A Paradigm of Revelation and Concealment: Deconstruction in Art and Architecture

If presence is, in the philosophy of Heidegger, a construction—a system of thought erected on stable foundations—then deconstruction (as conceptualized by Derrida, essentially as a deconstruction of Heidegger) becomes the revelation of the flaws which are concealed by and within the structure. This is revelation with the intention of making presence a contradictory condition—in Peter Eisenman's terms, a condition of **in-between**, which contains the possibility of absence inscribed in its present-ness. This, however, is deconstruction as philosophy or meta-philosophy, not as architecture. What then is deconstruction in architectural terms, if it can even exist in architectural terms?

Architecture, almost by definition, is the creation of space—this space is not a void, it is not an absence. It is a living or energized space which shelters or houses the presence of meaning. A space of absence, in contrast, is a space of alienation; it is the uncanny or an unsheltering space or the space of a loss which cannot be imagined—traumatic space, unoccupied space, a space in which nothing can be at home, a space of homelessness. It is space as metaphor, not space as presence; and as such, it cannot be a construction.

Peter Eisenman has argued that he wants to dislocate the metaphysics of architecture (architecture as an idea of shelter, as opposed to architecture as a concrete sheltering space), to create an architecture that is not a representation; it is a presence. In some of his writing, Eisenman has spoken of an attempt to free architecture from a discourse which exists apart from the building—a desire to conceptualize architecture as an "independent discourse" which makes no pretense of representing or being something other than what it is: "It [architecture] is a representation of itself, of its own values and internal experience." More recently he has spoken of architecture as a presentness, which contains the possibility of absence, absence as a trace. In his early projects, his houses, at least, I would argue that he succeeds in this mission. But I would also argue that this is not the translation of deconstruction into an architectural style because deconstruction is not, nor can it be, an architectural style.
If deconstruction is not a style, then what is it, and why do we speak of it as a style? In 1988, the Museum of Modern Art embarked on a project that has or had overtones of its famous 1932 exhibition which labeled and proclaimed the existence of what it called the International Style in architecture. The earlier show in this way declared the existence of a style, defining in a somewhat post-hoc fashion what this style was, on the basis of observed similarities in the works selected by Johnson and Hitchcock for display (but selected in order to communicate the existence of this style). Mark Wigley engaged in a comparable mission in 1988, this time declaring the existence of what was called "deconstructivism," a word which, in its conflation of constructivism and deconstruction, suggested the existence of a new, recognizable and coherent style, and which he applied to architects ranging from Eisenman and Frank Gehry to Daniel Libeskind, Bernard Tschumi, Zaha Hadid, and others. There were two flaws with this exhibition: the first was in the neologism of deconstructivism, implying a continuum from constructivism to deconstruction, but a continuum which does not exist either in ideological terms or in formal and visual terms, since the visual parallels to Russian architecture, where they do appear, are more accurately described as parallels to Russian avant-garde rationalism, and not to constructivism. The second flaw was in the assertion of the existence of a style, an incorrect assertion for two reasons. On the one hand, when we examine the artists grouped under this label, we do not find visual or ideological affinities. On the other hand, it is an incorrect assertion because deconstruction is a philosophy and strategy for engaging with ideology and culture. Architecture can be an instrument in this strategy, but it cannot embody it. To do so would be an untenable contradiction, because it would return architecture to the role of representing something outside itself. This is one of the fundamental differences between deconstruction and constructivism—constructivist architecture does exist as a style, a style in which ideology serves and implies form, while form simultaneously implies ideology. We do not recognize constructivism by form alone; nor do we recognize it by ideology alone. Constructivism exists in the interstices between form and ideology. Although form can suggest the ideology of deconstruction, deconstruction is an ideology which implies the
absence of form, or the replacement of form with shifting identities. Deconstruction exists in this collision between form and ideology, a collision which undermines the possibility of style.

To speak of style as both ideology and form, in which these are interrelated and interdependent components, foregrounds the question of what is meant by style. One of the most meaningful definitions of style which I have encountered is that proposed by the historian George Kubler, in a book called The Shape of Time (1962). Kubler conceptualizes the work of art as a signal which influences and participates in a search for a solution to a problem. As a solution, the work of art is part of a linked chain of related solutions to a problem, and the approach to studying this chain can not be a monographical or chronological approach, but needs to be non-linear—what Kubler refers to as a topology of a style, and what another writer describes as "mapping" the style or set of solutions. In both cases, this is an examination of relationships which transcends or overrides chronology or other arbitrary relationships which may hide the complexity of a style, or conversely, suggest stylistic affinities between objects which have visual commonalities but which, in actuality, are only coincidentally similar because they are solutions to different problems and have different places of importance and consequence in these different sets of problem-solutions.

