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Published
2009

Book Title
Architecture, Disciplinarity, and the Arts

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Callum Morton’s Architecture of Disguised Difference

Rosemary Hawker

Much recent art criticism has been shaped by a reassessment of the role of medium in art. In this debate, the claim that art has arrived at a post-medium condition is opposed by the view that it is returning to an explicit engagement with medium, both in its making and interpretation. Questions of disciplinarity in architecture and art usefully illustrate these issues and allow us to consider broader relations of disciplinarity across the arts. I come to these questions both through studying Gerhard Richter’s use of photography in painting and through arguing that he demonstrates the continued relevance of medium to art, the possibility of a productive space between media and their disciplines, and their resistance to homogenous hybrid forms. In looking at relations of medium and discipline as played out today between architecture and art, the work of Australian artist Callum Morton, based as it is in diverse and extensive references to architecture, tells us something of these same issues. Taking what I have learnt from Richter’s dialogue between photography and painting, this discussion aims to explore aspects of the possibly interdisciplinary formation of Morton’s work and to relate these to broader issues for the interpretation of contemporary art.

Morton’s attention to architecture is articulated across multiple forms – in digital images and prints, in video and installation works, and in architectural models. Yet the artist does not aim to engage with architecture on its own terms:

The work’s not about architecture.... The image of the building, the model, or whatever, is simply a frame onto which I put other subjects.5

That is, I was never that interested in practicing as an Architect (although I think about making functional buildings a little more since I have been asked to make one as a project) but rather in using the object of architecture as a subject to consider. It has been at various times the core around and onto which I can project a number of ideas.5

In this way, Morton makes a distinction between understanding the discipline of architecture as the practice of design and construction and according to the history and theory that surrounds it. Yet although his works are quite obviously not architecture, that is, not engaged in the work of designing and constructing built forms in their own right, in using the language of those forms, their history, and the specificity of named buildings by well-known architects, he does rely on the recognisable discipline of architecture to make art. As such, his work is implicitly grounded in the possibility of productive relations between art disciplines. Although Morton does not describe his work as motivated by questions of interdisciplinarity, he conceives that its genesis might lead us closer to those terms:

Interdisciplinarity is very important... as a tool of inclusivity within the institutions (the rise of cultural studies) and from there hopefully into other related fields.... At any rate, the idea of inclusivity is certainly where my work began. I was schooled after all in the late ‘80s, which fostered precisely this.... I pursued the idea that I could draw on any of my interests to make art and not distinguish between things because I was drawing them into a broad field of activity.5

Although this inclusivity may take us closer to interdisciplinarity, it cannot accommodate the sense of a productive activity that I am interested in, where the play between disciplines is what produces the work and is, in fact, crucial to it. In this context, the distinction that Morton makes between art and architecture, that is, that architecture is not to be confused with art, is particularly interesting: ‘I don’t include it in the arts. No, it’s not a discipline within the arts... it operates entirely differently in the world. It’s like Donald Judd saying – when I’m designing a chair I’m designing a chair, I’m not making art.’6 Is this perceived difference central to understanding Morton’s strategies and their critical success, and, more broadly, the prevalence of an address to architecture in contemporary art? If architecture were understood more broadly as having a place within the arts, would artists be able to make use of it in the same way? Is the perception of architecture as outside of art and part of the everyday world what enables it to function as a subject and as a frame onto which ideas are projected? Morton seems to underscore this possibility when he states, ‘I’ve never ever thought, at any point, that I could make any contribution to the field of architecture, at all.’7

Richter, unlike Morton, has always emphasised his headlong approach to issues of medium and disciplinarity. His engagement with photography offers real challenges to our understanding of both, especially when he famously says, ‘I’m not trying to imitate a photograph; I’m trying to make one. And if I disregard the assumption that a photograph is a piece of paper exposed to light, then I’m practicing photography by other means.’8 There are many things we learn about medium from Richter, but – and most importantly, I think – he demonstrates that it is only through a dialogue between media that we know medium at all. In taking photography into painting, at least in the way Richter does, we know something of photography that we would not know through photography alone. Similarly, in confronting painting with photography, Richter cannot help but emphasise

