FIRST OFFICE
ANDREW ATWOOD
ANNA NEIMARK

NINE ESSAYS

TREATISE
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TREATISE
To Sasha
UN-WISE passage

— Craig Dworkin
This pamphlet collects nine essays that represent the development of our ideas over the last four years, since the inception of our practice First Office. Three of the essays were written by Andrew; three were written by Anna; and three were written in collaboration with one another. Each text has been paired with a project. At times, the essays connect intimately to their associated images, outlining particular circumstances, details, and contents. At other times, the essays do not directly correspond to a project and instead establish a broader cultural ground for the work. There are also essays that do not fit neatly in either of these categories. Conceived separately, these texts present a more personal take on research that often fed into the visual work of the office. To gather all these writings and images in one place required removing them from their original contexts. This process of abstraction presented to us a project in itself, a close encounter with some past ideas, people, and events, which produced a great distance between us and our work. We are unsure at this moment whether this is a rite of passage or a dead end. Perhaps First Office is dead, and maybe we have killed it. So now might be a good time to thank our editors for all their generous help and support throughout the writing process and for granting us permission to reprint the essays in this pamphlet: Jonah Rowen and Emmett Zeifman, who published “Rewriting Abstraction” and “Zoopol” in Project 4 in 2015 and Project 1 in 2012, respectively; Log editor Cynthia Davidson, managing editor Luke Studebaker, as well as guest coeditors Dora Epstein-Jones and Bryony Roberts, who invited us to contribute “Rendering Air” and “On White on White” to Log 31: New Ancients in 2014; Emma Bloomfield and Joseph Clarke, who included “How to Domesticate a Mountain” in Perspecta 46: Error in 2013; Adrian Lahoud and Kata Gašpar from the Zagreb Society of Architects, who selected “Abstraction Returns” for the Think-Space Pamphlets in 2013; and Future Anterior editor Jorge Otero-Pailos, along with guest coeditor Aron Vinegar, who printed “The Infrastructural Monument” in their 2012 issue on Rethinking the Monument. We would like to also thank the Graham Foundation and in particular, Sarah Herda and Ellen Alderman, for generously working with us on this compilation of essays and projects, and of course, our friend and ringmaster, Jimenez Lai.
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As we discussed, I'm interested in rewriting your essay, or rethinking it in terms apart from the way that abstraction has recently been explained, and hence, I would suggest, perceived in a drastically limited way. I do not think it's necessary to do this; it has just finally occurred to me that thinking in this way is possible. It disappoints me that abstraction is going down in history as a closed chapter, as if there were no more to be said, as if recent articles were the final word. I hope we can agree that this is far from so.

Others may read this, so it's important to state from the outset: this essay is not a corrective to your original. It is not meant as a misreading or as a misreading of a misreading or as a critique or any of those things. I simply admire your essay and I like the idea of operating on a referent with which my essay can be compared. I like having a composition and structure that were authored by someone other than me. I like the distance and the difficulty it provides. Perhaps this is why I am trying to put us in the same space, so that I might provide a comparison between apparently similar things.

But, more importantly, I chose to rewrite your letter because I have also been thinking a lot about abstraction. This is what drew me to your work. It occurs to me that abstraction is what my work is often about. In your terms, abstraction is my work's "impossible ambition." I realize it's odd to selectively quote one phrase in this essay—which itself is one extended quote—but I find that particular phrase to be an extremely precise way of saying what I'm getting at.

It seems to me that the problem of abstraction in contemporary architecture is quite different from the issue of abstraction in modern art, in ways that have never been specified. The question for me is how we can continue to produce abstraction as a means of producing architecture. Like you, I admire Frank Stella, Ad Reinhardt, and other abstract painters, and as you pointed out, the power of painting relies on the fact that we can see everything at once. A
Shotgun House. Plan with eight rooms and ten Duchamp doors.
painting’s facts are immediately present. Its image and materiality exist in a single frame, on one surface. Abstraction in painting is made possible by the coincidence of these observable facts. For a painting to be abstract, our perception of it must oscillate between looking at the painting as an object, and seeing the image that the painting is trying to portray. If the image represents something too faithfully we will never see the painting as a thing. If the process of creating the painting is too visible, we will never see the image. We must always see the thing and the image at the same time. Or, as you pointed out, it must continue to oscillate: thing, image, thing, image, thing. . .