In order to solve a problem, or to answer a set of questions, artists realize that a new language must be invented and new systems of meaning must be formulated. In doing this, they also realize that language does not only reflect society; it constructs it; in this way we arrive at the interdependence of problems, problem solutions, and visual language. This interdependence suggests another way of defining style—to define it as a paradigm. A paradigm is a body of knowledge, a set of symbols and representations, which explain or answer key questions of centrality to the paradigm. These answers either take the form of a process or a defined solution. Within a paradigm, language may play a rhetorical role; language is used to communicate the viability of that paradigm, when it may no longer be viable, or conversely, language may be used to manipulate a change in paradigms—a tactic
which we are inclined to attribute to deconstruction.

Therefore, from this definition it follows that deconstruction may be a strategy within a paradigm, but it does not constitute a paradigm in itself because it overtly challenges the premise of unified world view and the possibility of arriving at a unitary solution. A recent statement of Eisenman’s is relevant to this impossibility: “Some architecture is built as a representation of an ideal state, the condition of the possibility of the ideality of the world. The Greek temple is one instance. My work is the converse of this, a condition that represents the impossibility of the ideal.” From this we can also recognize that Eisenman practices within a paradigm which is shared by a number of visual artists in recent years: Jasper Johns [Target with Plaster Casts, 1955], Alice Aycock [Tree of Life Fantasy, 1990-2], Sol LeWitt [Black Form dedicated to Missing Jews, 1987; 1989], Eva Hesse [Metronomic Irregularity, 1966], and Cindy Sherman [untitled “film stills”], to name some of them. This paradigm—or, in fact, two paradigms, one which we might call an "identity" paradigm and one which we might call a linguistic paradigm—is predicated on a strategic narrative of revelation versus concealment. To identify a shared narrative does not suggest common media or common visualizations—it suggests a common discourse; this narrative is, in fact, used in different contexts for these artists and with different visual languages. Cindy Sherman's centralization of this narrative questions the stability of self-identity through a conflict between the self as self and the self as a representation of self. It has very recently been argued that this narrative is also dominant in the work of Jasper Johns, argued in terms of the shadow presences of self in his later paintings as well as the disembodied plaster anatomical parts found in his earlier and later works. For Aycock, revelation/concealment is implicit in her process of provoking, through explicit and implicit allusions, art-historical, architectural, philosophical, autobiographical and psychological references to the theatrical narratives inscribed both visually and textually in her "machines that make the world." On another level, she transforms the narrative into one of self-preservation versus annihilation—and in this transformation we also find the narrative present in the sculptural forms of Magdalena Abakanowicz and Eva Hesse. In Aycock's
work, the transformed self is an implicit or implied outcome. Abakanowicz, instead of creating the spaces of machines within which transformation occurs, virtually turns the person or herself into an architecture—an architecture in which, as in the an-architecture of Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting*, boundaries are dissolved, or as in the architecture of Eisenman, elemental parts read as inverses or contradictions (walls as floors, and floors as walls, a staircase—a structural element for moving traffic—as a deliberate conversation deck or gathering place) or with Abakanowicz, heads without faces, or the inner self, emerging from an obliterated context, versus exterior spaces which contain nothingness. Whereas Abakanowicz, Hesse, and at times Aycock do not conceal the relationship of self to work, even if the presence of the self does not exist in a fully embodied, coherent, or recognizable form, Cindy Sherman does, going so far as to claim that she is not making self-portraits. A questionable statement, and a statement which gives rise to hypotheses of masquerade, it is accepted by writers who assert a difference between self-portrait and self-performance. This distinction itself, however, is untenable if one understands the idea and strategy of a self-portrait as autobiography, and autobiography as the construction or staging of a self—a definition which is, in fact, consistent with Sherman's descriptions of her early forays into self-transformation. Ultimately, Sherman inscribes a framework of contradictions for the viewer of her work—contradictions which coalesce around the dynamic of self-representation and self-extinction, on one level, and representation and reality on another. Further, whereas the autobiography may suggest a protean personality, knowledge of Sherman's multiple identities in her photographs works against the fusion of these into a protean but unified entity. Yet, her usual refusal to supply a complete visual context for the photograph conversely works for the idea of fusion. In this respect, another contradiction dominates her work: the inconstant or invaded self which becomes an uncanny process and image, versus the lone figure in a void environment, a figure which defeats inconstancy to become a presence.

