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Architects “Getting Real”

On Present-Day Professional Fictions

Arindam Dutta

Theories of practice hold that the set of actionable knowables in a given situation need be, or rather can only be, a marginal subset of all the potential knowables in that situation. For Herbert Simon, to take one among many mid-twentieth-century gurus of practice, the concept-metaphor “design” presented the headland of this reduction, one opposed to the metaphysical vagueness of terms such as “nature.” For Simon, the question “What is Nature?” amounted at best to prestige-seeking, with little to do with the needs of science itself (Simon 1969). Any discovery of so-called natural phenomena was in fact always a product of a more restricted epistemology of design (the “sciences of the artificial”), reductions that inevitably reflected economic interest. Rather than discover “nature,” then, scientific discoveries responded to “task environments”: criteria of use under which the qualities of matter became meaningful in new and specific ways. Matter is a performative entity; things were not things-in-nature as much as bundles of qualities that appear in the world because certain task environments become critical or purposive in a given socio-economic context. In other words, scientific programs do not unearth eternal, enduring truths, but rather represent a continually vanishing boundary of uncovering and refashioning the performative aspects of matter in response to a need, and moving on when the need has been met (Simon 1969: 131). “Nature” is here posed as a transactional field, a proto-market of sorts.

Since the 1960s, the humanities and social sciences have likewise tended to evade the constative question “What is ...?” in favor of the performative: “How does ...?” One discounts the obduracy of facts and truths, not because they are not valid, but rather because the brunt of the questions has shifted to the negotiational or the transactional. Design, construction, these appear more pertinent than ontology in modeling social behavior and cultural politics. There appears thus an unstated ideological convergence between the humanities, social sciences, and the sciences in the past half-century or so. For the humanities, design appears as the new grand narrative within which the predicaments of socialization, desire, and will can be thought through. Bruno Latour’s exhortation towards a “parliamentarism” of knowledge and interest, towards so-called “matters of concern” rather than the putative inviolability of facts, might thus be described as a counterpart to Simon’s ideal of a “boundary science” in that epistemic validity is seen in regional rather than universal terms, defined by need and context (Latour 2004).



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In any case, as the sciences focus more on securing commercial and state investments that keep research viable, there is a commensurate withering away of such “universal” metaphysical questions. What for Simon appeared in mid-twentieth century as a corrective against the bloviating of his contemporaries is now entrenched necessity: science *is* effectively product design. And rather than portend to discover the mysteries of nature, examining sociality and socialization, the erstwhile preserve of the humanities and social sciences, has now become, with the commensurate inroads into big data, a crucial feature in the market research that would render its products commercially viable. In every case, the invocation of design covers over a clandestine or not-so-clandestine premium on transactionalism as the driver of human affairs, a new utilitarian consensus creeping into political, economic, and cultural relations alike, from cognizance of rape in college dorm-rooms to disputes among nations about trade deficits and carbon emissions.

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This essay charts the present-day ascendancy of design in terms of the effects that this tacit transactionalism may have, not so much on the arts and sciences, but on the auteur segments of the workforce that have traditionally called themselves designers, e.g., architects. In so doing, it charts three paradoxes that appear salient in this ascendancy. For the purposes of this paper, Herbert Simon’s arguments cited above will serve for us as a useful foil, as symptomatic of mid-twentieth-century high modernism, wherein embracing the boundary games and cost-benefit calculus of the market sphere would entail the *secularization* of design, in that the “fall” or dissolution into economic criteria would eliminate transcendental prerogative (nature, genius, truth, community, state, etc.), effectively transforming the designer from conjuring priest into a liberal, value-seeking vocation embedded at the heart of industrial capitalism. Today’s designers, when called upon to assert a creed, I would argue, inevitably proffer some version of this rationalist faith—paradox intended—as their *raison d’être*, which suggests a tacit self-image or narrative hold that has still not fully run its course in the half-century following. The broad imputation of these three paradoxes, I will attempt to show, signals rather a devaluation of that self-image: I will argue that this self-image of the designer has *nothing to do* with the economic predicament in which they are placed and that the high-modernist view had sought to centrally orchestrate.

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The first paradox that I outline is the following. *The present-day ascendancy of design connotes a reduced, if not marginal, role for the designer herself.* This is largely, I will argue, because design is not a singular activity. Narratives that singularize the figure of the designer on the lines that intending subjects occupy in novels or films profoundly mischaracterizes the fragmented games of legitimation that go into the creation of commodities, which involve a raft of value-additive activity, say, from incentive-seizing (e.g., greening) to investor-hunting, networking, intellectual property management, market research, locational constraints, supply chains, platform development, and so on. Rather than evolve into the equivalent of orchestra conductors, as the tacit liberalism of systems-thinkers in the 1960s had led them to hope, the designer represents a piecemeal, often inessential, node in a dispersed and ever-shifting division of labor.

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As for those who traditionally called themselves designers, such as architects, this leads to a further, our second, paradox. *Rather than “modernize” into a liberal profession and skills commensurate with market rationale, there is a regression from the high-modern moment into a new feudality, in that their virtuoso creations best align with the appreciation and whimsy of (individual and institutional) wealth-holders and the powerful.* One cannot but reiterate that this regression is also a political one. Today this neo-feudal whimsy is bolstered by an intersecting network of academia, biennales, auction houses, museums, and galleries within which these auteurs or would-be auteurs circulate. There is a profusion of avant-gardist “projects,” espousing a “criticality” that has less to do with critique in the epistemological sense than in conjuring up quixotic social utopias devoid of any actual social contract.