The problem in architecture is different. Despite recent attempts, we have never been able to see everything all at once. Unlike painting, architecture has no medium. There is not a specific conduit through which to understand architecture. It doesn’t exist in a single frame, as a single thing. Its representation, image, and physicality are never compressed into one object immediately consumable in a moment. These things are always different. Unlike painting, whose integrity allows it to remain abstract, architecture must attain abstraction despite the differences and distances between its various products.

The drawing, which has historically been the location of abstraction in architecture, is only part of what architecture is. It’s that simple. Architecture always extends beyond the confines of this frame. And because drawings are projected, they are always displaced, whether it’s from one drawing to the next, or to an image or rendering or model or building. These projections are rehearsed an infinite amount of times in architecture. Model to Drawing to Model to Rendering to Animation to Model to Photograph to Building to Drawing. . . . You always only ever see part, and what you see is only ever a projection of some other part.

This is why architects who index the process of drawing in their buildings are ultimately unsuccessful. They model their work on the language of abstract painting, but they ignore the fact that what painting affords is what architecture can never allow—the ability to see all of the work of architecture: not just the full extent of the
Original wood framing is preserved, restored, and left exposed on the interior of the house. New roof framing is added in the front and the back of the house equally to provide for two front porches: (1) Original Structure; (2) New Structure.

Shotgun House is gutted and divided into four equal parts, each measuring roughly 12'-6" x 15': (1) Workshop; (2) Bedroom; (3) Kitchen; (4) Gallery.

Every room is configured with an electrical conduit circuit for maximum flexibility. No outlet is more than six feet away; and new outlets can be added as necessary. The location of conduit is specific to each room: (1) Workshop outlets along floor and 42" above finish floor; (2) Bedroom outlets along floor; (3) Kitchen outlets 42" above finish floor; (4) Gallery outlets along ceiling; (5) Breaker Box splits electrical system into four circuits.

At every wall intersection, two doors operate four door frames. When the bedroom is closed, for example, the workshop opens into the gallery. The double door configuration is also expressed on the façade to allow residents and guests to enter freely. (1) Exterior Doors; (2) Interior Doors.
building, but also the work’s representations, which are the documents of the work’s own making. Unlike paintings, which are things bound in a space, of a specific size, with edges of a finite width, architecture is never bound in this way. Yes, a building has a site, but our perception of it has no neat boundaries. Not only is the work experientially fragmented, but all the other media, which prevision, envision, and revision the building, are assembled to surround architecture. The work’s limits can never be understood by the boundaries of its material substrate, and neither are they confirmed by its being a discrete singular object.

What to do to overcome this fatal set of circumstances? Well, one way to do it is to compulsively push into buildings the techniques and specific qualities found in forms of representation we use in architecture. One example would be to represent by means of illusionistic images the supposed “facts” of a building’s experience projected onto the building itself: how the building is rendered, how it’s traditionally constituted through representation as “real,” before it’s ever built. What is now automatically taken for granted in painting, its dual status as an image and object, might be achieved in architecture by making buildings that not only look like their renderings, but are also produced like their renderings. The ambition of some of my most recent work is this kind of self-congruence, bringing image (through rendering) and object together, to make architecture that delays a stable reading as a single form of architecture, whether it be in the form of a model or a rendering or a drawing or a building or something else.


2. This essay is part of a letter I wrote to Morgan Fisher on August 20, 2014, which is based on an essay written by Morgan Fisher, which was excerpted from an unpublished letter written by Morgan Fisher to John Hanhardt on September 28, 2000, and revised in 2012.

**Abstract**

made and is is a document of its own making, a bounded space of a specific size, something with an edge, something finite that stops. Yes, a film image has an edge, but it’s an edge produced by masking, not the edge produced by the limits of the material support, confirmed by its being a discrete object in a larger space.

What to do to overcome this fatal set of circumstances? Well, one way to do it is to compulsively bring into the field of the image representations of the physical facts of film and film production. You represent by means of illusionistic images the facts of film and filmmaking that in abstract painting are available to the viewer by the simple fact of what a painting is as an object, how it is made, how it is constituted as a material artifact. What is secured in painting automatically, the self-documentation of making, the embodiment of making, is possible in film only by making pictures of it. Sound familiar? The ambition of my films is a kind of self-congruence, bringing image and object together, to make a film that shows you every material aspect of its making, just as an abstract painting does. This is by definition impossible in film, but that remains the ideal, and my films enact the frustration of trying to reach an ideal that they know is unattainable. To try to attain abstraction in film you have to use representational images. The result is abstraction by other means, or abstraction in an unfamiliar guise: images as boths.

