Trading between Architecture and Art
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Strategies and Practices of Exchange

Studies in Art and Architecture
9 The Terms of Trade of Architecture and Art
   Wouter Davidts, Susan Holden, Ashley Paine

17 Art/Architecture/Concept
   Mark Dorrlian

27 Pardo’s Plumbing
   Relational Art and Architectural Pavilions
   John Macarthur

40 Open
   John Körmeling

51 Assemble’s Turner Prize
   Utility and Creativity in the Cultural Economy
   Susan Holden

65 Jacques Moeschal, Signal
   Angelique Campens
Failed and Fantastic
Frederick J. Kiesler’s Imaging Practices
Mark Linder

Projects 2013–2015
Philip Metten

Warren & Mosley: Within and Beyond Rogue Game
Stephen Walker

The Follies of Conceptual Architecture at Osaka’s Expo ’90
Biwako Otsu Folly, Bolles+Wilson
Annalise Varghese

Massimo Scolari’s Ali and the Institutional Reframing of the Venice Biennale
Léa-Catherine Szacka

Rooms and Clouds
Gerhard Richter and Architecture
Guy Léon Châtel and Wouter Davidts

‘Breuer Revisited’
Creating Value at The Met Breuer
Rosemary Willink

Sarah Oppenheimer

Spencer Finch’s Windows
Authenticity and the Reconstructed Interior
Ashley Paine
Mies en Abyme
Architecture and Institutional Critique in Ludger Gerdes’ Bau-Bild Krefeld, Gartenfragment
Stefaan Vervoort

On the Art/Architecture of Reframing an Industrial Site
Rotor’s ‘Grindbakken’ Exhibition
Maarten Liefooghe

About the Authors
Index
Acknowledgments
I look for the object and the picture: not for painting or the picture of painting, but for our picture, our looks and appearances and views, definitive and total. How shall I put it: I want to picture to myself what is going on now. Painting can help in this, and different methods = subjects = themes are the different attempts I make in this direction.
—Gerhard Richter, 1977

In the early years of the Atlas project—the vast album of photographs and sketches initiated around 1969—the artist Gerhard Richter included a group of remarkable architectural drawings and collages. In these plates—Räume (Rooms) as he himself calls them—the artist played with the imposition of sketchy or more elaborated perspective frames upon photographs of mostly clouds, sometimes mountains and, more rarely, enlargements of paint strokes. In doing so, Richter made these pictures part and parcel of representations of rooms and halls of different sizes and dispositions. While...
134

the importance of the *Rooms* group within Richter’s vast body of work is repeatedly acknowledged, these architectural drawings and collages have been rarely discussed in detail.³ All too often they are merely understood as speculative sketches of future installations or as projections of works into either existing or imaginary exhibition spaces, failing thereby to grasp the critical stakes of Richter’s early forays into architecture.⁴

Gerhard Richter and architecture form an intricate relationship indeed. In his work and practice the artist has engaged with architecture on many levels. He has touched upon real as much as on abstract spaces, ranging from elemental representations of doors and windows to elaborate interiors, and from buildings to cities. He also fabricated several ‘architectural sculptures’, such as the *4 Glasscheiben* (*4 Panes of Glass, 1967*) and *9 Stehende Scheiben* (*9 Standing Panes, 2002/2010*) and set up installations of series of works with a clear sensitivity to their spatial arrangement in the exhibition venue—such as (among many others) the *48 Portraits* in the German Pavilion in Venice (1972), the *8 Graue Bilder* (*8 Gray Pictures, 1975*) for the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach (1982) or the *Acht Grau* (*Eight Gray, 2001*) in Deutsche Guggenheim Berlin (2002).⁵ In addition, the artist conducted fruitful collaborations with architects. So, for his contribution to *documenta IX* (Kassel, 1992) housed in the Aue Pavilions, he took up architect Paul Robbrecht’s proposal to cover the walls with wood panelling. In this case, Richter not only relinquished the obligatory ‘white cube’ formula but also responded to the ensuing cabinet-like condition with a floor-to-ceiling disposition of his work.⁶