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1 The principal weight of my argument here will be to establish, and this is our third paradox,
2 the following: *no boundary science can exist without a metaphysical kernel that grounds it*. Put differ-
3 ently, design remains through and through a vocation that essentially invokes transcendence of
4 some kind in order to establish its legitimacy. The will to contingency embraced in design does
5 not augur a path to freedom but rather the opposite, a submission to some ineluctable, sovereign
6 spirit prone to arbitrariness and whimsy, which in the long run must be represented as the
7 twisted workings of genius. The accentuation of design in the economic sphere corresponds not
8 to an expansion of deliberative rationality but to a profession of faith.
9

10 If you do not know the story already, Google the words “Ordos 100,” under Images. Some-
11 where between items 1 and 10, you should see pictures of a large architectural site model taking
12 up a sizeable portion of a gallery space. The buildings are blocked out, low in resolution,
13 presumably emulating the profundity of minimalist sculpture. Beyond the large floor model, on
14 the periphery, you may see some drawing boards on the walls, dimly recognizable in the dis-
15 tance as renderings and drawings of individual buildings. Googling some more, you may chance
16 upon some of these plates: photo-real pictures of these luxury residences as if already built.
17 Further online browsing may throw up puff pieces, ruminations about the radical potentials of
18 this speculative venture, and perorations about renewed ontological commitment. (“It’s a big
19 challenge for us, to think about what is a house, what is architecture.”¹)

20 Ordos 100 was to be located in Kangbashi or New Ordos or Erdos (a southern Mongolian
21 dialect/toponym, cognate with Urdu, the Mughal “camp language”), a new state-driven urban
22 development in Inner Mongolia, conceived by local officials to cash in on a booming economy
23 driven by the discovery of the region’s huge coal and oil deposits, some 30 kms away from the
24 city of Dongsheng. Now called Old Ordos, Dongsheng was in fact an unplanned boomtown
25 dating back only to 2000, devoid of the laundered and consolidated amenities and services that
26 new “planned” developments could offer to a burgeoning elite. The sponsors for Ordos 100
27 were two corporations owned by the Chinese businessman Cai Jiang,² a local entrepreneur who
28 had made his career pursuing sundry local opportunities that the boom economy threw up, first
29 selling cashmere and freshwater pearls to the Russian market for recycled steel, subsequently
30 graduating to the regional dairy and coal industries, and eventually (and predictably) stepping
31 into land speculation and real estate. Cai’s proposal for a “creative district” in New Ordos was
32 responding to new policy incentives from Beijing on creative economies and cultural districts;
33 as with other such incentives that governments offer towards “green,” “sustainable,” “resilient,”
34 or other such tags, the kernel of these classifications consists in relaxed access to land and regu-
35 latory approvals. In the classic tradition of real estate kite-flying, Cai reportedly pledged \$600
36 million of his firm’s funds as seed to invite investments for the much larger amount required for
37 the project, with little known about the source of these funds. To garner recognition, Cai
38 approached, in 2007, the state-owned China Architecture Design & Research Group—one of
39 China’s Design Institutes mandated to technically supervise every built project—to carry out the
40 overall schematics of the proposed development. A “creative district,” composed of cultural
41 venues, artists’ studios, etc., was designated, as complement to a proposition to build 2500 resi-
42 dential units. Following yet another standard marketing strategy, an “Ordos Prize of Architec-
43 ture” was announced for Asian architects, both to bring visibility to the project as well as to
44 entice brand-recognized firms to the area. Of the residential units planned, Cai approached the
45 team behind the Chinese state’s biggest prestige project that year, the Olympics Bird’s Nest, Ai
46 Weiwei and Herzog and de Meuron (there are competing accounts about who was approached
47 first) to help design the highest sliver of that market: 100 villas prospectively priced at \$1.5
48 million each.



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Rather than take on the project themselves, the trio—with Ai designated as master-planner—restructured the brief such that 100 architects from around the world would be invited to design each of the villas. Invitations were sent out from Ai’s firm Fake Design, which caused some confusion among recipients about whether they were being spammed or pranked. In the event, the major players approached by the team passed on the offer. Since time was of the essence, the story goes, Herzog and de Meuron reached out to the smaller, hungrier outfits run by sundry adjunct and junior faculty in Western academia, the potential attraction being the radical cachet conferred by the “critical,” more concept-driven, outlook professed by this cadre. Harvard’s GSD, given Herzog and de Meuron’s berth there, was heavily represented, as were other circuits—New York, Mexico, Switzerland, the United Kingdom—where the curators had professional interests. No Chinese architect was included.

Each firm was given 100 days to design their project, with very few program requirements. For some of these practitioners whose output had been more “mediatic” than in actual commissions, the temptation of building something was substantial. A camera team from Ai Weiwei’s studio recorded the course of the two meetings in Ordos, and later posted the edited film on Ai’s website.³ It makes for uncomfortable viewing. Ai leads the proceedings with banal exhortations to the participants to put aside their individual/idiosyncratic approaches to arrive at some conceptual unity, perhaps even articulate a contemporary zeitgeist; the architects promptly respond by invoking the 1927 Weissenhofsiedlung or the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. The effort is dropped almost as soon as it is considered, with the agreement that the outcome would be, in the words of Harvard’s Preston Scott Cohen, “100 sculptures competing for attention” (Bernstein 2008). The conversation appropriately turns towards the virtues of pluralism. This “misfits” approach would result in a literal lack of fit: in final submission, when their models do not fit the holes cut out for them in the site model, the architects manually go to work, chamfering the edges of their site with X-Acto knives to wrest the few extra cardboard millimeters of space.

Many of the participants appear wary in terms of what they had gotten themselves into. Yale’s Keller Easterling pointedly posed the question to the *New York Times* journalist filing the story: “Are we just performers in another of Ai Weiwei’s pieces?” (Bernstein 2008). Ai’s mannerisms lend to proceedings an ironic air, if not post-colonial schadenfreude at the scene of 100 Western architects scurrying across oceans to seek out any opportunity for a commission. (The year before Ai had sent 1001 Chinese subjects to live on cots during the Documenta art fair in Kassel, Germany.) The participants are made to line up to receive their compensation, doled out by suited accountants in wads of multiple currencies that some scramble to count. All appear uncomfortable with this naked descent into transactionalism.