5. Morton, email.
7. Morton, interview.
qualities specific to painting as a medium. Although it is not the purpose of this paper to provide detailed evidence of this in Richter’s case, this can be argued through theories of an image economy based in the differences between media, and according to the exchange and circulation between and across media.9 (I’ll come back to these arguments in greater detail to consider Morton’s case more closely.) These relationships of difference and exchange should not be understood to lead to the collapse of medium distinctions or to allow for the possibility of truly hybrid forms. Instead, the inability to combine or translate one medium into the other ensures their identity and their productive signifying strength. As confident as I am that Richter demonstrates the continuing relevance of medium in making and judging art, and that this is a self-reflexive and critical inter-mediality, I am unsure of the status of similar cross-disciplinary formulations such as those we see played out in countless examples of contemporary art that address architecture.

To refer to the work of such diverse artists as James Angus, James Casebere, Liam Gillick, Dan Graham, Tadashi Kawamata, Jorge Pardo, Rachel Whiteread, and Andrea Zittel is to give the briefest indication of this phenomenon, but also some sense of what, in art today, is almost a frenzy of attention to architecture. The extent of this attention was recently signalled by The Hayward Gallery’s exhibition Psycho Buildings: Artists Take on Architecture.10 It seems curious that so many artists have come to architecture around the same time, and it is hard not to think this marks a shift in architecture’s place among the disciplines. To get closer to these issues it is useful to consider debates round medium as they have developed in the visual arts and in relation to more familiar visual-arts media.

Our uncertainty about medium’s role in art has in large part been sought about by the multiple and diverse media used by contemporary artists and the heterogenous combinations of media found within single work. Richter is no exception to this, working, as he does, with painting, installation, photography, and sculpture. Similarly, Morton works across film, sculpture, digital imaging, architecture, and more. Given the centrality of Clement Greenberg’s theory of medium-specificity to definitions of modernism, such supposedly post-modern formulations of multiple media come as no surprise.11 A similar explanation of these circumstances is that art — and, more particularly, painting — as the supposed central medium of the visual arts, was the possibilities entailed in a modernist emphasis on medium-specificity. Consequently, in the 1970s and 1980s, the received view was that painting as a medium was over. More recently, painting’s evident resurgence and claims of the discipline beyond its self-evident medium seem clear proof this claim has lost all strength. For example, performance and installation works by artists such as Paul Leary, Thomas Schutte, and Francis Alÿs are routinely referred to as painting.12 Such examples provide clear evidence that medium has once more come to mean something quite different from what it meant in a modernist context.

This lack of interest in the purity or unity of medium is particularly acute in the use of photography in art, as seen in countless contemporary examples: Richter’s, but also Jeff Wall’s, cinematic tableaux; Thomas Demand’s photographs as sculpture; Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey’s grass photographs. Some claim such examples as evidence of photography’s post-medium, “post-photographic” condition. Yet this aim makes questions of medium all the more pronounced when we see photography everywhere and at the same time are asked to think it


12. Evidence of this disciplinary designation is found in recent exhibitions such as Painting at the Edge of the World (Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2001) and Painting is Painting (Tate, St Ives, 2003).
is somehow over. Krauss is particularly sceptical about the status of photography as a medium, arguing that it is so thoroughly dispersed across the arts that it no longer functions as an aesthetic object. Digital technology also means that what was once a relatively defined set of chemical processes has come to include multifarious means of image capture and manipulation. If we accept that this is a diminution of the medium and that it results from its being taken up outside its discipline, then photography’s case may be particularly cautionary for architecture. Without ruling out this outcome and its inferences, how might this interdisciplinarity be understood as productive activity that extends the function of disciplines and their media?

