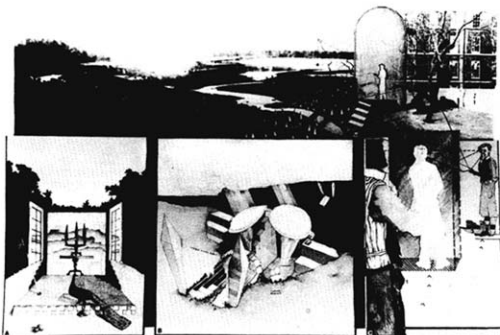
exhibition's subsequent opening at the Institute for Architecture and Urbanism in New York, Peter Frank in *Art News* described conceptual architecture as "a kind of projective planning, incorporating the improbability that has arisen since the 1950s." He went on to argue: "This architecture, in which artists as well as architects participate, renews the visionary imagination of the Symbolist and Expressionist architects at the beginning of the century by combining the social awareness of much current radical architecture with the speculative thinking of conceptual and postconceptual directions in 'visual' art."<sup>36</sup> In *Art International*, Fenella Crichton described it as a "curious amalgam of writing coupled with illustrative material dealing with a variety of artistic, architectural and sociological material," some of which is "plainly fatuous" and given over to "rhetoric, hyperbole and its attendant bathos."<sup>37</sup> Crichton pronounced the show stimulating overall despite the fact that "the level of contributions was extremely uneven."<sup>38</sup>

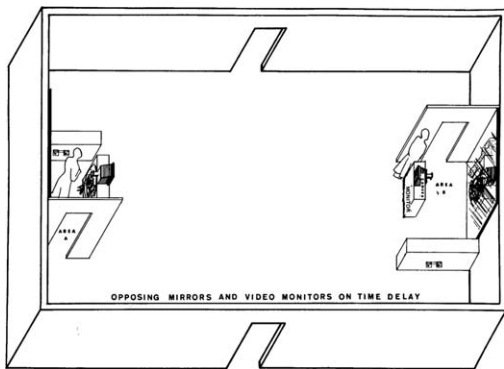
The reviews were not unjust or malicious in misrepresenting the show's ambitions. Despite the uniform format, the contributions were fragmentary and enigmatic, and the exhibition as a whole lacked an explicit or coherent ambition. It is best understood as a precursor for the London Conceptualists,

establishing for them a network of collaborators and a mode of practice that included exhibitions and new ambitions. For the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition, sponsored by *The Japan Architect* journal, of that year, the London Conceptualists entered scenarios that called into question the theme of "Comfort in the Metropolis." Again, they tested the limits between real and imagined spaces. Lowe proposed a house on a disused London train turntable. Mirrors and radiating corridors set up a discomfiting scenario that could only be resolved when the visitor passes "through the door that looks like a mirror and assumes the position that seems to be center of my home."<sup>39</sup> Exquisite pencil drawings were accompanied by photographs of people taken in a claustrophobically narrow and high alley. Peter Cook judged the competition and gave Lowe a special award for "Sense of Theater."<sup>40</sup> He awarded Peter Wilson fourth prize for a house on a "void in Covent Garden" that Wilson describes as only able to be experienced in the imagination. Wilson also used reflection to complicate the inhabitant's perception of inside and outside. The four-storey partly submerged house functioned like a periscope with a mirror giving the spectator views out to the street. This view was further complicated by a "quirk of optics," which meant it was inverted ("making the house particularly comfortable for the antipodean spectator") and reflected in another large mirror opposite.<sup>41</sup>

The view that there could be no common perception or experience of space was, paradoxically, widely shared. The intention was to avoid the instrumental approach of modernism and reconnect the architect to everyday life and to the uniqueness of individual experience. Without a basis for conceiving a larger social group, it was, however, difficult to reconcile personal space with architectural production for an unknown public. There was a perception that society demanded conformism and architecture could introduce conditions for liberative behavior. Lowe claimed

7. Pages from the catalogue of *A Space: A Thousand Words* showing contributions by Peter Wilson (left) and Jenny Lowe (right).