After the two meetings, there were exhibitions where the models and drawing boards were carted from China to galleries in Europe, the stomping grounds of the curatorial team. Subsequently, the airwaves went silent. The New Ordos development faded away like many a venture: postmortem reflections, drawing more from cultural studies than economics, adduced timeworn Orientalisms about China’s “overheated” economy, ghost-towns and asset bubbles, shady developers and non-transparent systems. Only a few of the buildings for the larger development were eventually built, along with five or so of the proposed projects on Ordos 100. None of the buildings were occupied. It took the anthropologist Michael A. Ulfstjerne three months after his arrival in March 2011 in Dongsheng/Kangbashi to find somebody who knew where the 198 hectares of the creative industries park or the Ordos 100 site was located. Ai Weiwei was in prison. Nobody seemed to know about the whereabouts of Cai Jiang; control over the property had gone to another local developer, the Liu Manshi group. It appeared that Cai may even have exited his ownership with a profit as land values continued escalating despite



1 none of the projects being built. We are, we discover, a long way from the sovereign concept
2 of territory espoused by Foucault or Lefebvre. Ai himself appeared to have been disenchanted
3 with the perils of playing architect: “I dislike the entire process, and I could be doing something
4 else ... there are so many other things to do, like fold a man of paper or go skipping stones” (Ai
5 2006).

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7 We note here the overlap of multiple realms of competence or speculation: the large architec-
8 ture firm, the small architecture firm, the art firm, the curatorial circuit (from galleries to bien-
9 nales), real estate developers, local chambers of commerce, construction firms, building materials
10 lobbies, the Design Institutes, “formal” and “informal” financiers, not to rule out personnel
11 manning the different nodes of jurisdictional facilitation and (de)regulatory procedures at the
12 municipal, regional, and national levels across multiple bureaucratic ambits: finance, land-use
13 and titling, environment, culture and creative industries, building codes, to name but a few.
14 There is, of course, also that crucial transactional entity that displaces sovereign authority in the
15 modern period, the political party system, in China ascribed as “monopolistic,” but in more
16 so-called competitive electoral arenas equally devoid of alternatives and increasingly defined
17 today by a thrust towards “strong” decision-making powers and untrammelled by the imperative
18 that Kant would substitute in the place of the sovereign, the exercise of “public reason.”⁴

19 As the antipode within this decision-making power, we include the state’s power to simply
20 say “no,” the domain of censorship. In its largest compass, this power comprises the where-
21 withal to curtail the rights of both domestic and international commerce and investment through
22 the management of taxes, tariffs, and licenses. City planning is such a censorial power, in that it
23 comprises a perpetual revision of what is allowable or not allowable in built space. In other
24 words, censorship does not connote some obdurate limit beyond which speculation may not
25 proceed, but rather constitutes a variety of devices in and *owing to which* speculation happens;
26 indeed limits and boundaries determine the very texture of artistic, territorial, and financial
27 speculation alike. Indeed censorship may derive from “democratic” imperatives, for example
28 the putative rights of a putative civil society in zoning territorial space quite in the same way
29 as they determine the visibility of, say, sex in public forums. A certain understanding of the aes-
30 thetic, even “art,” is here critical to *establishing* the norms of censorship as much as the rights of
31 speculation as well.⁵ It is not coincidental that art galleries and art networks have proved instru-
32 mental in the gentrification of post-industrial areas. Ai’s subsequent prosecution on alleged tax
33 evasion, in a move that many inevitably saw as a crackdown on dissidence, in that sense simply
34 represents the flipside of a long-existing bridge between art and commerce that Ordos 100, and
35 Ai in his larger career, and in what amounted to the edge of his radicalism, had done much to
36 underscore. If the aneconomic valuation of art confers to real estate speculation a higher price,
37 should the artist/real estate speculator be granted tax immunity?

38 In what follows, it will be helpful to have the multiple circuits of interest or competence laid
39 out above into two discrete precincts of legitimation. The first we provisionally name the realm
40 of “critique,” in that it refers to the norms of professional validation and expertise by which
41 projects of various kinds can be assayed and judged. The second we could call “territory,” which
42 encompasses on the other hand the sum total of global contingency, the decisions, infrastructural
43 outlays, and fragmented sovereignties that make up value in land. In the terms that we laid out
44 at the beginning of this essay, the realm of critique may be described as roughly corresponding
45 to the rubric of design, which is to say the finite set of actionable knowables that a discipline
46 chooses to work in order to forge its ways in the world. Territoriality, by the same yardstick, we
47 could define as the open-ended and potentially infinite set of maneuvers that define the rela-
48 tionship of land to markets. In the systems parlance of the 1960s that Herbert Simon would have



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well been familiar with, we can differentiate these two realms as “closed” and “open” systems respectively. As I have noted above, epistemologies of design subsist in the reduction of the latter to the former; more to the point, they would maintain that the reductive, closed system *must have* something of a predicative relationship (with so-called “margins of error”) (Dutta 2007; 2008) with the so-called open system of which it is a putative part. It is in this kernel of the “must have,” the Kantian *müssen* and the management of error that epistemology exposes itself as a faith, in the terms of various theologies of modernism, humanism, etc. It is also this faith, I would argue, that with the global spread of liberalism is inevitably being dressed over in the norms of transactionality. And it is here that I would like to place the principal brunt of my argument: all such reductions or transactions amount to nothing more than the profession of a faith. No system exists that can bridge the abyss between closed and open systems.

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Consider the four corporate entities involved in the Ordos venture: the firm, the state, the art gallery, and the university. A half-century ago, Pierre Bourdieu had written about the closed circuits of social or cultural capital: seemingly extra-economic networks that interlock with institutional flows of capital, producing nodes of valorization such that value in one system is able to be indexed as value in the other (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu was speaking to a central paradox of post-war *dirigisme*, where expertise in planning and government decisions appeared to derive not, despite claims to the contrary, from some neutral regime of rational deliberation, but from extramural circuits of cultural legitimacy, both filiative and affiliative (e.g., old school networks), whose basis remained starkly *unmodern*.