To answer such a question certainly entails accounting for the historical objections that could be offered to such a suggestion by influential theories of medium. Greenberg famously argued that ‘once the world of common, extraverted experience has been renounced’, there is only one subject for art, and that is to ‘be found in the very processes of disciplines’.13 If art was not committed to this principle, it risked slipping into what he thought the mere nominalism of the ready-made, or what Michael Fried called ‘theatricality’.14 Greenberg’s conception of medium as based in internal specificity described and informed much of the art of high modernism, but it cannot account for the way contemporary works engage with medium. The artists to whom I have referred are not loyal to a single discipline; their art is not that of the ready-made; nor does it follow the theatrical structure of minimalism.

Krauss can be said to extend Greenberg’s conception of medium specificity when she argues that artists like Marcel Broodthaers ‘understood and articulated the medium as aggregative, as a complex structure of interlocking and interdependent technical supports and layered conventions distinct from physical properties’.15 This “complex” of medium relations to which Krauss refers is able to reside within the work of art while allowing the differences of each medium to be main-


tained outside this structure. In this way, Krauss introduces the necessity of difference and thus extends Greenberg’s claim for medium-specificity by identifying medium as constituted beyond its material form as well as the result of both internal and external relations. This differential specificity, as Krauss terms it, brings us much closer to understanding what is at stake in taking architecture into visual art, as is the case with Morton, whose example I now return to in more detail.

Morton has been showing work with a self-evident connection to architecture since the start of his exhibition career, in the late 1980s. This has taken various forms, including digital images of reworked canonical modernist buildings; installations of generic architectural fragments, such as shop awnings, brick façades, and balconies; and precise architectural models based on accurate plans and elevations. His work is most often interpreted as a critique of modernism and its failed utopic formulations of the built environment. Perhaps the clearest evidence of this is found in Morton’s works that cast famous buildings into new and ironic roles in a world of global capitalism: the Casa Malaparte becomes a branch of an Italian restaurant chain, the Farnsworth house a 7-Eleven, the Schroeder house a Toys-R-Us.

It would be easy to see Morton as simply making architecture the subject for his art, or borrowing the superficial look of architecture to make a new kind of conceptual art. Although he rejects the idea of architecture as a discipline among the arts, we might nonetheless read his taking it into the gallery as a literal assertion of this status. But each of these interpretations rests on different formulations of the relation between visual art and architecture, and none alone seems sufficient to account for the range of effects the work produces. Morton’s knowledge of architecture tends to make these questions more critical. (He began, but did not complete, a degree in architecture.) That these are discipline-based questions seems even more acute in his work than in, for example, the treatment of architecture by such artists as Demand, Casebere, or Hiroshi Sugimoto, where I see considerable overlap but less assertive architectural disciplinarity.

Morton’s model works are the point at which questions of medium and discipline are most insistently posed, and this is due in large part to the persistence of the model as a disciplinary form of architecture. They have also brought Morton’s greatest critical success, which is perhaps no coincidence. Responses to the models typically make much of the
time and labour involved in their making and the precision and perfection of their outcomes. In this sense, the models are entirely architectural, made in the same way as functioning scale models and judged according to the same standards of accuracy and verisimilitude. Nevertheless, the different audiences for the models as architecture and as art force radically different interpretations. Morton ensures this difference by disrupting their architectural origins with the addition of sounds, lights, and signs. He variously uses sound tracks of conversation, music, films, and incidental noises of daily life, such as toilets flushing and televisions blaring, to disrupt the perfection of the original. Such additions take the works towards stage-sets where the disordered dramas of life are reinserted into the pristine order of modernist design.