Excerpt from an unpublished letter written to John G. Hanhardt on September 28, 2000; revised 2016.
2 Installation Model

POZZO: (To Lucky.) Coat! (Lucky puts down the bag, advances, gives the coat, goes back to his place, takes up the bag.) Hold that! (Pozzo holds out the whip, Lucky advances and, both his hands being occupied, takes the whip in his mouth, then goes back to his place, Pozzo begins to put on his coat, stops.) Coat! (Lucky puts down bag, basket and stool, advances, helps Pozzo on with his coat, goes back to his place and takes up bag, basket and stool.) Touch of autumn in the air this evening. (Pozzo finishes buttoning his coat, stoops, inspects himself, straightens up.) Whip!

— Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot

The MAK Center for Art and Architecture in Los Angeles annually invites an Austrian artist to collaborate with a Los Angeles architect on the design of an installation in the Mackey Gallery. The role of the artist is to place a work of art inside the gallery. The role of the architect is to place a work of architecture inside the gallery. Both actions seem at first similar and straightforward. But they are not. Artists have had a long relationship with galleries and museums as their patrons. These spaces for the display of art seem normalized today, possibly in part because art has had a critical moment toward its means of exhibition and consumption. Examples in the “expanded field,” which located painting and sculpture outside of the white box of the museum in land, data, performance, and pavilions, abound.¹ Contrary to this long history of art’s display and struggle against its containment, the history of architectural display is a short one. Museums have for over two hundred years located architectural artifacts—models, drawings, and fragments—but locating architecture as such, and commissioning works of architecture within these interiors, has emerged as a relatively recent trend.

With many museums and galleries offering such projects to architects today, there is a wave of proposals that shrink architectural problems to the format of the installation. Not too small to be an exhibition of models and not too big to be a fully serviced commission, the installation seems to offer a convenient form for architects to express their ideas on a relatively small budget on the
one hand and outside of the constraints of practice on the other. And although this new model of curatorial patronage often offers the only outlet for public display for an office that has not yet established a traditional client base, there are many problems that arise from its format that push the architect into a peripheral field.

Sylvia Lavin offers a similar critique in her recent discussion of a parallel architectural type: the pavilion. She argues that if art’s pavilion was a form of resistance against established norms of the consumption of art, architecture’s pavilion seems to be its opposite: its form facilitates the consumption of architecture, cheapens its role as a cultural vehicle, and eliminates the need for more committed forms of patronage. Her essay is a call to arms for architects to not engage pavilion competitions, exhibitions, and biennials that have exploded throughout the globe as a result of this easily packaged architecture “at a steep discount.”

First Office cannot yet afford to decline offers for installations, pavilions, or whatever else you call these often temporary, low-budget, high-labor projects. Besides, we are so inconsequential, that our resistance, if we pursued it, would go entirely unnoticed. We recognize, however, that if architecture were to remain a critical practice, we necessarily would have to resist occupying such spaces neatly or comfortably. While our participation in installations makes us complicit in promoting its miniaturizing format, we nonetheless hope to express its capacity as a conceptual device through the forms that the work necessarily assembles—representational, professional, and contractual.

So when we were approached by the Austrian filmmaker Constanze Ruhm and the director of the MAK Center for Art and Architecture Kimberli Meyer to place a work of architecture inside the Mackey Gallery, we immediately accepted the invitation. We did so under the caveat that it will be a self-conscious and critical piece, uncomfortable in its own skin, without a beginning or end, barely distinct from its gallery context. The mundane limitations of practice, often left behind by the installation, would definitely need to be considered. After all, if the production of the work defines its medium, then perhaps the instruments of architectural practice are the specific tools that define ours. To reject the established formula
Specification Manual

This section includes surface preparation, painting, and finishing of one interior surface, measuring, space permitting, eight feet by eight feet.