8. Dan Graham's contribution to the exhibition "A Space: A Thousand Words" at the RCA gallery, London, 1976, and his *Public Space/Two Audiences* of the same year.

that architecture had "discarded any social or cultural role" and, turning to the consumption of its own history, had become self-referential. She believed that the "socioeconomic and cultural reasons for that history" were too removed from current conditions for those forms to be relevant, maintaining that such an approach reinforced "the state of cultural decadence we are now experiencing."<sup>42</sup> Instead, Lowe advocated interrogating "the politeness of public spaces and the spaces that allow uninhibited actions and games of habitation."<sup>43</sup>

Lowe's approach risked becoming as private, solipsistic, and irrelevant as the historicism the group rejected. New ways of operating were required, and here Goldberg's argument about the materialization of theory through "Space as Praxis" was influential. While Tschumi had been a catalyst, members of the group did not follow his increasing interest in exploring the relationship between literature and architecture. He continued with a series of projects organized around literary texts brought into play at many levels: as a programmatic brief, as exemplary structures whose narrative organization could be translated into spatial order, and as a source of metaphorical descriptions of architecture. His experiments with James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Edgar Allan Poe, Italo Calvino, and Jorge Luis Borges have been widely published and were crucial to Tschumi's later proposal for the Parc de la Villette.<sup>44</sup>

Although the experience of writing a thousand words for the exhibition led Shephard to become an architectural writer, for others in the group, writing and the importation of literary texts were insufficient. Ideas required materialization in space, and while this did not necessarily involve building, it required more than talk about space. As Lowe admits, the group rarely studied the theoretical texts Tschumi proposed, preferring direct explorations. Coates later argued that "theoretical refer-

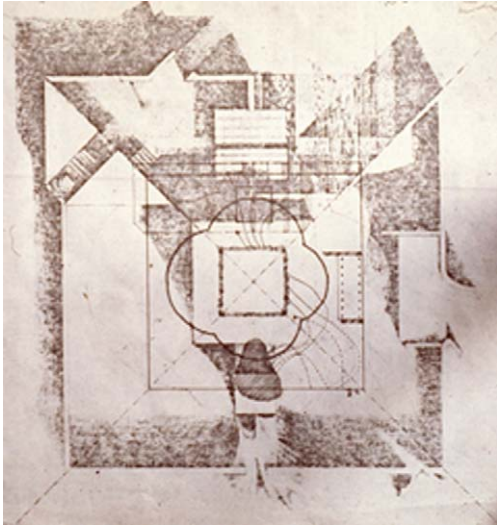
ences had to be avoided if they could be found in the city as it exists" through "the action sensed with an ear to the ground."<sup>45</sup> While Tschumi had challenged his students to explore the sensual, erotic, and subversive underbelly of architecture, his explorations were primarily undertaken through writing and well-crafted drawings. With the exception of his performance at the "Real Space" conference with Brian Eno (Tschumi read a text while Eno played music increasingly loudly until the lecture was drowned out), Tschumi was not given to making an exhibition of himself. Propositions for using space in a contradictory fashion—"Pole-vaulting in the chapel, bicycling in the Laundromat, sky-diving in the elevator shaft . . .?"—remained conceptual devices.<sup>46</sup> He was not to be found, as was Lowe, "acting out space" at a drawing board wrapped in black gauze in the four-day long occupation of the Air Gallery in a show titled "We Thought Le Corbusier Was a Bottle of Brandy" (Figure 9). Nor was Tschumi involved in any of the other more theatrical events organized by this group outlined below.

Between 1975 and 1981, Coates collaborated with Antonio Lagarto to produce films, performances, and installations. Lagarto had graduated from the RCA and later became a set and costume designer of world renown, as well as a festival and theater director. In the photographs taken by Lagarto in Figure 10, Coates poses in front of the Royal Opera House wearing a Chinese coolie hat from which are hung, one on each of four sides, photographs of The Pagoda in Kew Gardens. For the two-week occupation of a derelict house, Lowe recalls that Lagarto filled the attic with pigeons, brought in a grand piano, and, in flamboyant evening dress, played Erik Satie. Unfortunately, the door had to be kept closed to keep the birds from escaping so viewing was difficult. Coates installed a Christmas tree in the room he occupied for the same event called *Housework* that the British Arts

Council funded. For the "Just a House" project, Coates collaborated with Coop Himmelblau: white plastic drape obscured the house, an inflatable was anchored from the roof, and inside, Coates installed a rhododendron garden and a graveyard of domestic objects.

The shift in the London Conceptualists' activities had parallels in the London art world of the 1970s where, as Stuart Sillars notes, the primarily self-referential strain of conceptual art gave way to work with a specific social, political, and moral impetus.<sup>47</sup> The two most significant exhibitions in London in 1978 were "Art for Whom," at the Serpentine Gallery, and "Art for Society," at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. The Whitechapel show included Tony Rickaby's *Fascade*, a series of drawings of London buildings, each the headquarters of a right-wing organization. Although the images themselves were of rather bland buildings, the stress was on the idea, rather than the image, opening up the work to political critique.