*International Style* (1999, fig. 7), Morton’s model of the Farnsworth house (1945-51) designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe is supplemented by the soundtrack of a party and the glow of light behind drawn curtains. Sounds of convivial party conversation, laughter, and the clinking of glasses are drowned out by a rising argument and a shrill ‘Don’t you dare touch me!’. Gunshots are followed by a shocked but brief silence; whispers and murmurs soon return to full party chatter, at least until we hear the sequence repeat. Morton’s intervention offers a critique of modernist sensibility based in cool, elegant minimalism and suggests that its qualities might be designed but not lived.

As much as Morton’s critique identifies a gritty underbelly for ideal architecture, this tends to be countered in a self-conscious display of insider design knowledge – the interior is shrouded by curtains, pointing to the litigation famously brought by the client against the architect who built her a weekend retreat that offered no retreat at all in a glass box devoid of privacy. There is also the sense that architecture, particularly famous architecture, is able to provide a backdrop to glamorous living and the means to demonstrate taste in design connoisseurship. Morton says,

If you listen to architects, the language of formal modernity has returned... What I was using [in *International Style*] was the recognition of that in the culture, and that would mean that a certain audience would respond to that work in a particular way... I’m sure the response to the Farnsworth house had a lot to do with this predilection for neo-modernity. It was a taste thing and it was exploiting what had a certain currency.

Here Morton recognises architecture’s place within a system of taste, and therefore as having cultural meaning. We might know this in other ways than through visual art, but Morton shows he can articulate these things through the use of the architectural model in art, amplifying them.

Beyond the self-evidence of the architectural model, there are other elements of the model works that maintain or point to the particularity of architecture. Here I am thinking about the way the work is enabled through a technology that has developed through architecture, namely, Computer Aided Design (CAD), and also the role of scale in organisational architectural representation. *Habitat* (2003) is Morton’s model of Moshe Safdie’s community housing block for Expo 67 in Montreal. Morton learnt how to use CAD software for the project, and he and his assistants checked a digital model of the building as they put the lego-like complex together. That this aspect of the art is necessarily high-tech is ironically counterbalanced in the autobiographic elements of this work. Morton’s father is an architect and worked on the Safdie project. ‘I used to ring my father when I was making that model and ask him what the balustrade was made of because I couldn’t work it out from the drawings.’

These aspects of the work are grounded in being faithful to architectural detail, but Morton also manipulates standard architectural techniques, like scale, that relate design to building. Common architectural scales would, for example, be 1:100 or 1:500. Morton’s use of scale is often more idiosyncratic but no less representational.

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17. Morton, interview.


19. Morton, interview.
Gas and Fuel is at 1:34, 34 years being the years [the building] was alive... Here [in Melbourne] the Farnsworth house was at 1:10, it ended up at Santa Monica at 1:5... If it’s a particular building I’ll get it exactly right, I want that verisimilitude.20

Yet Morton also identifies a sense in which the architecture of the model cannot be apprehended as visual art: ‘When you make something like the Farnsworth house exactly right it looks wrong, it doesn’t look like an actual thing; it looks like some mean evil machine. It’s disembodied; it’s out of its context.’21

This leads us to another point about the technological determinism of Morton’s means towards art. Questions of scale in architecture have been radically reconfigured in the way that CAD is able to elide strict relations of scale. Morton’s manipulation of scale is indicative of the way that standard scaling in architecture has become outmoded. In CAD, it is possible to look at something in a completely arbitrary scale and readily change that scale. Architects who were trained before CAD’s introduction are often confused by this and cannot think clearly about the work until they know its true architectural scale. Morton says,

The way I do it now is to have photographs and to scale [the work] to whatever I think is right. It doesn’t even follow real scale. [The scale] comes [from] the photography I’m working from and then straight into the computer and then out. It’s much more intuitive.22

We might think Morton’s idiosyncratic determinations of scale lead him away from the discipline of architecture, but they often identify a real shift within that discipline.