I would suggest that Sherman, and perhaps Johns, as well, come closest to deconstructing the idea of the self, and that Sherman's project, of all the artists I have
named, has the greatest affinity with that of Eisenman. Nevertheless, what they all share is a commitment to the postmodern condition of undecidability, which they create or reflect through artistic strategies that provoke confrontation, that rely on a theatrical mode in which determined endings do not exist, and which centralize the uncanny, an alien presence of something deceptive and threatening, as a condition of the narrative of revelation and concealment. But Eisenman, as I will demonstrate, is concerned with the revelation and concealment of truth and fiction, and uses the destabilization of space to destabilize truth. Further, Eisenman, as do Johns, Lewitt, and the minimalist sculptors of the 1960s-70s, also operates in a linguistic paradigm which introduces another set of strategies.

The paradigm of constructivism (and I do think we can speak of one) centralizes a narrative of chaos and of the assertion of order either within or emerging from this chaos. This is a narrative of the "in-between" (in the terminology of Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, the constructivist theater director and producer, the "grotesque") and this, perhaps, is its generative link to deconstruction. But it is a paradigm which calls on specific language sources and strategies as the means of communicating this narrative. The narrative of the in-between in the constructivist sense is also a narrative of the theatricalization of life, and a narrative of magical or fantasy machines or dynamos. This is, consequently, a visual language which models and implies transformation, and the creation of the new from amalgams of the known and the unknown. We may accept that such a fusion is indicative of anything that can be called "in-between," but this in-between is the outcome of constructivist architecture. For Eisenman, it is an intervening step, unless we accept that Eisenman's entire project is the subversion of architecture in order to make architecture an "in-between." This is the position I adopted in an earlier study of his work, in which, using Rosalind Krauss's model for an "expanded field" of sculpture, I argued that Eisenman creates something which falls between architecture and not-architecture--what I called "hermetic architecture." There may well be additional support for accepting this viewpoint, if we work with David Goldblatt’s discussion of Eisenman’s work as architecture which is against architecture. But, I would suggest, this deprives the work of something
with which Goldblatt himself agrees: that Eisenman's work pushes the boundaries of architecture, and in so doing, expands its possibilities. If we do accept the idea of an architectural in-between as Eisenman’s goal, then we have an affinity with constructivism, although not in formal terms. The urban carnival utopia of constructivism was a social in-between; if we can attribute social liminality to the subverted spaces and functions of Eisenman’s architecture, this would represent a connection to constructivism. Personally, I am not convinced that we can: I am more inclined to see a functional and visual in-between in Eisenman’s work than an ideological in-between. We will return to this at the end of the essay.

The Linguistic Paradigm

Eisenman’s house projects of the 1970s intersected with the evolution of minimalist and conceptual sculpture, largely through a parallel interest in language. As illuminated by minimalism and conceptualism, the defining problems and hypotheses of the linguistic paradigm include the sense that the remaining viable domain for the artistic avant-garde would be work in three dimensions; rejection of the role of the subconscious or subjectivity in favor of systems and processes; the growing importance of the generative idea, although paradoxically accompanied by a decreased belief in the value of explanation; and a new interest in linguistic or semiotic theory. These themes, in an oddly prescient way, appear as an alternative model of modernism--post-humanist modernism--in the 1920s and 30s. Critical to post-humanist modernism is an emphasis on serialism, an abrogation of narrative time, the retraction of the privileging of the visual mode of aesthetic experience, incompleteness, and uncertainty--characteristics which come together in a displacement of the centered subject as the origin or agent of the work of art. Minimalism and conceptualism, in the goal of eliminating any signs of the artist, turn to compositional means that do not connote individualism and introspection. These include serialism--typically seen in the work of Donald Judd--and the use of indeterminate forms--as in the work of Robert Morris. Whereas indeterminate form can counteract the dominating role of the artist and
the deliberate creation of external meaning, it can also suggest impermanence, erosion, and conversely, potentiality for presence; in this respect, the use of indeterminate materials may be a strategy related to both the identity and the linguistic paradigms.

Conceptual art seems to be an intervening stage between minimalism and later poststructuralist developments. Indeterminacy and the negation of classical composition accompanied a tendency to devalue the medium of art in favor of its message. Indeed, the message often existed without the medium. But although many conceptual artists did continue to produce artifacts, they gave primacy to the idea, viewing it as a "machine that makes the art," in the words of Sol LeWitt. In this formulation, "all intervening steps--scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed works, models, studies, thoughts, conversations"--assumed heightened interest. Thus, process--and the traces it left--at the very least equaled in importance the final product, and the work itself often included written descriptions of the process, although these descriptions were factual and objective, as opposed to interpretive or explanatory.

