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## 'Paper Architecture': A Collaboration

### Joseph Masheck

Over about the last five years two abstract painters, Olivier Gourvil in Paris, and Marjorie Welish in New York, have collaborated at a distance in producing drawings to suit titles specified by e-mail to each other, titles stretching structural imaginability – such as 'Door Through Wall/Door Throughout Wall', as suggested by Welish to Gourvil, or 'Porte ouverte/Porte fermée,' by Gourvil to Welish. (Gourvil has each title printed on the sheet, in English or both languages, while Welish, though otherwise actively interested in inscription as such, sticks to the given French title without incorporating it into the piece.) The larger theme of their ongoing project concerns structural imagination as challenged to realize seemingly inconsumerable conjunctions. Gourvil's compositions are ironically illustrative in their abstraction, as realizations of anomalies, like puzzle 'solutions,' and frontally diagrammatic, as if on a blackboard or screen: typically, PA9, 'Door Through Wall/Door Throughout Wall,' is a brain-teasing inversion of void and solid that Gourvil's easygoing pencil line pretends to take in stride. Welish's compositions engage architectural schematization as such, including the modern favoring of the plan as locus of problem-solution: at least two of her later 'architecture de papier' pieces (for both artists also have produced similar works titles 'Paper Architecture' or 'Architecture de papier'), for instance, evoking the way functionalists have been led to 'regularize' by subtly compensating for an irregular site.

The general concept of 'papier architecture' is vexed. Discussion sometimes invokes Piranesi and Boullée, but the former, who built almost nothing, produced two 'lines' of 18<sup>th</sup>-century aesthetic fashion, documentary picturesque and make-believe sublime; Boullée, however, is one of the great propellers forward of architectural thinking, extremist yet hardly irrational. Unfortunately the term 'utopian' is now taken as pejorative (conveniently for bourgeois materialism, the negation of idealism underwritten by the standing modern abolition of metaphysics renders dialectical materialism moot), carrying an almost incorrigible onus of impracticality; but many projects wind up as paper architecture owing to ignorance, insensitivity, squareness or niggardliness of private or institutional clients. And if all paper architecture goes somehow beyond practical exigencies, that does not make the architects airheads. Even the plethora of utopian projection in the 'sixties- by Archigram and such-was a thinking-through of possibilities and capabilities. Rather more profoundly than John Dewey justifying abstract art as an eye-exercise (!), students of architecture have long understood how paper architecture can be worthwhile in the long haul by embodying architectural thought. The problem always reminds me of a stunning drawing by the greatest of architects, François Mansart, as presented many years ago in a lecture of Dorothea Nyberg: a major axial complex in which a new idea had to be caught swiftly, though it meant spiritedly working over what had already been well considered, with the second system sweeping over the first. This has probably influenced everything I have ever thought since about paper architecture; but just what drawing was it, and why was it paper architecture? A plan, it turns out, for Val-de Grâce, in Paris, dating from c.1645-46, the feature that had struck me being a forecourt with alternative platforms, the major, curved one, overriding a prior angular idea. Why had the even better plan not been put into effect; why was this paper architecture by default? Besides outside circumstances, it seems to have been Mansart's "habitual changes," no doubt including this one that so impressed me. Jaques Lemercier got to build a decent Val-de Grâce, but in this case the paper architecture may well be the greater work of art.

As abstract art made remotely to specification, the Gourvil-Welish project is not without modernist precedent. Its action-at-a-distance aspect is something of an internet extension of Moholy-Nagy's notorious ordering by telephone, in 1922, of five porcelain-enamel *Telephonbilder* from a sign factory, using graph paper and the company's color chart. Yet beyond that, on this side of the Atlantic the famous color theorist Munsell, then known as a painter, had already explained in 1915 that thanks to the physicist Helmholtz's system of three color coordinates of value, hue and intensity, it should be possible "to transmit accurately, through telegraphed notations alone, the color elements in a European sunset to a poster designer in America",<sup>1</sup> so the idea actually came first – too utopian! Here, without consulting the other it has turned out that Gourvil and Welish apparently chose to stress the color yellow and a few linear devices, though only in 2004 did the artists share the drawings first hand.