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In the Ordos saga, this pluralist terrain of capital is evinced in the developers’ and curators’ attempt to conflate the four circuits that we have identified above. For regional and municipal officers in Dongsheng (per capita income second only to Shanghai), urban development was an attempt to leverage and corral a runaway energy economy, where native raw materials were being siphoned off by large, monopsonistic, state-owned firms licensed from Beijing. In the official literature, the planning exercise thus characterized itself as the creation of “a new administrative centre due to existing ambiguities surrounding revenue streams and government restructuring.”⁶ For the provincial government, building new real estate was also a way of using up budgets (recently increased) sent down by the central government as part of a fiscal decentralization policy; local officials failing to spend an allocated budget risk “a reduction in future budget size, an appropriation of funds by central government, a series of political demotions and transfers, an adverse reputational impact, among other potential outcomes” (Chohan 2014). In the absence of other investment venues, new urban development appears as an allocative device, bundling together services that the state is required to provide (education, welfare, healthcare, security, etc.), with the hope that escalating land values from these rationalized and concentrated services would vouchsafe high revenue returns. Clarified property and tenorial rights would establish a smooth rent gradient (unlike older or cluttered/messy developments such as Dongsheng) that radiates outward from new city centers or so-called CBDs outward into residential districts: the so-called “Western urban land economics” (Hsieng 2010).

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Since *any* place might acquire these attributes—indeed these new (de)regulated terrains are being laid out the world over—there is then an effort to supplement place with symbolic capital. Ordos officials thus routinely took to pronouncing various “art,” “creative,” or “green” zones dressed up with the “imminent” construction of important buildings (theaters, museums, art workshops) both to utilize central government incentives in these categories as well as maintain a certain programmatic indeterminacy aimed at capturing the next shift in policy or investor interest:

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Architects "Getting Real"

1 After a secret permission, the [Creativity and Cultural Zone] might become a residential
2 area, or something else. In these times, there is no way of saying. You say this is residential
3 area, but it isn't; say these are villas, but at the same time they are not villas; say these are
4 offices, but then again they might not be.

(Ulfstjerne 2016a: 401)

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7 Zoning, that protean instrument of twentieth-century bargaining, becomes an absurd game of
8 predictive designation and unrealizable nostrums, on whose slippery deck governments and
9 firms carry out a dance of continuous regulatory transgression and plays of interest, with moves
10 writ from each side of the law. For example, eventually, the large villas planned for New Ordos
11 suddenly began to face regulatory headwinds from Beijing officials wishing to cool down an
12 overheated real estate sector. The developers who took over from Cai Jiang promptly redesignated
13 the cultural district as a botanical or zoological garden instead. As a former employ of Cai,
14 Xiao Bai, put it

15
16 these are not villas, they are botanical gardens or maybe even zoological gardens... All you
17 really need is a piece of paper stating that they are this or that kind of construction, some-
18 thing in line with regulations, just don't mention luxury villas.

(Ulfstjerne 2016a: 395)

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21 "Culture" is not separable from this unstable play of signifiers. Art galleries and universities, other
22 than simply *being real estate* (land was, and remains, a critical element in university endowments
23 since their founding) of a kind in that they are routinely adduced as cores of various "innovation"
24 or creative clusters or districts, similarly evince a delegitimation of terms, a shift in language games
25 wherein claims to epistemic value necessitate simultaneous gambits in multiple, unrelated spheres
26 of valorization. For instance, from much of the writing by and around Ai Weiwei, it becomes clear
27 that a central image that Ai Weiwei seeks to project is to cast himself, the artist, as a business firm.
28 Prominent mention is made of Ai's attention towards contracts, of his sub-contracting work to
29 other firms or manufactories to realize his "made in bulk" projects; here, the Duchampian alienation
30 from the aesthetic has transmogrified, by way of the mid-twentieth-century New York
31 scene of white-collar artists (Jones 1998), into a figure of the artist as contracted professional.
32 Inevitably this conflation of artist and firm returns liberalism to its eighteenth-century roots. The
33 downside of this amalgam was made poignantly visible in the course of Ai's subsequent incarceration
34 in 2011 by the Chinese government: the government insisted it was prosecuting Ai as a firm
35 that had evaded taxes, while Ai took to describing himself as an artist whose free speech was being
36 censored. Both claims were made against the background of the Chinese state's public relations
37 challenges in relation to the global market: the negative signals posed by punishing the artist-firm
38 vis-à-vis privileges promised to other firms seeking to invest in the Chinese market.

39 It is hard not to see these compound gambits as indeed firm-like behavior of a kind, in that
40 they seek to mitigate the risks of investment by spreading meaning across multiple realms or
41 circuits of capital, symbolic or otherwise. Lack of conceptual profundity can be mitigated if a
42 work fetches a high sale commission price on the market; in such cases price itself can be
43 drummed up to look like meaning. Conversely, a real estate speculation can always be dressed
44 up to look like conceptual art, if the models and drawings lay claims to "critique," with a com-
45 mercial afterlife in galleries and academic presses if the investors don't show up. We have not
46 yet worked out the myriad potentials hidden in the question "Is this art?" which in the after-
47 math of Duchamp has largely been seen as an argument for the anti-aesthetic. Symbolic capital,
48 as any anthropologist might tell you, is not a universal rubric but field-specific, coded, a kind of



tribal or feudal behavior. The hyphenated, portmanteau construct of the artist-firm-critic thus produces the work of art as if a hedge, a gambit to secure value in varied spheres with the expectation that some may not catch. In the aftermath of the Ordos fiasco, for instance, Ai Weiwei's film on Ordos 100 received an Official Selection for the International Film Festival in Rotterdam in 2012. Here, the Ordos project is presented not as a real estate venture but as a performance art project, with the architects, and their conception of architecture, as the targets all along. In subsequent, "approved" monographs by/on Ai, a callow schadenfreude makes itself visible:

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Photographs depict scenes that appear satirical in the context of China's reputation as the Western architect's gold mine. *The architects play perfectly into Ai's conceit.* Descending upon the Mongolian frontier in search of a golden commission, the swarms of black-clad designers find only sand. Unwittingly, or perhaps to conceal their late-dawning suspicions, the architects carried out the performance for the cameras by surveying the sand-swept landscape, noting the contextual features of a site defined by its very placelessness.⁷

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Keller Easterling's observation about the whole exercise being a performance piece, above, was thus prescient, but only in retrospect; had the Ordos 100 venture actually taken wing, "critique" would have had quite another valence altogether. In the event, Easterling appears to have matched play for play, insincerity by insincerity, by defining her building's program not in terms of recognizable architectural figures but as blank cultural commentary on media headlines reflecting various Chinese clichés. A nonsense architecture as it were, presuming architecture is about making sense: "A magician's box has extra space and trap doors. The rare Mongolian antelope stores fat in unlikely places. Big villas need home entertainment. Most of China's Olympic swimmers are girls" (Scharmen n.d.). At the same time, we note that this repartee, the critique of critique, circulates in *exactly the same circuits* in our description above of Ai's own plural gambits for validity. There is not a shift in type of game or in the rules of the game; the contest is rather one of big players and small players in the marketplace of wit.

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Easterling's causticism nevertheless underscored the other participants' muted but equally evident credulousness towards the project: this too is evident in Ai's film (therefore not so "late-dawning" as Ai's ghost-written, chortling account above might have it). Rather, some of the architects take this "entrapment" as a sign of an existential problem, of their predicament in the world. For instance, as Alejandro Arevana, one of the participants, puts it to the camera: "I think [contemporary architecture] is irrelevant. Architects work with issues that only interest other architects." The architects know that they are the butt of a joke, but Ai is not the joker, or at least not the important one. The interlocutor whose intentions they struggle to descry is the *developer*, not the representative of a profession but a sort of hyphenated avatar—of a local warlord, a commodities trader, a political broker, or money launderer, it does not matter which—equally seeking to diversify its risk:

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Whenever you work for a big company that size, this is a big ... rich ... man, you never know exactly where the money comes from, if in the end he will really do it, if he will change his mind, or put your house somewhere else, or tell a Chinese architect to do it better, whatever, you have to jump and see in the end what happens, projects in China are not about absolute control, about absolutely knowing what will happen.⁸

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The Mexican architect Francisco Pardo points out, in this context, the disappearance of what in the modernist era would be defined as the public interest: "We do a lot of developing in Mexico. We never meet the final client. We only meet the intermediary that is the developer."

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1 The client-interlocutor represents the interlocutor of an interlocutor of an interlocutor, an
2 incomprehensible morass of interests in which practice and/or truth has to forge its way. In such
3 a situation, a transactionally derived “will to contingency” appears as both problem and solu-
4 tion, an unfathomable chess game played without the rules of chess:
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6 Mr. Ai, who is known as a provocateur, encouraged the architects to keep asking questions,
7 though he rarely provided answers.

8 But he did offer some specific comments on the houses by the first 28 teams. At one
9 point, he told Mr. Meredith and Ms. Sample that a garage building on their property
10 seemed a bit too big and would overpower a neighboring house. “Why don’t you take
11 some time and see if you can adjust it,” he said gently.

12 But they didn’t need time. Mr. Meredith simply reached over to the cardboard model
13 and ripped the garage off its base, exposing a patch of blue cardboard.

14 “Good, a swimming pool,” said Mr. Ai, smiling.

15 (Bernstein 2008)

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17 Such is “practice” in the *mise en abyme* of validation, the “task environment” in the field of flex-
18 ible accumulation. Inevitably this has signal effects on the sphere from which so many of the
19 Ordos 100 architects obtain their legitimacy: the university. If we remember, for regional offi-
20 cials and developers in Kangbashi, the air of “criticality” vested in inviting 100 international
21 architects must be seen as itself a marketing strategy, aimed at garnering copious free ad copy in
22 the myriad media columns devoted to following such cultural events and “provocations” across
23 the world. “Assembling a ... contingent of reputable, but relatively inexperienced designers
24 whose potential as *critical* theorists and disciplinary practitioners [is still unfounded]” (Ai and Pins
25 2018: 287), with Ai Weiwei and Herzog and de Meuron as curators, was explicitly designed to
26 lend land speculation an aura of speculative discernment, of sifting through diamonds in the
27 rough, etc., with the premise that global investors might invest in properties as executives in an
28 art investment fund might go around scouring the art fair or the biennale scene.

29 Criticality thus becomes a gambit for monetization. On the other hand, *within* academia, this
30 engineering of minor fame—“We got a little taste of what it’s like to be Zaha Hadid”⁹—is
31 ironically cast by its recipients as a much-needed push towards “practice” and hard-nosed prag-
32 matism, *against* critique seen as the preserve of seminars and scholars. A legerdemain takes place,
33 where the “inexperience” adduced above, seen as value-additive for investments, is redefined
34 by the architects, by the very fact of participating in this curatorial venture, into a badge of
35 experience. If Ai and Easterling’s use of irony in their projects might be seen as hedges, with an
36 express view to the reuse of their material in alternative venues, something similar might be
37 happening with the other participants as well. Ines Weizman and Andreas Thiele’s contribution
38 might be considered the most pronounced in this respect, comprising a proposal to build Adolf
39 Loos’s phantasmatic Josephine Baker house, a provocation guaranteed to launch a few dozen
40 term papers (“What does copying mean for architecture?”) in “critical theory” seminars in
41 Western institutions. The “project” was reinstalled in the Venice Architecture Biennale in
42 2012. The Ordos 100 projects will thus also have had a career in the participants’ professional
43 resumes, in the form of departmental lectures, self-published monographs, and exhibitions, not
44 to rule out resumes and career portfolios; presumably they will be portrayed as examples of the
45 architects’ encounters with the “real world,” of having what it takes, and so on.