For Sol LeWitt, operating in the interstices between minimalism and conceptualism, structuralism and semiology become formative influences. LeWitt's structuralist tendencies indered in his use of simple structural ideas hidden beneath visually complex works that nevertheless yield themselves to discovery, as well as in his own analogies between his work and language. He wrote, for example, that the form chosen to express the idea had less significance than the fact that it served as a grammar for the work. In his work, we find the creation of a visual grammar of cubes and grids underlying such projects as "Cube Structures Based on Nine Modules" (1976-77) which consists of structures built from "sentences" or rows of from one to nine cubes. Each structure has at least one row of each of the nine different lengths. In one structure, resembling a ziggurat, the square base is nine cubes on each side. On each successive layer, the size of the square diminishes by one cube, until only a single cube remains at the top. Because the cubes are skeletal, rather than solid, the structures create what seem to be infinitely variegated networks of lines. Whereas the skeletal cubed projects evoke a scientific imagery of molecules, which may be oddly
appropriate to structuralism, LeWitt's works with solid elements of different sizes tend to evoke the world of cities and industry. Such associations are contrary to the aim of impelling a focus on the generating concept, but they seem inescapable. With architecture, however, because a focus on structure evokes the idea of a complex structure or building, the work assumes a self-referentiality that eludes LeWitt's sculpture. The possibility that such self-referentiality may not have been LeWitt's goal should not, however, be overlooked. Nonetheless, for Eisenman, the tendency toward purification of form logically led to an emphasis on structure and pointed away from the classical-modernist tradition in architecture. In this respect, Eisenman's strongest connection to minimalism, conceptualism and posthumanism lies in his early affinity with structuralist strategies and in his goal of displacing the idea of an originating subject.

For Eisenman, this displacement of the idea and the person was a central premise of modernism. Structuralism–modernism, he argued, had repositioned man so that he was no longer in the center of the world; objects, in particular, now existed independently of man. This awareness was the result of structuralist thinking which pointed out the arbitrary or conventional nature of relationships between words and their meanings. If these relationships were arbitrary, then an object or word meant something not because the author asserted it did, but because convention had fixed the relationship. In design, this displacement of the locus of meaning could be enacted in strategies of disintegration or fragmentation. Fragmentation disembodied the origin or center of design; but at the same time, it centralized a new architectural dialectic—one between wholeness and disintegration, a dialectic which we can reread today as one between absence and presence.

One of Eisenman's first strategies for investigating this new dialectic was an emphasis on the syntax of architecture. To pursue this investigation, he created what he termed "cardboard architecture." Not literally using cardboard, he simulated its appearance in his work, creating the illusion of insubstantiality in his materials and structural systems. The simulation of insubstantiality forces the viewer to confront the idea of architecture and its meaning as shelter. Unintentionally, perhaps, the representation of cardboard evokes
parallels to one of the basic building materials in the environment of the homeless.

In Houses One to Four, 1966-72, Eisenman turned to an examination of the structural components of a building. To do this, he employed a binary system of structural redundancy, such that if one element performed a structurally necessary role, Eisenman used two and then clearly subverted the structural role of the second. As actualized in House III, the idea of redundancy assumed greater complexity because the house consists of two parallel systems, one of which refers to the traces of the compositional process; this second system signifies the presence of something lost or missing. Both systems together signify presence and absence but in this case, in terms of allusions to other architectural forms (a Corbusian villa, Terragni’s Casa del Fascio, Schindler’s Lovell Beach House, a Miesian 9-square plan). These allusions are ruptured or denied by changing angles and slight misalignments, a denial which in itself evokes an illusion to El Lisitskii’s Abstrakt Kabinett (described in the Introduction) and its tentative creation of an active spectator.

This tentative quality persists here as well. In Houses I-IV, the idea of a subject who can discern and “read” the syntactical message of these houses still exists. But at the same time, Eisenman wanted to “alienate the individual from the known way in which he perceives and understands” the world; as a result, the subject cannot succeed in his reading of these houses.15

The frustrated subject, however, is still a subject; the subject or actor remains. Further, where structural redundancy may intimate the possibility of unstable foundations, it does not convincingly erode the possibility of stability. Thus, the theme of redundancy allowed Eisenman to approach but not to access the philosophical strategy of deconstruction. To achieve this, he works toward a strategy of ”dislocation,” or the creation of a state of in-between.