Into the 1980s, hybrid practices, such as those pursued by the London Conceptualists, increasingly characterized the London cultural landscape. Rosetta Brooks summed up the ambitions for her generation of London artists when she founded the art magazine *ZG* in 1980 mixing together articles on art, punk, nightclub cultures, and fashion. *ZG* set out to privilege "self-consciously borderline activities" that "refuse to accept the self-imposed limits of their cultural microcosm." The first three issues featured articles and work by Giulio Paolini, Bruce McLean, Vivienne Westwood, Dan Graham, and Antonio Lagarto. Bernard Tschumi published "Erotic Spaces" in the second issue where it followed an interview with Vivienne Westwood in her post-Sex King's Road Store, *Seditionaires*. By the mid-eighties, independent journals that mixed art, theory, music, sexual politics, performance, and film included *Real Life*, *Wedge*, and *Effects* and



9. Jenny Lowe's contribution to the show "We Thought Le Corbusier Was a Bottle of Brandy," Air Gallery 1977.

reflected the pervasiveness of hybrid practice. By 1983, the London Conceptualists were no longer a coherent group, and their significance was already being reviewed by Peter Cook who thought "the period of the seventies was for (Tschumi) and his students, a great cleansing operation in which, despite their protestations to the contrary, they were preparing the ground for the creation of a second modern architecture."<sup>48</sup> Was he correct?

### Consequences and Conclusions

Cook also suggests that the diploma unit at the AA in "the Tschumi period seems the more serious, quiet and scholarly, whilst it is the very *currency* of the Coates period that emphasizes its deliberate

10. Nigel Coates wearing a coolie hat and photographs of The Pagoda in Kew Gardens from "Unbuilt England—Its Structural Background."



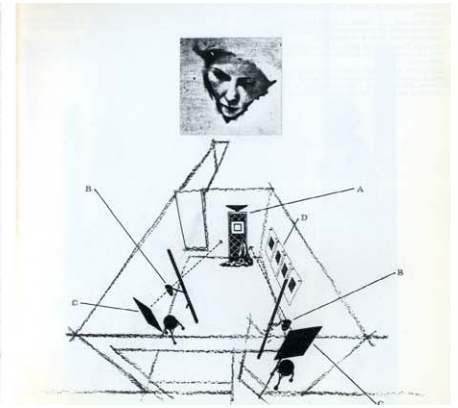
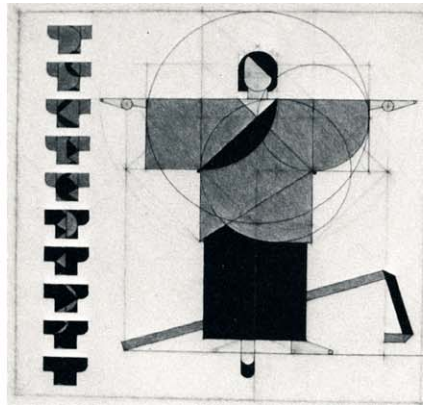
wish to abrade and to shriek."<sup>49</sup> Coates himself saw in the unit under Tschumi in the 1970s projects that "willfully overturned a realistic sense of function in favor of designs which demonstrated the existential connection between habitat and inhabitant."<sup>50</sup> Under his own leadership of the diploma unit, Coates observed work that was "deliberately inelegant and emotive, anti-historicist, and totally local."<sup>51</sup> The question is how to understand this shift. For Cook, the activities of the seventies are the intellectual precursors for the serious business of making buildings. This is as banal as seeing punk as a transition period toward Sid Vicious learning to play guitar. The group's achievements do not transform simply into a renaissance of modernist ideals or forms, nor should the scholarly approach favored by Tschumi be assumed to be that of the students.

The allegiances of the London Conceptualists were with the individual over the powerful institution, the abandoned building over the large-scale commercial development, and the imagination over economic rationality. Informed by Goldberg's arguments and the artists she introduced to the architectural community, the emphasis was on practical dissent over theoretical contemplation. The London Conceptualists were convinced that it was necessary to physically insert themselves within investigative scenarios in order to move from theory to praxis. The use of houses as sites for temporary exhibition and performance was a method of unsettling architectural determinations of private and public. The distinctions between audience and performer, public and private, were muddled with environments that brought the two into disorienting contact. Their activities revealed architecture as simultaneously the product of larger economic forces and of individual action and perception. Van Schaik describes this position, formulated during his student years, as one "that heightens one's awareness of the differences between communities, while, paradoxically, searching for the continuities between them."<sup>52</sup>

The London Conceptualists' occupations of derelict buildings redirected attention to abandoned postindustrial sites in the city, highlighting their character and history. Their experimental approach heralded a more inclusive role for the architect at the same time as it pointed to the ways in which performance and installation could be used toward architectural and urban inquiries. Along with artists such as Dan Graham, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Claes Oldenburg, who used performance and architectural installation as vehicles for examining the relation between the individual and the public and private spaces of the city, they developed a method of operating between disciplines and with ambiguities.