46 In academia, curatorship or participation in exhibitions, totted up in self-published mono-
47 graphs, are now evinced strangely as examples of professional *practice*, which now appears as a
48 nebulous category unencumbered by the methodological constraints either of falsifiable research



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or of project execution. In the case of the Ordos 100 architects, it is not hard to imagine, in tenure or other appointment dossiers, the obligatory supporting letter from Herzog and de Meuron testifying to the candidate’s participation in the Ordos venture—“an honor to be selected”—as in itself a sign of professional and creative superiority. Curatorship here is thus like a currency note that can be cashed in at multiple venues. A private network—to quote Herzog: “We had to rely on our networks”¹⁰—thus becomes, in passing through the seemingly “objective” procedures of tenure and peer review, a public roster of genius. The neo-feudal, Bourdieuan world has not withered away.

In Ai’s film, we nonetheless confront the architects’ patent confrontation with what we might call the classic liberal predicament of the “pluralist aesthete”: on the one hand, a well-meaning air of political innocence, even naivety, a wanting to do good, and on the other, the necessity to act, with the requisite suspiciousness towards outcomes, in what they (mis)cognize as their pragmatism or their “agency,” terms that are taken to mean that what architects do in some way determines their power to effect change in the world. It is rather that today both the modernist conception of pragmatism and its postmodern critique or counter-practice appear to be increasingly undone in a universe where one does not quite know what one has to be pragmatic about, of the link between practice and its end. In such a situation, pragmatism returns to its Lutheran roots, as the practice of virtue without eschatological expectation. “You have to jump,” take risks, see what happens; one cannot know the path to paradise. The fatalisms of the old feudal world more or less drew on the bias that things would turn out badly in this world no matter how earnestly one strives towards the good. By contrast, contemporary institutional ideology presses the reverse: that things must turn out well no matter how bad it gets. What Albert O. Hirschman once called “the bias for hope” is today exacerbated into a “fatalism of hope.” One must enthuse at all times even if there is no joy in the proceedings. The authoritative cultural script for this unfree engagement is provided by Rem Koolhaas’s *Singapore Songlines*, a text that maintains the legerdemain of Europe as the fount of an ecstatic *civitas*: “We think there can be no pleasure” (Koolhaas 1995: 1015). To quote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:

But pluralist aesthetes of the First World are, willy-nilly, participants in the production of an exploitative society. Hence in *practice*, [the modernizing Third World anti-insurgency police] must destroy the enemy, the menacing other. He follows the contingencies of what he sees as his historical moment. There is a convenient colloquial name for that as well: pragmatism. Thus his emotions at killing [political insurgents] are mixed: sorrow (theory) and joy (practice). Correspondingly, we [i.e., liberal aesthetes in the First World] grieve for our Third World [counterparts]; we grieve and rejoice that they must lose themselves and become as much like us as possible in order to be “free”; we congratulate ourselves on our specialists’ knowledge of them.

(Spivak 1987: 179)

Matters are not thus much changed if we consider where this joyful rush to agency manifests itself as its opposite, in various forms of political radicalism or “resistance” movements in academia that mobilize the same institutional venues and biennale circuits. In its most limited sense, this presents itself as a kind of solipsism, disguised as an overconscientious regard for the “other.” Take for instance Tatiana Bilbao, “I design the house for me, because I don’t know the people who are going to live there, I don’t understand the culture, how they live” (Ai 2012). This, from an architect. In its more strident variants, this radicalism can comport itself as a form of activism. A case in point could be the campaign, after a Human Rights Watch report (Human Rights Watch 2006) against the exploitation and abuse of South Asian emigrant labor in the



1 Persian Gulf Emirates, against major universities, museum corporations, and architectural brand-
2 names such as Zaha Hadid, Jean Nouvel, Raphael Viñoly, Frank Gehry, and Tadao Ando, for
3 their involvement in various business ventures there. In question was a development compar-
4 able to Ordos, building creative and cultural assets and districts to diversify investment patterns
5 in a region buoyed largely by a single-resource, energy economy.¹¹ Quite like Cai Jiang and Ai
6 Weiwei, corporate executives at New York University, at the Louvre, the British Museum, and
7 the Guggenheim had partnered with sovereign wealth-holding corporations in the Gulf with
8 the same assumption: that cultural/academic brands could be used to sell real estate in the desert,
9 leasing out their name as well as personnel, at the requisite premiums, to provide academic/
10 cultural services in a part of the world where such metropolitan goods were scarce.

11 We do not have the space here to offer a blow-by-blow account of the campaign, led largely
12 by university-based academics and artists and architects, against these developments. Whatever
13 by their objectives, however well-meaning, it becomes clear that for the agitators, the equation
14 wrought by the “relatively inexperienced” architects in the Ordos 100 equation might be said
15 to be working here in reverse. If for the Ordos promoters, association with “critical” brand-
16 names to create cultural content was good advertising strategy, in the case of the Gulf projects
17 it was precisely the value of the brand, and the marketing element, that the agitationists
18 approached as their sole point of “leverage,” as the New York University sociologist Andrew
19 Ross put it (2015: 15).¹² An article in the *New Yorker* spelled it out: “The country spends tens of
20 millions of dollars—probably hundreds of millions—on P.R. firms to improve its image. A
21 single human-rights report can undo the work of fifty million dollars” (Azimi 2016). Through-
22 out the campaign, the fronts of activism remained almost hermetically sealed within the same
23 intramural circuits, focused entirely on extracting concessions from *Western* institutions and
24 figures. It seems not to have occurred to the campaigners that the appropriate legal forum for
25 such a campaign was in fact the sovereign nations of South Asia themselves—such indeed was
26 the point made to them by an Indian activist working in the field¹³—who were the only bodies
27 constitutionally bound to protect the interests of their citizens, within their boundaries and
28 elsewhere. If the architects in Ordos were deprived of an eventual contract, here we are con-
29 fronted by a political activism equally devoid of an actual social contract.