1 Paint the entire 8' x 8' surface in ten layers with colors designated in future articles.

2 Where an item or surface is not specifically mentioned, paint the same as similar adjacent materials or surfaces.

Surfaces Not Requiring Painting:

a. Metal toilet enclosures, unless otherwise specified;

b. Acoustic materials;

c. Architectural woodwork and casework;

d. Conduit color banding or other identification;

e. Conduit and equipment in equipment rooms, unless otherwise specified;

f. Equipment in hazardous (classified) locations;

g. Labels: Do not paint over Underwriter’s Laboratories, Factory Mutual, or other code-required labels or equipment name, identification, performance rating, or nomenclature plates;

h. Concealed auto-releasing sprinkler head covers (i.e., escutcheon plates);

i. Glass, brass, or chrome plated portions of fire protection system control valves, hydrants and fire department connections. (Reference NFPA 13 and Section 15310, “Automatic Sprinkler and Water Based Fire Protection Systems.”)

3 Deliver materials to the job site in the manufacturer’s original, unopened packages and containers bearing manufacturer’s name, label, and the following information:

   a. Product name or title of material;
   b. Contents by volume, for pigment and vehicle constituents;
   c. Thinning instructions;
   d. Application instructions;
   e. Color name and number.

4 Protect from freezing. Keep storage area neat and orderly. Remove oily rags and waste. Take necessary measures to ensure that workers and work areas are protected from fire and health hazards resulting from handling, mixing, and application.

5 Apply water-based paints only when the temperature of surfaces to be painted and surrounding air temperatures are between 50°F and 90°F.

6 Do not apply paint in snow, rain, fog, or mist, when the relative humidity exceeds 85 percent, at temperatures less than 5°F above the dew point, or to damp or wet surfaces. Painting may continue during inclement weather if surfaces and areas to be painted are enclosed and heated within temperature and humidity limits specified by the manufacturer during application and drying periods.

7 Available Manufacturers: Subject to compliance with requirements, manufacturers offering products that may be incorporated in the work include, but are not limited to, the following: Wellborn, A Dunn-Edwards Company (W); Behr Process Corporation (BPC); Sherwin-Williams Company (G-W); Dunn-Edwards Corporation (D-E); Glidden Corporation (G).

8 Examine conditions under which painting will be performed for compliance with requirements for paint application. Do not begin paint application until unsatisfactory conditions have been corrected. Start of painting will be construed as Applicator’s acceptance of surfaces and conditions within a particular area.

9 Remove plates, tables, paintings, wood and similar items in places that are and are not to be painted, or provide surface-applied protection prior to surface preparation and painting. Remove these items if necessary to complete painting of nearby surfaces.

Following completion of painting operations in each space or area, items shall be reinstalled in the same manner, in which they were removed.

10 Clean and prepare surfaces to be painted in accordance with the manufacturer’s instructions for each particular substrate condition and as specified. Do not remove old paint by sanding, scraping, or other means. This action may generate dust or fumes that contain lead. Exposure to lead may cause brain damage or other adverse health effects, especially in children and pregnant women.

11 Provide the following paint systems for the various substrates indicated:

   (1) First Coat: Behr Ultra Pure White Self-Priming Interior Flat;
   Second Coat: Behr Ultra Pure White Self-Priming Interior Flat;

   (2) First Coat: Valspar Ultra White Matte Interior;
   Second Coat: Valspar Ultra White Matte Interior;

   (3) First Coat: Dunn-Edwards White Interior Flat Paint;
   Second Coat: Dunn-Edwards White Interior Premium Paint Flat;

   (4) First Coat: Glidden White Interior Premium Paint Flat;
   Second Coat: Glidden White Interior Premium Paint Flat;

   (5) First Coat: Sherwin-Williams Extra White Interior Flat;
   Second Coat: Sherwin-Williams Extra White Interior Flat.
of placing an object—architecture—inside of an envelope—the
gallery—the Mackey project developed its formal language through
the professional paperwork and labor practices of the gallery’s
normal functions.

Conventionally, gallery walls are painted white. In fact, they
seem to be defined by this generic, unquestioned finish. Painting
walls does not demand an architect’s involvement. The choice of
paint—its hue, sheen, and brand—is often left to chance: something
matte, something environmentally safe, something of which the
nearest store never runs out. If an architect were to get involved in
this process, the paint and the painting would have to be specified.
Those choices would be documented in the specifications, as a set
of instructions to the painter. To design that aspect of the installa-
tion, we realized that we would have to write a “spec book.”