Performance has been, and continues to be a vehicle for materializing architectural concepts, preserving ambiguity and acting directly upon the city. It is evident that contact with conceptual and performance art had a significant impact on the direction of the London Conceptualists, an impact that has cast a long shadow on their subsequent architectural teaching and practice. Conceptual architecture, however, remains a misunderstood term and practice. The term has been almost entirely hijacked by the information technology industry to describe organizational strategies in software design. In architecture, debates around conceptual architecture continue to circle around the significance and source of design concepts that direct formal composition. Engagement with the overlap between conceptual and performance art, that Goldberg and the London Conceptualists found essential, is entirely lacking in contemporary discussions and in historical reviews of the period. This article has attempted a more nuanced understanding of a historical moment in architecture, with the view to demonstrating that conceptual architecture is not necessarily a retreat from the physical realm but, as in the work of the London Conceptualists, can be a more intense search for the experiential and political through embodied and material experimentation.





11. Contribution of Peter Wilson and Julia Bolles to "Architectura Correcta," Zone Gallery, Florence, 1977, organized by Gianni Pettena and partly funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain.

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Bernard Tschumi, RoseLee Goldberg, Leon van Schaik, Jenny Lowe, and Paul Shephard for their time and generosity in interviews given in 2004.

## Notes

- Peter Cook, "Winners of the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition, 1977," *The Japan Architect* 250 (February 1978): 11.
- Peter Cook, "Unbuilt England—Its Structural Background," *Architecture and Urbanism* 83, no. 11 (October 1977): 20–21. Lowe and Wilson were Australians.
- Goldberg and Tschumi each remain in New York. Their partnership ended a few years after the move from London. Goldberg pioneered performance studies, authoring the seminal texts on performance art, *Live Art Since the 60s* (1998) and *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (1979 and 2001). She has also written essays on architects Frederick Kiesler and Diller + Scofidio. See RoseLee Goldberg, "Dancing about Architecture: The Genesis of Diller and Scofidio," in Aaron Betsky, ed., *Scanning: The Aberrant Architecture of Diller and Scofidio* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 2002).
- Bernard Tschumi, "Architecture and Transgression," *Oppositions* 7 (1976): 57.
- Ibid.
- Bernard Tschumi in conversation with the author, New York, 2004.
- P. Cook, "Unbuilt England—Its Structural Background": 20.
- See Kathy Battista, "Domestic Crisis: Women Artists and Derelict Houses in South London, 1974–1998," in Ken Ehrlich and Brandon LaBelle, eds., *Surface Tension: Problematics of Site* (New York: DAP, 2003), 109–13.
- Paul Shephard, "An Ideal Home," *Architectural Design* 47, no. 7/8 (1977): 552. Lowe made light of her impoverished conditions. For "Unbuilt England," she supplied a photograph of herself, grinning, outside the Health and Social Security Building.
- Ibid. Lowe organized the show held in the foyer of the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1977 for the London Architecture Club.
- Jack Burnham quoted in Edward Shanken, "Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art," *Leonardo* 35, no. 3 (2003): 434. See also Jack Burnham, "Systems Aesthetics," *Artforum* 7, no. 1 (1968): 30–35 and "Alice's Head," *Artforum* 8, no. 6 (1970) reprinted in Jack Burnham, *Great Western Salt Works* (New York: George Braziller, 1974).
- P. Cook, "Unbuilt England—Its Structural Background": 18.
- B. Tschumi, "Architecture and Transgression": 47.
- Peter Eisenman, "Notes on Conceptual Architecture," *Casabella* 359, no. 360 (1971): 55.
- Bernard Tschumi, "Spaces and Events," *The Discourse of Events* (London: Architectural Association, 1983), p. 8.
- See RoseLee Goldberg, "Oskar Schlemmer's Performance Art," *Artforum* 16, no. 1 (September 1977): 32–37.
- R. Goldberg, "Dancing about Architecture," p. 39.
- These essays immediately followed the exhibition and were published in September 1975 in a special issue of *Studio International* 190, no. 977 at the invitation of Richard Cork.
- Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973).