The idea that architecture can constitute culture and society is immanent in the strongly autobiographical underpinnings of the work. Morton’s architectural connections are prominent in his artist statements and interviews. He often refers to his father’s being an architect and his consequent immersion in the language of modernism: ‘I grew up with Modernity as a type of English so when I turned to it as a subject, or as a form to use, I did so because I had such an intimate knowledge of it.’23

Morton’s story of his birth, not just in Montreal during the time his father worked with Saadie but also on the day Le Corbusier died, presents a portentous correlation of events that rely on architecture’s being recognised as a high cultural form. That Morton does not reside from architecture-as-autobiography is unequivocal in his Valhalla project for the 2007 Venice Biennale (fig. 3-6). The work is a large-scale remaking of the family home designed by Morton’s father and recently discovered to have been demolished. Morton’s family home has suffered a more violent form of corruption than the other examples I have referred to, looking as it does like a bomb-blasted building and thereby emphasising the macabre connotations of the work’s title. The structure’s interior and exterior are entirely at odds. Inside is found a slick, anonymous lift foyer and a woman sitting silently with mop and bucket. Those who pushed the lift button heard a soundtrack of its machinery starting up, but its doors remained closed.

I might feel a hint of envy when I think about what it must be like as an architect to feel you are contributing progressive and constructive models for the future of the planet but my work is only possible because it does not exist. That is, its virtuality liberates me from having to think through the complex pragmatic issues of the daily practice of architecture.24

Although we can appreciate the distinction the artist makes here, it signals both the limits of architecture to the artist’s project and a limit for art, its being outside the pragmatics of the workaday world.

Morton does not want his art to be judged in terms of architecture’s role, yet when he reduces this role to appearance alone it might reveal more about the relations at stake. Referring to the sort of comments I have quoted, Morton says, ‘I say all that but this is the problem of discussing the relation of my art to architecture because on some levels it’s so obvious, it’s just a kind of image.’25

20. Morton, interview.
22. Morton, interview.
23. Morton, interview.
24. Morton, email.
25. Morton, interview.
Thinking back to what Krauss claims of Brodthaer’s work, that it relies on a differential specificity that generates a complex of media relations, it is possible to mark out a distinction in Morton’s use of architecture around this idea of the image. To do so, I will draw on Michel Foucault’s discussion of medium, which also refers to photography. Like Krauss, Foucault argues for the importance of inter-mediality, and he sees the differences between media as crucial to productive activity in art, describing this as disguised difference.

For Foucault, the best of 1970s art returns to much earlier conditions of image-making. Between 1860 and 1900 there existed a shared practice of the image… on the borders of photography and painting, which was to be rejected by the puritan codes of art in the twentieth century.32 He describes these early years of photography as a time of liberated image-making, when artists, photographers, and amateurs alike used any means at their disposal to make images:

[These years] witnessed a new frenzy of images, which circulated rapidly between camera and easel… Photographers made pseudo-paintings, painters used photographs as sketches. In this vast field of play… technicians… amateurs, artists and illusionists, unworried by identity, took pleasure in distorting themselves. Perhaps they were less in love with paintings and photographic plates than with the images themselves, with their migration and perversion, their transvestism, their disguised difference.33

Foucault’s examples of this exchange (between Julia Margaret Cameron and Perugino, between Oscar Rejlander and Raphael) emphasise image over medium. Similarly, the refusal of medium specificity in the 1970s was a return to creative freedom:

Pop art and hyperrealism have re-taught us the love of images. Not by a return to figuration, not by a rediscovery of the object and its real density, but by plugging us into the endless circulation of images. This rediscovery of the uses of photography is not a way of painting a star, a motorcycle, a shop, or the modelling of a tyre; but a way of painting their image, and exploiting it, in a painting, as an image.34

27. Foucault, “Photogenic Painting,” 83-84.

As Foucault explains, the image resides not simply within painting or photography — that is, within medium — but between them:

Pop artists and hyperrealists paint images. They do not however incorporate images through their… technique, but extend technique itself into the great sea of images, where their paintings act as a relay in this endless circulation… what they have produced… is not a painting based on a photograph, nor a photograph made… to look like a painting, but an image caught in its trajectory from photograph to painting.

