

Reiser and Umemoto: Otherness and Incompletion

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Jesse Reiser and Nanako Umemoto's architecture is the process of architecture. In Andrew Benjamin's introduction to Reiser and Umemoto's monograph "Reiser + Umemoto: Selected Works," he states that Reiser and Umemoto do not create the novel in their work, they create otherness that cannot be reduced to a singular tradition.¹ The architecture cannot be reduced because they never allow it to reach a state where it can be criticized or interpreted beyond the act of making architecture. Reiser and Umemoto have otherness in their architecture. The otherness is not their formal language; it is the idea that their architecture is a non-architecture. Through excess and movement of vector fields in the Globe Theater, Cardiff Bay Opera House, and Yokohama Port Terminal, Reiser and Umemoto set up a language for the act of architecture, but never the architecture itself.

Reiser and Umemoto's project for the Globe Theater in 1987 explores the idea of excess and mechanization. Reiser and Umemoto first formed a papier maché ball out of the Yellow Page. They sanded down the ball until it was smooth and the layered Yellow Pages exposed and hid multiple layers of text. Reiser and Umemoto then selected plausible letter combinations plausible as words and charted these combinations into the "Book of Sigils." The letter combinations then were charted to create line drawings, which were in turn used to create the shadow both and chaise for the Globe Theater.

Reiser writes in Walczak's book on the London Project that he chose text to create the theater because text is the flow of our contemporary society.² Text surrounds and is discarded by society; it is a field from which the project can rise. In his 2001 essay "The New Fineness," Reiser states that he uses materials not for their physical use or

¹ Andrew Benjamin, *Reiser + Umemoto: Recent Projects* (London: Wiley and Sons Academy Editions, 1998), 9.

² Marek Walczak, *The London Project* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), 2.2.

representation of a built structure, but for the qualities one can achieve when manipulating the material.³ This is a similar argument to “Solid-State Architecture.”⁴ Each material has its own properties, and the forces taken to bend or distort it are unique. Reiser and Umemoto extract these forces from the material, laying their interest in the material’s guide to the spatial manipulations they can achieve in the vector field. The material is an easily disregarded tool to find new ways of shaping space. In the Globe Theater, the medium they work through is text. Through the process, the letters are rearranged and distorted, the mechanization and categorization of the letters dissolves their initial properties. The letters are no longer seen or important, only that they were changed is.

Reiser’s ultimate thesis in “The New Fineness” is that the human can be reunited with the architectural project through artificial engagement with natural.⁵ By detaching themselves further from the final product and only focusing on the process, Reiser says he is creating an architecture with human effects. Reiser and Umemoto use these three steps to remove themselves from the final output. The first step of the process, creating the papier maché ball, results in what Reiser calls a “sensual” or “tactile” object, which is still too close to the human condition to be applicable to what they want to do.⁶ The affect of the papier maché ball supersedes the material condition and process; it does not achieve the “artificially attenuated existence.”⁷ This is the only moment where Reiser and Umemoto discuss the human condition in architecture beyond the need for pushing the

³ Jesse Reiser, “The New Fineness,” *Assemblage* (The MIT Press), no. 41 (2001): 65.

⁴ Andrew Benjamin, *Reiser + Umemoto: Recent Projects* (London: Wiley and Sons Academy Editions, 1998), 49.

⁵ Jesse Reiser, “The New Fineness,” *Assemblage* (The MIT Press), no. 41 (2001): 65.

⁶ Marek Walczak, *The London Project* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), 2.3.

⁷ Marek Walczak, *The London Project* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), 2.7.

button of mechanization. Because this is not discussed in other works or played upon by other academics of the time, the idea the Reiser and Umemoto are playing to the human sensibility is false. By creating an unfinished architecture, they are allowing the human to fill in their own formal projections on the project. The otherness comes not from their ability to affect the human sensibility, but by leaving any discussion about human experience open ended. Reiser and Umemoto are showing the how, and the user's own projections make the why.

The Globe Theater project exemplifies the idea of the object-text. Eisenman discusses the idea of architecture as writing in his 1984 article "The End of the Beginning, the End of the End."⁸ He sees writing as the act of massing, not the massing itself. The architecture is about making the architecture, not the physical result. Eisenman calls this trace, which is not the real; it is the action of the real. Trace is its own process; it is not the end image. Although Reiser and Umemoto are not accused of being in Eisenman's camp, Eisenman's definition of writing in architecture aptly applies to the Globe Theater. The documentation Reiser and Umemoto's Globe Theater does not cover the end product to the extent that it covers the making and function of the machines themselves. The shadow box is an afterthought to the creation of the engendering plate. The Globe Theater project is the object-text because it focuses on the act of architecture.