Throughout Richter’s career one can discern a genuine desire to grant his paintings architectural amplitude—an
aspiration that the *Rooms* series seems to exemplify. Yet in an interview with Dorothea Dietrich in 1985, answering a question about the meaning of the ‘drawings of entire rooms, architectural drawings’ in *Atlas*, the artist gave her a double-sided, overtly antithetic response. When asked whether these drawings represented the desire to devise a total environment, the artist concurred: ‘Oh, yes, that is such a dream of mine—that pictures will become an environment or become architecture, that would be even more effective.’ Yet in one fell swoop the artist derided the inescapable nature of architecture. The fact that ‘a building is there and one cannot avoid it’ bothered him profoundly:

That is why I sometimes hate architects so much. To erect a building is such a brutal thing, such an act of aggression. Painting is never like that... One can look away. It is fortunate that one cannot turn one’s paintings into buildings.  

In this essay we will try to make sense of the *Rooms* group’s appearance in *Atlas* and of the apparent inner dissension that goes along with it. Moreover, we will attempt to figure out what the group stands for in relation to Richter’s oeuvre as a whole, and how it exemplifies the artist’s idiosyncratic understanding and use of architecture.

*Atlas* appears as a bulky collection of images—mostly photographs, self-made or found, whether clipped or not, generally devoid of specific artistic claims—presented sometimes individually, but usually in groups and often in grids on standardized cardboard supports, consistently framed and numbered, and loosely articulated in more or less discernible sets. These sets rely on a mix of subject-related and formal associations. *Atlas* is not a random accumulation of images. It is held together through associative relations. On the one
The Rooms have the main part in the Atlas section going from Sheet 218 to Sheet 252. This group proceeds, so to speak, from the respective sections dedicated to the Seestücke (Seascapes) and the Wolken (Clouds), two preceding groups of images which themselves partially interfere and overlap.

Certain factual data provide some clues about the context in which the Rooms group took shape in the period 1970–1971. Richter was given the opportunity of a first major retrospective at the Kunstverein in Düsseldorf from June to August 1971. In the build-up to that important event the artist engaged in making a vast set of architectural perspective drawings. He even created a scale model of the venue (1:50 scale) replete with miniaturized versions of the works to be exhibited. He showed the model during the exhibition itself and had it reproduced as an architect-like drawing in the catalogue. Richter included the collages with scaled water colored versions of the works in the very first version of the Atlas presented in Utrecht in December 1972 but withdrew them from later versions. Sheet 245 of the latest version of the Atlas still distinctly shows the architectonic features of the Kunstverein venue and appears to aim at exploring its possibilities as exhibition space.

The Rooms group however stands out in a different sense. Among the vast majority of photographs, Atlas every so often includes installation schemes, sketches for exhibition settings and tentative set-ups for commissioned works. So, the large dimensions of the magnified details of brush streaks for the BMW commission (3 × 6 m) are verified by setting them against the representation of human silhouettes (1973, Sheet 103). What is more, the Städte (Cities) group even contains two plates with trapezoid cut-outs of aerial views.

Gerhard Richter Archive at the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden for their kind help and assistance in comparing these early installation shots in the photographic archive with the Atlas sheets.
mounted in perspectival sketches of interiors strongly akin to those appearing in the *Rooms* group (1968, Sheet 122). But in these cases the bodily and architectural expansion of the image seems to be fueled by the problem of concretization. They appear to aim at bridging the gap between a picture-photograph and a picture-painting, that is, at overcoming the challenges of transmogrifying the image of a photograph into a pictorial object in space. The perspectival spatialization achieved by Richter in the *Rooms* group however is far more intricate as well as being more projective or exploratory—an argument that may be supported by the artist’s later withdrawal of the concrete installation schemes for the Düsseldorf exhibition from the *Rooms* group in the Atlas.