We can also think of Morton in this way if we see his use of buildings from the history of architecture as part of an image exchange and circulation not constrained by questions of discipline, and which makes new works in the space between architecture and art. A more exaggerated sense of this can be seen in his virtual architecture of Valhalla, based as it is on a mixture of personal history, media image, generic corporate environments, conceptual art strategies, and semblance to architecture. We might understand what Morton makes as being neither architecture nor art, but existing at the intersection of their rhetorical trajectories.

For Foucault, photography and painting are apprehended at once and in the same place, that is, in the image, but are present and known according to their difference, which is disguised in the image they make together. Morton, unconcerned with theories of inter-mediality, says, ‘I don’t go into a gallery and ask if I am looking at architecture or installation or whatever, I just think about the broader experience of the work.’35 Although Morton insists on a distance between art and architecture, the difference between art and architecture is disguised in his work, or at least he feigns that disguise. That this difference is present and productive is evidenced in the work’s making something beyond the self-evident sum of its parts. Krauss’s differential specificity of media still assumes that medium is apparent, even as a relation. Yet Foucault’s disguised difference of an inviolable identity that can nevertheless be feigned brings us a step closer to painters taking on photography and artists taking on architecture. This could be close to what Morton means when he says,

29. Morton, interview.
It does seem strange that I would talk about interdisciplinarity as nonsense when I use cinema, fiction, architecture, all these things enter my practice but then I think artists have always done that, so maybe I've just brought it in more literally.  

To conclude, I will return to Krauss's concern with photography's aesthetic status. Photography's dispersal across the arts has been possible because it is such an effective vehicle for diverse ideas. This is due in large part to its intransigent connection to reality, and this connection to the world of objects is what artists have asked it to bring to their work in one way or another. Morton's comment about Judd's designing his chair points to the idea that architecture is of the real world, like photography, whereas art is outside of use. Such formulations of disciplinarity suggest the pragmatics of architecture; its connection to use and to objects is able to bring the world — of building and commerce and fashion and taste — into the gallery, to supply the grist of the real to the conceptual world of art. Morton, and so many others who have enthusiastically taken up architecture, shows this in tandem with his appreciation of architecture's ability to transport ideas. Does this mean, though, that architecture is destined to be dispersed across the arts, to lose its cohesion as a disciplinary formation and a medium, to be the new photography?

If we agree with Krauss's assertion that photography has lost its aesthetic value through its dispersal, then this might lead us to fear a similar demeaning of architecture. But photography's widespread use has shown that the medium prevails despite the diversity of its use, because this diversity marks out the differential specificity of the medium all the more effectively than isolated, singular expressions of medium. We can understand this as productive activity when we look to Foucault: under his scheme of interdisciplinary relations, architecture would enter into an exciting circulation of images unaffected by concerns of identity. Both Krauss and Foucault, in slightly different ways, see intermedial relations as productive in their articulation of disciplinarity and media. This is what I see in Richter's work. Painting owes photography for all it has learnt from it about the world and its appearances, but painting repays that debt when it tells us something of photography we would not otherwise have known. If art can complete such a contract with architecture and tell us more of it, it will be because the differences between art and architecture (the places where they do not cohere, their inability to combine or translate one into the other) ensure their respective identities. Derrida describes this when he writes, "Through each language something is intended which is the same and yet which none of the languages can attain separately... They complete each other." This sameness causes artists like Morton, Zittel, Demand, and Richter to draw different media and disciplines into their art. They may feign to disguise the differences of these forms in suggesting they are easily drawn together and engaged in a concerted task, but it is their disciplinary differences that allow each to say something quite different. It is their resistance to homogeneous hybrid formations that allows their greatest effect.

30. Morton, interview.