In school, nobody writes spec books. Nobody reads them. No
one assigns them. They are not deliverables for any final review.
They are not considered interesting. And maybe they really aren’t.
Historically, specifications have been used to translate an abstract
design into instructions for the building trades—reading often like
Samuel Beckett’s stage instructions. The spec book is still used to
communicate between these professions, and in the process it iden-
tifies them as separate, distinguishing the domain of design from
the domain of building. In truth, we cross this line all the time, but we
wanted to identify that boundary as a contribution to the critique of
the architectural installation: to identify the work we do as archi-
tects and to differentiate it from other kinds of labor. We used speci-
fications to keep ourselves honest to our goal of doing architectural
work instead of doing an architectural installation; perhaps it was a
kind of rehearsal of an architectural service, not the real thing.


What you are about to read should be obvious, but a prefatorial statement is necessary. An installation without a prefatorial statement is not an installation, right? Also, a written statement is technically required here, in this place (see Terms of the SCI-Arc Exhibitor’s Agreement). Worse still, without one, this becomes a sort-of installation, an installation without the proper authorization, an alien without the proper papers. In fact, only when it’s prefaced is it worthy of bearing that name: installation. Maybe this is because the authority of the installation statement relieves me of the necessity to fully describe to you the work that I’ve done. A statement, in other words, leaves open the possibility that your participation is a definitive characteristic of the installed work. Like I said, maybe this is obvious.

Regardless, I hope we can agree that a prefatorial statement is a convention within the genre of architectural installations. And so, here is mine. I do not know if this installation will be of any real interest to you. It took a rather pleasing turn in its realization. Its content is fairly entertaining. Its forms are fairly fantastic. Its details are fairly natural. The odd mixture of references gives conventional things (lights, paint, carpet, etc.) an almost exceptional air. All of this makes me hopeful that it meets the minimal conditions of being interesting. But beginning with my own impressions may be the wrong way to start my installation statement. Beginning with my conclusions, however, satisfies a core requirement for any such statement: it shows that I wrote it after the whole thing was fully thought out. As they say, “after all is said and done.” It puts the installation on solid ground, as it were, but it disappointingly falls short of making a statement about statements. Maybe I can blame that particular shortcoming on the fact that not many texts exist on the architectural installation statement. Maybe this is the first one, or a preface to the first one. Many texts exist on installations in art, of course. And artists have plenty of texts written about the prefatorial statement; there are numerous texts written about titles, even. But art installations also find their footing in other disciplines, often referencing statements from the history of literature. To find a proper
A preface is an odd thing. Published first, written last. A preface functions as a necessity, whose own necessity is immediately defeated by the work that follows. My title states this is a preface, but by writing the word with a strikethrough, it also indicates that it’s something else. This is perhaps a vulgar way of indicating that the text you are reading is erasing the purpose of the title which preceded it. But I rather like how it calls a word into question that we assumed we understood, but whose meaning we are now no longer sure about. A preface, like a title, reasserts its authority only to be continually defeated by the thing that follows. This has led to the presumption that the preface should not be taken seriously, that the real work is what comes after. But sometimes the peripheral work is all that exists, if only by accident. Perhaps these reflexive acts of erasure and reduction are at the center of this project, if that’s possible. Let’s consider the possibility of solely producing these peripheral things that we might never have confronted in any other context but a blank installation. An installation with presence but no content.

The preface sits on this periphery. Like so many other conventions, it serves as the threshold between an installed work and its constituents, much like the project credits, the title wall, the brochure, the poster, the rendered image, the bio, the headshot, the opening, the gallery talk. If, like the preface, these things are often defeated by the work, what should we make of these customs? Are they simply a series of disciplinary habits left over from previous generations? Or worse yet, have we borrowed them from other disciplines to obscure the fact that we don’t have any conventions of our own? This installation is mostly about working through these peripherals to question the status of a genre’s conventions. After all, what would an installation be without floors and lights and walls and paint and posters?

It should be obvious, but this installation isn’t an empty container waiting to be filled, or an imposed absence in the wake of withdrawal or in the name of sobriety. It’s about facing the strange blankness of an installation about an installation’s liminal elements.
It’s about those things that take up so much time and consume so much of the budget. It’s about reading something when there is nothing there to read. It likes to quibble. Or maybe it’s even more obvious. Maybe, like the title (which we are no longer sure about) this installation is about the anxiety produced by blankness and the terrifying struggle with the terrifying question, “Are you sure this is enough?” Or is it too much?