30 In the end, Walid Raad’s negotiations with the Guggenheim involved measures that had
31 nothing to do with South Asia but a kind of score-settling about the New York art world itself,
32 and *its* overlaps with real estate dynamics; quite in the fashion of Ines Weizman’s proposal for
33 the Baker House in Ordos. The artists proposed that the museum re-exhibit the exhibition it
34 had notoriously cancelled in 1971, Hans Haacke’s *Shapolsky et al.* (Haacke seems not to have
35 understood his signing-on to the campaign as posing a conflict of interest.) Initially somewhat
36 rattled and amenable to “negotiation,” the museums soon enough came to the conclusion that
37 the brouhaha would have little impact on investors and stopped talking to the protestors. The
38 Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and Zayed National Museum were not realized not because of labor
39 practices but because the market simply went in a different direction. The labor practices on
40 Gulf building sites continue as before; for the artists, the biennales go on.

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42 In the Kantian sense, to critique means to equip oneself with the means to judge. Thus, in the
43 post-Kantian/Romantic university, knowledge production does not subsist in producing
44 “truths” that literally mirror the external world; this is impossible, since externality or the uni-
45 verse *as such* is precisely what is unknown. Knowledge can only be reflexive. It can only be ver-
46 fied according to a procedure, one that it itself creates. This epistemic “finitude”—we can only
47 test how we know, not what we know—thus inherently relies on, rather it launches, a pluralism
48 of expertise invested in producing and testing these procedures, by which agreements as to



various truths can be reached. As such, the Kantian system of the university was always fatally flawed: it promotes an institutional empowerment of knowledge-expertise based on consensus (quite like the liberal nation-state for which the university styles itself as a proxy), thus paradoxically rendering these privileged epistemic protocols vulnerable to capture by multiple tentacles of interest. The old arguments for postmodernity thus argued for a disempowerment of knowledge paradigms, calling our attention instead towards the political economy of research and knowledge systems: a “counter-practice” of observing *how* statements were used, and by whom, rather than what they said (Lyotard 1984; Dutta 2013).

The relationship between the state and the university in that post-Kantian imaginary was thus more than one of mere bureaucratic devolution or about the protection of academic privilege (on the feudal principle of the estates). Rather, these reflexive procedures unite them in a shared *telos*; state and university represent but two filiative outgrowths of an organum (among other such estates, the courts, the executive, the press, etc.) wherein knowledge and power—a claim and the legal right to make that claim—are both seen to derive from a methodological impetus for verification that, in its very establishment and in its institutionalization, *becomes* verification. The procedures of knowledge production provide the structural basis for authority in state and academic operations alike: in the post-Kantian imaginary, the stability of this reflexive structure posits as its counterpart the programmatic ideal of fostering various “experiments” as a way of rendering supple this knowledge/power bind, open to transformation and ontogenesis. It is in this sense of a failed experiment or failed speculation that the exhibition and films of the *Ordos 100* project re-enter the validity circuits of the university. The university thus epitomizes, or even provides, the crux of the state as a gambit for institutional and territorial continuity, a risk-managing maneuver aimed at bridging the abyss between the closed systems of knowledge and practice and the open, viral trajectories of capital. The knowledge-driven “expert” and the sovereign mechanisms of monetary and fiscal management would thus develop as two conjunct and contrapuntal organs of post-Kantian governmentality.

The contemporary crisis of expertise is thus primarily a crisis of the post-Kantian imaginary. As the celerity of liberated capital movements force commensurate real-time reaction (with the commensurate arbitrariness) by state authorities at all levels, there is an increased delinking of the state’s monetary authority from its assumption of epistemic authority, since any “experiment” in the classic sense takes too long in comparison to the unpredictable and erratic terrain that investments are required to negotiate. There can be no planning, since at best plans are consigned to merely marking deliberative moments in a temporal universe of competing interest where such deliberation becomes just one more stake, another fount of interest. If in the post-Kantian frame epistemic reflexivity represented the countervailing moment of the state’s propulsive behavior (the ideal of progress), there is now an unraveling of that contrapuntal arrangement. There is a change in ideology from, say, the Popperian dictum on falsifiability where statements are required to be amended in the face of counter-evidence that undoes the validity of a claim. By contrast, in the contemporary ideological conjuncture, the primary demand on a knowledge claim is that it be, like a real estate venture, equipped with an exit strategy: one must know when to pack up and capitalize on rising land values even if the buildings haven’t even struck ground. Reflexivity and decision, traditionally posed in epistemology in terms of a tension, increasingly acquire the semblance of two unknotted threads no longer having anything to do with each other.

The university can no longer retain its germinational significance, as a redoubt of philosopher-princes tasked to mull over the *telos* of the nation-state and its people, defining goods, allocational ethics, narrative imaginary, and so on. Elsewhere I have typologized some other functions that equally, if not more substantially, describe the proliferating business briefs of the university:

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1 as conduit for state-fiscal stimuli, as tax haven, as investment portfolio, as real estate developer,
2 as advertising billboard, as entrepreneurial incubator, as labor sub-contractor, entertainment
3 franchise (sports), as consulting firm, as biofinance (investment vehicle vested in the governance
4 of life, such as National Institutes of Health), as vehicle of soft power (Dutta 2014, 2015). The
5 predicament of a real estate developer or regional official in Inner Mongolia and a professor or
6 dean in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is not so qualitatively far apart as we would have imagined.
7 After all, universities serve as the exemplar for the so-called creative or innovational districts that
8 the New Ordos would imitate. In the Ordos project, as in the university, it is not clear to what
9 intent or effect statements are made or can be made: at best one *hopes* that a statement may have
10 some effect, but a commitment to that outcome may itself prove to be counter-productive.
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12 This essay began by positing theories of design that, in the mid-twentieth century and at the height
13 of the power of the universities, explicitly sought to constrain knowledge production as an open-
14 ended vocation and orient it towards more performative ends. On some level this amounts to
15 nothing more than folk or karmic wisdom (know/talk less, do more); on the other hand, this
16 served as a robust reminder of epistemic finitude that harks back to the metaphysics of the eight-
17 eenth century. Knowledge subsists in a perpetual state of incompleteness, a principal consequence
18 of which is that it cannot know its own ends. The radical incomprehension posited in Kant's "Cri-
19 tique of Teleological Judgment" thus resurfaces at the very moment when one portends to do
20 away with romanticism. It is in the post-Kantian imaginary of incompleteness that a regulatory "will
21 to contingency" as the very essence of "the human" appears. The "events" or "happenings" celeb-
22 rated by the *soixante huitards* thus resurrect a well-worn post-Kantian motif, placing it at the heart
23 of design just as Kant had restructured the aesthetic within the heart of mimesis.