The *Rooms* group is launched by the superimposition or erasure of the outline of window frames onto cloud pictures (Sheets 214 and 215). This is only a small step away from evoking a room around a picture (Sheet 218). As the artist loosely draws a perspectival extension from the four corners of the picture, the whole gains an architectural dimension. Such an operation may still be understood within the search for concretization or materialization: the problem of the transformation of a photographic image into a painting obviously requires judgments concerning dimension and scale, and their influence on the painting’s effectiveness in display. Yet, it is with this elementary gesture—the act of sketching a room around a picture-photograph which by the same token becomes an imposing picture-painting—that the *Rooms* series starts up.

From there on, various lines of development spin out. A first series of sheets shares the concerns of framing and repetition, as a regular paneling comes to articulate a neoclassical architectural order (Sheets 228–232, 234, 237, 239–240, 252). This plot gets a counterpoint in Richter’s adoption of a

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15 Atlas, Sheet 218 (Clouds, 1970, 51.7 × 36.7 cm).

16 Atlas, Sheet 237 (Rooms, 1971, 36.7 × 51.7 cm); Sheet 252 (Rooms, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm).
one-off deviant De Stijl- or Proun-like arrangement (Sheet 250).\textsuperscript{17} A second plotline consists in a mode of ‘theatricalisation’, which results in stage-like environments (Sheets 224, 242, 251).\textsuperscript{18} ‘I wanted to find out what happens when pictures are staged’, Richter recently explained to Obrist, ‘if it’s possible to increase their effect and, if so, how and with what motifs.’\textsuperscript{19} This story line abuts on the representation of a total environment with pictures occupying the ceiling, walls and floor—a setting that seems to completely rule out the public (Sheet 222):

That was the ‘total picture’ I talked to Sigmar Polke about in the fictional interview with him in 1964. We discussed pictures so overwhelming in effect they could have been used to torture or kill and so weren’t allowed to be shown again in public.\textsuperscript{20}

A third line resumes the question of the effect of painting by betting on a quasi-unlimited magnification of scale. These plates (Sheets 234, 243 and 249), Richter indicated in an earlier interview with Obrist, represent ‘sanctuaries … for pictures with an incredible total effect’.\textsuperscript{21} ‘Utopian spaces?’ asked Obrist. ‘And megalomaniac ones’ was Richter’s retort, revealing his own awareness of their vexed nature.\textsuperscript{22} In the more recent interview, the artist further elucidated:

That was wishful thinking or pleasure in provoking and opposing, because at the time there was a general move to reduce barriers, plus a certain degree of skepticism toward the sublime. Cologne Cathedral wasn’t allowed to have steps anymore, which is why there is this ugly square in front of it. And the Haus der Kunst in Munich was supposed to be demolished because it was fascist.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{17} Atlas, Sheet 250 (Rooms, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm).

\textsuperscript{18} Atlas, Sheet 242 (Rooms, 1970, 51.7 × 36.7 cm); Sheet 251 (Rooms, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm).

\textsuperscript{19} Obrist names Sheet 251 as an example of depictions looking ‘a bit like stage sets of diorama images’ in: ‘Interview with Gerhard Richter’, p. 93.

\textsuperscript{20} Atlas, Sheet 222 (Rooms, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm).

\textsuperscript{21} Sheet 249 (Rooms, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm); Atlas, Sheet 234 (Rooms, 1971, 36.7 × 51.7 cm).