For his part, Gourvil draws mainly with a soft gray pencil line, in a somewhat Corbusian style, whether rectilinear or loopy, on 14 x 17 –inch sheets, sometimes inflecting the structure with a pliant, watery yellow acrylic line. Gourvil's work in painting is quite graphic having the forthright semiotic look of signs, even, say, traffic signs, elusively without the 'vocative' directiveness of such.<sup>2</sup> His drawings here convey a certain ambiguity though not indeterminateness, owing to the coincident overlay of grids, diapers, symmetrical inversions and other regular planer structures. Where one such pattern overlays another- as in one drawing lettered 'Paper Architecture'- non- binocularity, by comparison with spatial vision, becomes an interesting issue, the drawings being anything but optical illusions. In terms of Descartes's distinction between clarity and distinctness, they are less clear than distinct, managing to effect categorical oppositions despite their wobbly circumscription. Gourvil's drawing PA3, unusual in employing two

tones of wash, the yellow forms a balanced irregular asymmetric grille, part of which is loosely fleshed out by springy loops of inky gray-black; and this makes it possible to see how, by different trains of thought the two collaborators can produce parallel effects.

Welish's drawings comprise several open series of which a 14 x 17 –inch drawing of 2000, in oil, based on a structure already occurring in her painting practice, issues several 11 x 14 –inch drawings of 2004, in acrylic, responding freely to particular first-phase drawings – which often tend to begin with at least implied halving of the field, left to right and sometimes by quartering, top to bottom, like the basic diptych format of artist's paintings.<sup>3</sup> In her series 'Pilage' (= 'fold') this reader of Deleuze began with a dense meander in which underlying colors were obliterated by gray oil paint; this led to a phase-two 'Pilage' in which loopily brushed yellow bands wind around another broken rectilinear interlace: thus Gorvil's rectilinear grille, shifting in and out in outline, finds a counterpart in Welish's work. Thinking about the 1960's utopian aspect of grandly projected mega-grids, I noticed a similarity between such orthogonal interlace and a paper-architecture project from 1961 by Yona Friedman, in which such forms indicate buildings on a big trussed platform;<sup>4</sup> so I asked Marjorie if she knew of Friedman, only to learn that she regularly treats him in a course on modern to postmodern art. Significantly, between her two drawing phases she undertook a study of Peter Eisenman's dialogue with Derrida, *Chora L* (1999), with special concern for Eisenman's Parc de la Villette studies, which themselves remained paper architecture. An indication of the effect of her negotiating this classic enterprise in 'deconstructive' architectural thought is the manifest difference between an earlier 'Colonne virtuelle' drawings whose upper half has spots for columns at intersections of coordinates, and variants marked by the complete independence of grids and arrays of columns.

In the late nineteenth century the great proto-modern theoretician Viollet-le-Duc spoke of the "decadence" of contemporary architecture as manifest in awkward disjunctions between interior disposition and fenestration, "tortured distributions for the greater glory of exterior architecture" commonly caused by an approach to design too much "sur le papier, en géométral."<sup>5</sup> What Viollet so graphically meant as overly concerned with the composition of the façade, was a problem within architecture. Now that the whole question is again problematic, What with many young architects depending on computer programs allowing them to 'image' spaces, whether axial or not one may not even be able to tell while moving all too 'virtually' through the , it will be interesting to see if the term 'paper architecture' comes to extend to unbuilt computer designs. Here and now, two abstract painters elicit by their different means comparable ambiguities within the planer, which is to say, within their common province of abstract painting.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Albert H. Munsell, 'A Lecture on Color,' *Art and Progress* 7 (1915), 78, quoted in Fredrick C. Moffatt, Arthur Wesley Dow (1857-1922) (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977), 85.

<sup>2</sup> Some examples in the Center d'Art exhibition catalogue *Olivier Gourvil* (Quimper: Le Quartier, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Masheck, 'Vexing the Diptych with Assymetry,' in Aaron Levy and Jean-Michel Rabaté, eds., *Of the Diagram: The Work of Marjorie Welish*, Contemporary Artists Series, 2 (Philadelphia: Slought Books, 2003), 65-87.

<sup>4</sup> Illus., Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1978), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *Entretiens sur l'architecture*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1863-72; repr. Ridgewood, N.J.: Gregg, 1965), 1:336.