24 In this context, one facet of Ordos 100 presents itself as conspicuous, not so much in the context
25 of this project per se but as a symptom of a more general, cultural shift present in both the profes-
26 sion and academia. Look back onto the images you chanced upon in the Google search, and con-
27 sider what we have discussed above, whether in Ordos or in Saadiyat Island, regarding the extreme
28 precariousness and provisional nature of these ventures. Easterling's and Weizman's projects here
29 go to the nub of the problem, in that architecture's value here is entirely discursive, an element of
30 branding, rather than placed in its modernist self-image, of resolving programmatic challenges,
31 since in any case one does not know what the program is. Given that systemic indefiniteness, what
32 strikes one in the Ordos project renderings is the emphatic priority on formal *completion*. Each
33 building is presented as a hermetic whole, its surfaces hyper-articulated in the most exquisite digital
34 renderings, lit up to show considerable application of mind as to choices of material and texture.
35 The response to programmatic indefiniteness, it would appear, is a high-definition aesthetics.
36 In the absence of content, there is a premium on formal resolution, and the material finishes are wrought
37 with little regard for supply chains, budgetary considerations, or operational and maintenance
38 constraints. The architecture arrives as if fully resolved, even if nothing else is resolved. I would
39 argue that this impetus towards phantasmatic completion is a reflection of the manner in which
40 *land*—for architects, "site"—is being restructured in global economic movements today. Consider
41 the behavior of the developers in Ordos: land is made available so that *anything* could be put there,
42 if the right conditions obtain. Conversely, land itself becomes only one commodity in a basket of
43 investment choices: investors can move investments from coal to real estate one day, and then,
44 contingent on market movements, opt out as land prices rise to park investments in the media
45 sector, and so on. There is a shift from the old, productivist universe, where land is a primary
46 input, to a purely speculative territoriality: the availability of land is styled not in response to a
47 production demand, but because it *could be* used in some way or another. The term "land-use"
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palpably becomes a nonsense designation, since use is precisely what must be kept fungible as a major feature of the stimulus. The relationship of part and whole are thus intrinsically changed: one has no organic relationship to the other. Apropos Tatiana Bilbao’s “I don’t understand the culture, how they live,” in Ordos, like the land on which it sits, building is no longer an anthropological receptacle since there is no anthropos or ethnos to speak of. It is the designer who exemplifies the cultural subject, who is tasked with injecting place into a non-place.

Land must be seen as receptive to shifts of investment at a moment’s notice, filled with infra-structural plenitude, ever ready to be installed and made operational in relation to investment decisions where tenurial rights are held not to be used but as leverage in larger bundles of investments. Correspondingly, form no longer corresponds to function, since they are not of the same time or place: there is an extirpation of program. And like the land itself, professional legitimacy in design lies in the projection of an air of perpetual readiness in the face of radical ignorance, ever prepared to instantly dress up the carapaces of space without any power over its contents. The aura of completion does not indicate an aesthetic choice, a design, but rather a resume, a performative demonstration that one *could* perform, *were* one asked. One would submit that this is not an exhibit of pragmatism but a rehearsal of the medieval Christian conception of guilt. There occurs, in the name of design, precisely what design claims to work against, a total disjunction between cause and effect. There is also a colloquial name for such expectation: faith.

Notes

- 1 Sou Fujimoto, quoted in Ai (2012).
- 2 Michael A. Ulfstjerne’s field-studies conducted in the aftermath provide us with great anthropological insight and factual detail into the Ordos phenomenon, including Cai Jiang’s role. See Ulfstjerne (2013, 2016a, 2016b).
- 3 Ai, *Eeduosi 100/Ordos 100* (2012).
- 4 The relevant texts on Kant’s argument on public reason, put forth in his 1784 newspaper article, “What Is Enlightenment?” has been compiled in Schmidt (1996).
- 5 John J. Costonis’s writing from the 1980s offers us an exemplary window into this role of aesthetics. See Costonis (1989).
- 6 *Erds Urban Region Development Strategy*, 2005, Bert de Muynck, “Architecture on the Move,” quoted in Ai and Pins (2018: 248).
- 7 Perhaps realizing the public relations risk inherent in this description, the article adds a caveat: “Ai remained a sincere host.” Ai and Pins (2018: 293).
- 8 Interview with Simon Hartmann of HHF Architects, Zurich, in Ai (2012).
- 9 Michael Meredith, in Bernstein (2008).
- 10 Speaking to the *New York Times*, Herzog stated that the 100 architects selected for the project did not reflect any objective criteria, but rather, given the urgency pressed by the client, reflected who they knew and could call on (Bernstein 2008).
- 11 Details of this affair can be found in the following sources: Ross (2015), Azimi (2016), Gulf Labor Artist Coalition website (n.d.).
- 12 Andrew Ross, “Leveraging the Brand: A History of Gulf Labor,” in Ross (2015).
- 13 See comments made by P. Naraswamy of the Palamoori Migrant Labour Union (PMLU) made to Paula Chakravartty and Nitasha Dhillon on their field visit to India on behalf of the campaign: “Indeed, they held government agencies directly responsible for failing to enforce ILO conventions on responsible recruitment practices” (Chakravartty and Dhillon 2015: 55).

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