- Robert Barry interviewed by Patricia Norvell in 1969, in Alexander Alberro and Patricia Norvell, eds., *Recording Conceptual Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 96–97.
- Ibid.
- Brian Muller, in RoseLee Goldberg and Bernard Tschumi, *A Space: A Thousand Words* (London: Royal College of Art, 1975), unpaginated catalogue.
- The Art and Language group brought informational art to its logical conclusion in their project Index 01 for the Documenta of 1972. For a discussion of Index 01, see Charles Harrison, "Mapping and Filing," *The New Art* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1972), p. 15.
- Siegelau's most well-known venture into curating an exhibition in the form of a catalogue is *The Xerox Book* of 1968. It comprised seven original twenty-five-page works using photocopy by Andre, Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, LeWitt, Morris, and Weiner. He followed this by several other exhibitions that took the form of catalogues. Of his stable of artists, Daniel Buren and Dan Graham participated in "A Space: A Thousand Words." Siegelau's importance in the development of conceptual art is thoroughly documented in Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
- RoseLee Goldberg, "Space as Praxis," *Studio International* 190, no. 977 (1975): 130.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Ibid.
- Gianni Pettena had been a visiting professor at the AA from 1973 to 1974.
- The interest between the Italians and the London Conceptualists was mutual. Parts of van Schaik's thesis were translated in Italian and published by Gillo Dorfler. Work of several of the group was published in the Milanese journal *In Pui*.
- R. Goldberg and B. Tschumi, *A Space: A Thousand Words*, unpaginated catalogue.
- Dereck Revington, statement, in R. Goldberg and B. Tschumi, *A Space: A Thousand Words*, unpaginated catalogue.
- Invitations to the contributors to present live at an event in parallel with the exhibition came with the apologetic note that "recent budget cuts at the RCA allow us to subsidize you only to the extent of a minimal lecture fee." RoseLee Goldberg and Bernard Tschumi, eds., *A Space: A Thousand Words* (London: Royal College of Art, 1975), unpaginated catalogue.
- Grahame Shane, "Towards a Theory of Modern Architecture," *The Architects' Journal* 162, no. 29 (July 16, 1975): 118.
- Peter Frank, "A Space: A Thousand Words (Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies)," *Art News* 75 (October 1976): 122.
- Fenella Crichton, "A Space: A Thousand Words, at the Royal College of Art," *Art International* 19 (April 1975): 63.
- Ibid.
- Jenny Lowe, entry "Comfort in the Metropolis, Winners of the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition, 1977," *The Japan Architect* 250 (February 1978): 31.
- Cook was a great supporter of the group. Arts Net, the gallery he established in 1973 with financial backing from philanthropist Alistair MacAlpine, showed Peter Wilson and Jeanne Sillett in 1975 and more of the group in "40 London Architects" the following year. RoseLee Goldberg was Art Net's first female speaker. See Peter Cook, "Art Net: 1973–1977," *Architectural Design*, 7/8 (1977): 489.
- Peter Wilson, entry "Comfort in the Metropolis, Winners of the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition, 1977," *The Japan Architect* 250 (February 1978): 21.
- Jenny Lowe, statement, *Architecture and Urbanism*, 83, special issue: Unbuilt England (1977): 92. After one particularly intense summer during which Coates, Lowe, Wilson, and Sillett had undertaken four exhibitions and had no money, they all went to work for Fitzroy Robinson architects, a firm they did not find interesting but which employed Australians.
- J. Lowe, entry "Comfort in the Metropolis, Winners of the Shinkenchiku Residential Design Competition, 1977."
- See Bernard Tschumi, *Architectural Manifestoes* (London: Architectural Association, 1979); Bernard Tschumi, *Questions of Space: Lectures on Architecture* (London: Architectural Association, 1990); and *The Discourse of Events* (London: Architectural Association, 1983).
- Nigel Coates, "Ghetto and Globe," *AA Files* 5 (January 1984): 61.
- B. Tschumi, "Spaces and Events," p. 10.
- Stuart Sillars, "Visual Art in the 1970s," in Bart Moore-Gilbert, ed., *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 261–64.
- Peter Cook, "Strange Pavilions of the Mind: The Discourse of Events—The Work of Diploma Unit 10, 1973–1983," *AA Files* 4 (July 1983): 102.
- Ibid.
- N. Coates, "Ghetto and Globe."
- Ibid, p. 60.
- Leon van Schaik, "Architectural Reality: A Continuum Concept," *AA Files* 28, p. 14.