\textsuperscript{23} Obrist, ‘Interview with Gerhard Richter’, p. 94.
As a similar ‘kind of act of defiance’ Richter justifies the predominance of cloud and mountain scenery in the *Rooms* group: ‘traditional subjects were really looked down on, especially if they were done in oil on canvas … there was something nostalgic about it, something neoclassical.’\(^{24}\) However, apart from such a contrarian motive and the avowed pleasure in yielding to it, it seems significant that the pictures involved in these spatial set-ups are actually devoid of perspectival markers such as traceable horizons and vanishing points—even though they are obtained through a perspectival apparatus as photographs obviously are. In this respect these pictures are technically insensitive as to their degree of enlargement and their position vis-à-vis a beholder. To put it simply: they may fit in whatever place, regardless of their scale. Therefore, the picture of a stately—perhaps authoritarian—neoclassical interior (Sheet 223), mounted in the scheme of a room drawn in central perspective with concurring horizon and vanishing point, is not only an exception, but arguably a kind of counter-image for the whole *Rooms* group.\(^{25}\) If this picture were to match the view of a beholder standing in the envisioned room, the dimensions of both room and picture would have been fixed within narrow margins. Yet, even if the pictures integrated in the *Rooms* group represent the reverse of such a severe constriction, they are totalizing images nonetheless. The rooms look out on racks of cloud or over mountains (Sheet 246).\(^{26}\) One may think of the picture-window of the Berghof residence near Berchtesgaden and realize that the overbearing, totalizing vision threatens to open onto a totalitarian prospect.\(^{27}\)

With the painting as a window, Richter reconnects pictorial representation with the old episteme that determined about six centuries of modern culture and science: the postulated unity between the world and the perceiving (and

139

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 93.


\(^{26}\) *Atlas*, Sheet 246 (*Rooms*, 1971, 66.7 × 51.7 cm).

\(^{27}\) Postcard: ‘Der Berghof Obersalzberg, Blick aus der großen Halle auf den Untersberg’, Photo Hoffmann, Munich, 1930s. The Berghof was Adolf Hitler’s vacation residence on the Obersalzberg in the Bavarian Alps near Berchtesgaden, Germany; also generally acknowledged as his headquarters during World War II. We are indebted to Steven Jacobs for the suggestion of this reference.

In the Tate retrospective catalogue Mark Godfrey mentions the *Rooms* group’s possible reference to fascist architecture. Godfrey indicates that ‘the *Rooms* were indeed drawn up in the year Richter visited Speer’s parade grounds in Nuremberg’, and points out the similarity between the arched windows in Sheet 224 and photographs Richter took of the exteriors of the building. Mark Godfrey, ‘Damaged Landscapes’, in *Gerhard Richter: Panorama*, exh. cat. London (Tate Publishing), 2011, pp. 85–86.
thinking) subject. It is well-known how photography supplanted painting on that field, and how, on the level of thought, this unity was undermined through the demise of the certainties about both terms of the relation. Richter came to painting when the soothing unifying idea of painting was already exhausted. In an interview with Benjamin Buchloh in 1986, he explicitly relativized the impact of photography on painting’s attrition, shifting register from the ‘descriptive and illustrative function’ to the moral realm. Observing that literature and music ‘are in the very same mess’ even though they have not ‘been edged out by anything analogous to photography’, he (at first sight quite) incidentally alluded to Hans Sedlmayr’s diagnostic of the Lost Centre. When his interlocutor expressed his dismay about this touchy reference, Richter asserted: ‘what he was saying was absolutely right. He just drew the wrong conclusions, that’s all. He wanted to reconstruct the Centre that has been lost… . I’ve no desire to reconstruct it.’

In his Notes dating from the same year, Richter wrote:

> What offends me most of all is the slack apathy of such people, who ultimately regret only the loss of a centre, and who are too comfortable to give up the apparent pleasures of a corrupt and cretinous ersatz art.