In its attack on the stability of thought, deconstruction postulates that meaning exists only through a system of difference. Since the creation of difference or oppositions of signs is an unending process, there can be no inherently true or false meaning. In addition, conventional oppositions, if left unquestioned, blind us to other possibilities, to
change. Change comes about through the juxtaposition of new terms, the creation of new oppositions; this is a process of dislocation, or of the removal of one term from a traditional location and its attachment to a new term in a new location. Dislocation, suggests Eisenman, creates a spatial and temporal sense of in-between, a liminal zone in architecture and in a historical narrative. As a result, dislocation is potentially the most political or ideological of Eisenman’s strategies.

He also embarks at this point on the strategy of decomposition—a strategy of breaking apart, reassociating fragments in an arbitrary or layered relationship, suggestive of archeological sedimentation and the palimpsest of an allegory. House X embodies decomposition in its structural elements, its relationship to modernist paradigms, its disruption of traditional function/space associations, and the reality of the house itself. House X was never built, but it existed as a series of drawings and models residing in an ambiguous netherworld, each representing a reality that did not exist.

Taken together, what is the effect of Eisenman's strategies? He does not believe that architecture can change the world, but he does believe, and his work embodies this belief, that architecture can unsettle us, force us to reexamine our perceptions and question our assumptions. The effect? As with the artists of the identity paradigm: fragmentation, confrontation, instability, the fear of the uncanny, an alien and chaotic presence of something deceptive and threatening; ultimately, a condition of "in-between" which creates an aura, an "aura that is secret and contains its own secret." "Aura," as Eisenman describes it, "is the presence of absence, the possibility of a presentness of something else."

Returning to the notion of an identity paradigm and a narrative of revelation and concealment, the question is, I believe, whether Eisenman creates a space that violently undoes the experience of space, so that home and homeless exist in a perpetually shifting relationship. My answer to this question is yes. Then we need to ask, does constructivism create this type of shifting relationship between space and no-space, or does it choose one side in this dynamic—either by destroying space or by creating a stable, albeit dynamic, space. Constructivism, as we understand it, creates a dynamic space, a space of movement,
in which space metaphorically represents a life force and this life force generates the form of a building. The centralization of space in this way centralizes the idea of the person, an act which places constructivism at a point diametrically opposite to the architectural actions of Peter Eisenman. This use of space as movement suggests, however, an affinity with the work of Zaha Hadid, although in her case, I would suggest, the closer parallel is the architecture of rationalism and someone like Nikolai Ladovskii.

Even Frank Gehry, who might be considered the most comparable to the constructivists through his interest in facture, departs from this generative use of space that characterizes constructivist architecture. For Gehry, space is sculptural material, material contained in a sculptural package, which then interests him as another problem, often a problem of symbolization. Gehry refers to Eisenman as the father of linguistic architecture, a type of architecture which he does not consider himself to be a part of. Gehry's use of materials may dictate structure, but not because of a focus on expressing or controverting structure as a linguistic element—he seeks an expression of structure which expresses the essence of the material. The dialectic which can emerge in his work is one between this expressive essence of material—or facture—and an expression of symbolic intention. This is not, I believe, a dynamic of presence and absence, nor is it truly a dynamic about the nature of architecture and the meaning of shelter or home and homelessness. But I think this latter dynamic continues to permeate the work of Eisenman, work which conflates not the issues of constructivism and deconstruction, but which conflates the construction and the destruction of space, and the construction and destruction of truth.

But by pushing the boundaries of architecture, even as Eisenman erodes the possibility of truth, he also transcends it. If we finally accept that Eisenman is part of an identity paradigm in which the dialectic between revelation and concealment is the central narrative, then we must also answer this question of transcendence. The identity paradigm questions stability as it focuses on process; it constructs the possibility of protean identities (rather than a single transformation). The existence of protean identities can be seen as the deconstruction of the self and the commitment to a state of undecidability, a commitment
to the destabilization of truth. We can call this a commitment to a state of in-between or we can call it a commitment to the fragmentary, a resistance to completion, a determined confrontation of the unknown and the uncanny with the devices of the unknown and the uncanny. This is the “something else” which Eisenman creates—something else which calls for a new spectator/user of the environment, a something else which takes the constructivist engaged spectator to planes only imagined by the constructivists, a something else which removes the “blinders” from the eyes of the viewer. But because this is a fragmentary, resistant something else, a something else which conflates the construction and the destruction of space, it—more successfully than el Lissitski’s Abstrakt Kabinett—resists the totalizing hegemony of modernism.


16. I discuss these strategies, the linguistic model, and House X in detail in my earlier article on Eisenman: “Peter Eisenman and the Erosion of Truth,” Twenty/One, Spring 1990: 22-37.