Daniel Libeskind and his Writing Machine are direct influences on Reiser and Umemoto's work. Daniel Libeskind's Writing Machine is the result of Libeskind's three lessons of architecture: lesson a, reading architecture; lesson b, remembering architecture; lesson c. writing architecture. Libeskind sees the three lessons as interdependent; their

⁸ Peter Eisenman, "The End of the Classical: The End of the Beginning, the End of the End," *Perspecta* (Yale University School of Architecture) 21 (1984): 171 .

purposes are to “release the end to itself.”⁹ The end here is really the beginning, which Libeskind sees as the experience of architecture. By using the lessons and corresponding machines, he is removing the object from architecture, creating only the experience. The experience Libeskind discusses is different from Reiser’s idea of the human sensibility in “The New Fineness.” Libeskind is using the experience of architecture as the act of creating, while Reiser’s experience is the physical experience of the end form. The reading machine gives the experience of reading. The revolutions never let the books fall out of place, yet the reader must work hard to turn the wheel of existing texts. The memory machine is meant to project the future.

The writing machine processes both memory and reading.¹⁰ The reading machine becomes fully engaged in its own process, both the art and science are forgotten for the mechanics of the machine. The forty-nine cubes have four exposed sides. The four sides consist of: a broken plan of Palmanova, a mirror, a geometric sign which points to the horoscope, and the forty-nine saints from Roussel’s *Impressions of Africa*. The machine spins each cube randomly, each cube independent of the next. The written text produced by the machine cannot be controlled or predicted, there is almost no human hand involved.

For Libeskind’s writing machine, images of the product of the writing machine are practically nonexistent. The writing machine not only writes, but in its documentation it remains in Eisenman’s realm of trace, where the real does not exist, only the action of the real. Both Libeskind’s writing machine and Eisenman’s idea of *trace* seek to negate

⁹ Daniel Libeskind, "Three Lessons in Architecture," in *Countersign*, 37-61 (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992), 38.

¹⁰ Daniel Libeskind, "Three Lessons in Architecture," in *Countersign*, 37-61 (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992), 43.

the object and produce only the experience of architecture. For Libeskind, the experience of architecture is in the detachment from it. Reiser and Umemoto also seek detachment in their Globe Theater project. The architect only pushes a button, allowing the architecture to be within and against the architectural act.

In K. Michael Hay's afterword for *The London Project*, Hays argues that the object-text deletes authorship and imposes criticism before there is an aesthetic object.¹¹ Hays sees the aesthetic object, or final result, as interrupted by the criticism of this object. The focus of the object-text is not in representation, but acts as the "recording device" for the project, putting the process into motion void of artistic intention. The object-text works against Hays' aesthetic object, which is nothing more than the artist's response to his own criticality. Reiser and Umemoto are breaking this cycle in their Globe Theater project. They remove criticality and aesthetics, focusing only on mechanization. Mechanization cannot be criticized or further interpreted, as its own inertia keeps it in motion. The machine's own workings that protect it from criticality. This absence from the critical and formal readings of the building creates the otherness of Reiser and Umemoto's architecture. The formal language of the Globe Theater is not new, only the exposure of the act of writing.

That Reiser and Umemoto search for the architect's detachment from architecture at first seems ironic. In "Solid-State Architecture," Reiser argues against the placelessness that comes with computer design.¹² Without site, the expanded field that Reiser and Umemoto work within cannot be found, thus the continuation of this field is impossible. The human detachment that Reiser and Umemoto seek directly corresponds

¹¹ Marek Walczak, *The London Project* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), 8.1.

¹² Andrew Benjamin, *Reiser + Umemoto: Recent Projects* (London: Wiley and Sons Academy Editions, 1998), 49.

to the attachment of architecture to its site and expanded field. Reiser and Umemoto see the site as a vector field from which the building rises. The site is mechanized, and the materials of the project, as described in “Solid-State Architecture,” use the vector field to create a continuation and disturbance in it. The disturbance of the vector field is more aptly shown in the Cardiff Bay Opera House and Yokohama Port Terminal.