‘Sacrifice oneself to objectivity’, he proclaimed; in sum, the anguish of being reduced to ‘a reaction machine, unstable, indiscriminate, dependent’ is preferable to business as usual. The artist’s lucidity and antagonistic stance leads him to ‘bracket off’ ideology, not unlike Manfredo Tafuri’s call for a dispassionate historiography wherein ‘anguish’ would be replaced by ‘accomplishment’:
Fortunately for us, the reception of specific moments in the history of modern criticism permits a ‘bracketing off’ of the ideological sign originally stamped on them. For example, it is difficult indeed not to sense the close affinity between Sedlmayr’s intuition of loss, [Walter] Benjamin’s concept of the ‘decline of the aura’, and Robert Klein’s reflections on the ‘anguish of the referent’.31

But beyond the resemblance qua analysis and the dramatic dissimilarity qua fate, what basically distinguishes the victims (respectively fugitive and exile) of violent oppression from a benevolent contributor to National Socialist ideology and unremorseful reactionary, is the personal conduct in general, and more specifically their deeds and works, and the moral sense the latter reflect. ‘Action in pursuit of ideology creates lifeless stuff at best, and can easily become criminal’, Richter pens down on February 25, 1986.32 Hence, in his artistic practice he places deeds before ideas and the ‘How’ before the ‘What’.33 In the register of intentions this results in the following bias: ‘to invent nothing—no idea, no composition, no object, no form—and to receive everything: composition, object, form, idea, picture.’34 On April 21, 1986 he formulates what may be considered the crux of his positioning:

This plausible theory, that my abstract paintings evolve their motifs as the work proceeds is a timely one, because there is no central image of the world any longer: we must work out everything for ourselves, exposed as we are on a kind of refuse heap, with no centre and no meaning; we must cope with the advance of a previously undreamt-of freedom.35
The artist acknowledges this disenchanting freedom with an extremely versatile production. Yet, in the stirring conversation with Buchloh already quoted above, he strongly denied the latter’s hypothesis that his work would aim at making a sort of catalogue of the rhetorical possibilities of painting: ‘I see no point in enumerating the old, lost possibilities of painting. To me what counts is to say something; what counts is the new possibilities.’

Despite the loss of the Idea of painting, the artist remains committed to the Ethos of painting. He does not propose another or a new Idea for painting, but his work is entirely captivated with the quest for it. As he puts it already in 1977, ‘the own true element’ of painting is ‘that of formative thinking’. Painting’s assignment is to ‘set an example.’ Therefore, we would like to argue, Richter’s work is suspended in reflection. His thoughtful practice entirely inhabits the moment that precedes the Idea, where the universal is sought in the particular, via the example. Through individual closure (determination) every singular work—be it a smaller or larger abstract, or a cloud-painting, a small landscape or still-life, a color chart, striped, grey or monochrome canvas, or a mirrored or glass plated piece, etc.—is an ‘example’ of painting. It is as a whole that his oeuvre ‘exposes’ the ethos of painting. Reflection is the place where antithetic formulas are played out. It is the proper place of dialectics. The space of reflection detaches itself from worldly determination. Commitment to the ethos of painting is this distance proper: the realization by the artist that his deeds and gestures do not belong to him, nor that they confront a swarming anonymous mass, but that they do address a society of peers, a grand community of culture.

Hence, we can understand why Atlas is a necessary complement to Richter’s oeuvre. It is the repository of the
antithetic movements of his *Daily Practice*. Rejected formulas, dismissed thoughts can be kept and somehow ordered there. Since *Atlas* is a storehouse of incongruous elements and a compendium of conflicting notions about painting, Buchloh aptly named it an ‘Anomic Archive’. But even within this overall unruly whole the *Rooms* group ‘erupts’ as an anomaly alike. Since it stands out, as the artist himself has intimated, as an intemperate attempt to maximize the ‘effect’ of painting. In the *Rooms* group the artist does not so much emerge as an architect or a curator but rather as a scenographer. However, the striving towards a maximum impact destroys the distancing effect carefully maintained in reflection. In an effort entirely oriented toward effect, reflection is ruled out. Such an overbearing exercise can leave a trace in *Atlas* but cannot be integrated in the oeuvre. By betting on the effect of painting, the *Rooms* group works against Richter’s oeuvre as a whole. It overestimates painting’s determination and likewise devalues the artist’s reflective practice.

As for architecture then: In the *Rooms* group it appears as an accrued subject to painting. That is, architecture is the subject on which this adventurous but sidetracked expansion of Richter’s practice is piggybacked. It is a dead branch of *Atlas*, bearing neither fruits nor offspring. In a recent interview with Obrist, the artist called it a moment of ‘wishful thinking’. Twenty years earlier, he had already conceded that the sketches were marked by a megalomaniac impulse. Hence *Rooms* did not hold an appeal to be built in reality. ‘That sort of thing only works in sketches’, he acknowledged, ‘because the execution would be unendurable, overblown and bombastic.’ Nevertheless he maintained the importance of making them: ‘it was good to design sanctuaries of that kind, for pictures with an incredible total effect.\(^{42}\)
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Index

'1:1 Period Rooms' 184, 185
'5th International Architecture Exhibition' 121, 126, 127
AAM Galleria, Rome IT 129
Abraham, Raymond 129
Adam, Robert 99
Appleyard, Donald 70
Architectural Association (AA), London UK 17, 24, 109, 112, 114
Arkzoom 18
Archenius, Thordis 212
Art Academy Düsseldorf, DE 195, 202
Art Basel Unlimited, CH 181
Art Net Gallery, London UK 17
Art of this Century Gallery, New York US 80
Arts Council England (ACE), UK 61
Asher, Michael 165, 200–203
Assemble 51–56, 58–62
Atkinson, Dennis 103, 104
‘Atlas van de foto’s en schetsen’ 133
Balmond, Cecil 36
Banham, Reyner 18, 23
Barbaro, Daniello 79
Barbican, London UK 209
Barcelona Pavilion, ES 196
Bartelli, Carlo 125
Barthes, Roland 13, 204, 214
Bataux, Abbé Charles 53
Bauhaus 69, 145
Bayer, Herbert 69
Beaufort Triennale, BE 218
Behind the Green Door’ 209
Behrens, Peter 82
Benjamin, Walter 35, 83, 141, 214
Biesenbach, Klaus 217
Billiet, Lionel 208
Binet, Hélène 109, 110, 117–119
Bishop, Claire 35, 37, 38, 56, 59, 60, 150
Blazwick, Iwona 134, 136
Bloc, André 67
Bois, Yve-Alain 13
Bolles, Julia 112
Bolles-Wilson 109–113, 115, 117, 118
Bonineer, Tristan 208
Bonvicini, Monica 217
Borris, Giovanna 59
Bötticher, Karl 128
Boullée, Étienne-Louis 22
Bourriaud, Nicolas 30, 34, 35, 37, 56, 58
Boyarski, Alvin 109, 110
Brauningan, Bud 184
Branzi, Andrea 109
Breuer, Marcel 145–155
‘Breuer Revisited: New Photographs by Luisa Lambri and Bas Princen’ 145–150, 152, 154, 155
Brick Country House project 194, 197, 200
Broodthaers, Marcel 202, 204
Bruges Triennale, BE 218
Brugueras, Tania 53
Brunelleschi, Filippo 83
Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. 96, 105, 133, 134, 140, 142, 143, 200, 202, 213
Buren, Daniel 105, 195, 200–204
Burkin, Victor 18
Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal CA 59
Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal) 195
Casco Art Institute, Utrecht NL 97
Castelli Gallery, Leo, New York US 115
Centre Pompidou, Paris FR 129
Chaplin, Charlie 82
Christo (Christo Vladimirov Javacheff) 197
c/o Haus Esters’ 193, 200
Index

Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam NL 10
Robbrecht, Paul 134
Robbrecht en Daem 133, 134
Rode, August 194, 195
Rogers, Ernesto Nathan 123
‘Rogue Game’ 97–99, 101–106
‘Rooms’ 133–139, 143, 214
Rønning, Wilhelm 79
Ross, Toni 35, 38
Rossi, Aldo 122, 123, 126, 127, 199
Rothko, Mark 217
Rotor 207–218
Rotor Deconstruction (Rotor DC) 210
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 25, 195
Rowe, Colin 18
Royal Monceau cultural center, FR 72
Ruscha, Ed 19
Ruskin, John 57, 59
Ruta de la Amistad, La (the Road of Friendship) project 66, 72
Rykwert, Joseph 18
Salter, Peter 109
Sanck, Tomaas 118
Schiller, Friedrich 35
Schleizka, Jenny 217
Schütte, Thomas 193, 202
Scolari, Massimo 121–131
Sedlmayr, Hans 140, 141
Selgascano 32
Semper, Gottfried 128
Serota, Nicholas 135
Serpentine Galleries, London UK 27, 32–38, 53, 61, 111
Sert, Josep Lluís 68
Shannon, Will 55
Sheraton, Thomas 99, 101, 102
Sherer, Daniel 125, 130, 131
Shinkenchiku Residentiaal Design competition 112
Shop at Howgill, The project 57
Showroom Gallery, The, London UK 97, 103
Simmel, Georg 215
Skafis, Thomas 79
Smith, Chris 60, 61
Smith, Hamilton 146
Smithson, Alison and Peter 23, 70
Soane, John 99
Sotheby’s 151
Speer, Albert 139
Spike Island Gallery, Bristol UK 97, 98, 102, 105
Sportcentrum Olympos, Utrecht NL 97
Städtische Galerie Lenbachhaus, München DE 136
Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach DE 134
Stirling, Simon 52
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam NL 185
Steck, John 18, 22
Steinbeck Studio, London UK 55
Stiftung Kunstfonds, Bonn DE 194, 195, 203
Stirling, James 18, 23
Sugarhouse Studios, Stratford UK 61
Suzuki House project 111
Suzuki, Ryoji 109
Szekely, Pierre 71, 72
Tafuri, Manfredo 140
Taki, Koji 116
Tam, Melanie 208

Tate Gallery, London UK 51, 135, 139
Tegethoff, Wolf 197, 198, 200
Tiravanija, Rirkrit 30, 34, 35, 37
Tramway Gallery, Glasgow UK 51, 55
Tschumi, Bernard 18, 22, 24, 115
Turner Prize 51–55, 57, 59, 61, 62
Twombly, James 187, 188
Tweed Regional Gallery, Murwillumbah AU 184

Use Me project 207, 208, 210–212
‘Usus/Usures’ 209, 218
Van Orman Quine, Willard 195
Vanderbilt Whitney, Gertrude 146
Vattimo, Gianni 129, 130
Venice Bienalle 121, 126, 127, 130
Venturi, Robert 199
Verschaffel, Bart 218
Vesely, Dalibor 18
Vidler, Anthony 11
Vision Machine project 75–78, 80–84
Wagstaff, Sheena 152, 153
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis US 18
Walker, Stephen 98
Warburg, Aby 83
Warren & Mosley 97–99, 101–106
Warren, Sophie 97, 103
Water House project 111
Weiner, Lawrence 213
Weiss, David 37
Weissenhof Estate, Stuttgart DE 196
‘Western Objects Eastern Fields’ 112
Wexler, Alan 29
Whiteread, Rachel 52
Wilson, Peter 112, 119
Wright, Frank Lloyd 183, 184
Württembergischer Kunstverein, Stuttgart DE 136

Yale School of Architecture’s Gallery, New Haven US 129
Yardhouse, Stratford UK 61
Yatsuka, Hujime 109
Ziche, Jens 27
Zimmerman, Claire 147, 150
Zittel, Andrea 29
Zumthor, Peter 33
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