Reiser and Umemoto are fascinated with geodesics. The rule of geodesics is that every load is carried along the shortest possible path. Geodesic structures can remain light while also having extreme redundancy to the point that the structure is nonessential. Reiser argues that because the system is both flexible and complex, it could adapt to new formations without an increase in the existing state of complexity.¹³ The structure can change and adapt fluidly to changes in the program. Reiser also sees use in linking heterogeneous elements. The complexity and homogeneity of the structure would hold and mask the disparate parts.

In the Cardiff Bay Opera House competition entry of 1994, Reiser and Umemoto use a “geodetic bag” to link the ground level and auditorium. The geodetic structure can easily transform from encapsulating the main concourse to the three tubes, the lobbies for the auditorium.¹⁴ Reiser is more concerned with using the dome as a smoothing tool between the two parts than the end effect of smoothing the parts. Throughout his explanation of the Cardiff Bay Opera House design, he is excited about the geodesic dome possibilities and transformations, but does not supply any reason for his design outside the material experimentations and manipulations. In this way, the geodesic dome

¹³ Andrew Benjamin, *Reiser + Umemoto: Recent Projects* (London: Wiley and Sons Academy Editions, 1998), 56.

¹⁴ Andrew Benjamin, *Reiser + Umemoto: Recent Projects* (London: Wiley and Sons Academy Editions, 1998), 57.

becomes an object-text for this project. The project is not given criticality nor is it given any formal reading. The geodesic bag, which can be read as the manipulation of forces, not solely the manipulation of material, is a vector field pointing in different directions, showing the movement in the field without creating the movement itself.

Reiser and Umemoto's Yokohama Port Terminal competition entry in 1995 works in a similar way to the Cardiff Bay Opera House. Greg Lynn interprets this project as an example of topological architecture, a continuous blob-like system that could extend beyond the localized project.¹⁵ Lynn notices that Reiser and Umemoto's excessive structure allow for the expansion of structure to allow program in while retaining the "blob-like" roof shape. While Lynn is excited about the new forms this allows, Reiser and Umemoto are less interested in the formal implications, and focus on the structural shifts free of formal implications.

Reiser writes that Yokohama is a "smoothly functioning link between land and water."¹⁶ The theme of a link or transition is also in the transitional phase of the Cardiff Bay Opera house. Neither building is really in a state of equilibrium, but a state of stasis, a pause in a movement. Reiser further states that the terminal is an incomplete building, only complete when the link is activated.

Yokohama uses a steel-shed structure popular in the nineteenth century. Reiser and Umemoto reappropriate the structural logic of the steel-shed, changing it from a pure homogenous structure to one of complex deviations,¹⁷ like the warping of the geodesic structure in the Cardiff Bay Opera House. The manipulation of the structure allows for

¹⁵ Greg Lynn, "Blobs, or Why Tectonics is Square and Topology is Groovy," *ANY 14*, May 1996: 61.

¹⁶ Andrew Benjamin, *Reiser + Umemoto: Recent Projects* (London: Wiley and Sons Academy Editions, 1998), 63.

¹⁷ Andrew Benjamin, *Reiser + Umemoto: Recent Projects* (London: Wiley and Sons Academy Editions, 1998), 63.

more complex spaces that can still be smoothly linked under the continuous structure, like the geodesic bag. The continuous complex spaces are analogous to the broader idea of linking between the water and land. The steel-shed structure is not contained locally to the building, but is part of larger field of vectors and forces that expand far beyond the terminal. The steel-shed manipulation, as told by Reiser in “The New Fineness” is the way to express a manipulation of forces. The twists and turns in the Yokohama terminal are smoothly connected because they are part of a larger system; the terminal is just a twist. The internal workings of the terminal are also part of this twist.

Reiser and Umemoto have not developed any formal language. The excess of structure in the Yokohama Port Terminal and Cardiff Bay Opera house directly defy the purity of modernism, which had its own formal language and criticality to complement it. The idea of excess means that certain parts could be removed; therefore the project has not gone through this final step and has not reached completion. Reiser and Umemoto let the structural non-necessity overrun any formal properties of the projects. Their otherness comes not from what they have done, but what they have not done. Formally, their work is not novel nor is it otherness. The work can be read as part of Lynn’s blobs, which have a more formal than process-oriented quality. The otherness happens because Reiser and Umemoto leave their work in an unfinished and undetermined state, leaving the viewer to ascertain the formal qualities themselves. There is otherness because there is no reality, and their architecture does not need the reality.

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