# Architectural Strategies in Contemporary Art

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> "Art no longer tells stories, it prompts meditation; after labor, it is good to meditate." Le Corbusier, Towards a New Architecture

Towards a New Architecture is a volume that itself operates with a degree of creative license and artistry – a collection of seven essays famed to have been inspired by conversations between Le Corbusier and his colleague Amédée Ozenfant, it advocates for the exploration of an idea: the modernization of architecture, parallel to industrial and technological advancement. Though technology is celebrated heavily, in the block Aesthetic of the Engineer, Architecture Le Corbusier addresses artists directly:

> "Painters and sculptors, champions of the art of today…join together so that we might rebuild the cities. Then your works will find their place within the framework of the era and everywhere you will be accepted and understood. Tell yourselves that architecture needs your attention. Be mindful of architecture."[1]

In Le Corbusier's words, while architecture may be an artistic fact – a "machine for stirring the emotions"[2] – art is a prompt for meditation. He calls upon artists to "join together," with the promise that modern architecture will redefine the context for art to "be accepted and understood." In this excerpt, Corbusier suggests the artist as one whose vision is established past the conventional horizon, so far ahead in fact that the products of that vision can only be accepted once modern architecture has created the appropriate environment.

At the time that Corbusier would have committed this statement to paper, the logic of art was not the logic of its context. Sculpture, in particular, was gradually transitioning out of its conventional threshold as an isolated monument in public space. Rosalind Krauss refers to the sculpture produced from 1880 to the middle of the 20th century as exhibiting "a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place."[3] Krauss cites as an example Rodin's Gates of Hell and his statue of Balzac, both conceived of as monuments but ultimately failing as the commissions collapsed, and the made objects were produced with such a degree of subjectivity that neither truly commemorates their intended subjects. Even as Le Corbusier was crafting the articles that would become Towards a New Architecture, Constantin Brancusi was in the full flush of his career, exhibiting works in which the base supporting the figure is the site of the work, transportable to any new location, the meaning of it unchanged by its context.

Maybe it is not surprising, then, that Le Corbusier addresses painters and sculptors directly. Largely disassociated from its physical surrounds, modern sculpture in particular continued developing in isolation from temporal and contextual conditions until the 1950s, when it reached an impasse that could be summarized in the words of Barnett Newman: "Sculpture is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting."

When the indifference of sculpture to its environment ended in the 1960s, it ended in such a way that sculpture became undefinable and unpredictable. Mirrored boxes on a landscape became art; pits dug into the earth and framed with lightweight timber became art; hiring contractors to use dump trucks,

tractors and front-end loaders to move rocks and earth to new locations far removed from the built environment, removing existent walls from exhibition spaces as a critique on the architecture of the institution of the art world, slicing through houses and larger buildings - all of this became art. If such a diversity of operations can be said to share one common value, it is in fact the specific articulation of a relationship to architecture and the built environment, the acquisition of context as a medium.

This shift in art - and in particular sculpture – to move beyond the influence of historical precedence and institutional limits and into the space of the everyday inspired a seminar that I taught in Spring 2009: Art, Architecture and the Built Environment. Focusing on the strategies that contemporary artists use to engage and to critique the built environment, this course leads with the question, "What is it about architecture that has motivated visual artists, particularly within the last forty years, to appropriate and act upon it?"

Beginning in the 1960s, artists established their own terms for engaging architecture out of political concerns, a reaction to the institutions of galleries and museums which commodified art, displaying it for the consumption of those who could afford it. What changed this power structure was an artist's choice to engage the context of their work on their own terms. A significant number of artists of the 1960s worked to establish direct and specific relationships between their work and the everyday built environment surrounding them – both responding to and inventing critical moments in architectural history. In this seminar, students were (re)introduced to architecture through the eyes of artists whose works establish a strategic relationship within both iconic and ordinary built environments.

Four territories in which arts practices engage or appropriate architecture formed the organization for this course: Site, Image, Pavilion and Archive. In each section, we discussed whether architectural strategies were methods of making art, or were meant as a specific critique about the built environment. Through four made projects, critiques, and in-class discussion, students were meant to further understand and articulate the manner in which artists' specific interventions question architecture's intended effects upon culture, culture's needs and desires for architecture, and how through the critical act of intervention, the built environment and our interpretation of it can be radically altered.

**I. SITE**

This seminar begins in the 1960s, from within the expanded field of Rosalind Krauss' seminal article, in which the critic articulates sculpture's growth beyond simply what is 'not-landscape' and 'not-architecture' to four hybrid categories. 'Site construction' operates between landscape and architecture: In a field at Kent State University, a backhoe layers dirt on an empty shed until the center beam of the wood and stucco structure cracks and the architecture is overcome. Robert Smithson, Partially Buried Woodshed (1970). 'Marked sites' are the hybrid of landscape and not-landscape: Two trenches are cut into the eastern edge of the Mormon Mesa – the trenches are each 50 feet deep and 30 feet wide, measuring together 1,500 feet in length, displacing 240,000 tons of rhyolite and sandstone. Michael Heizer, Double Negative (1969). 'Axiomatic structures' are operations between architecture and not-architecture: Two stacked television monitors are displayed at the end of a corridor that is 30 feet long and just 20 inches wide, with a live-feed video camera at its entrance. The image displayed on the upper monitor becomes evident as one advances along the length of the corridor – revealing the image of the viewer as an ever-diminishing speck walking away from the entrance. Bruce Nauman, Live-Taped Video Corridor (1970). The fourth boundary of this expanded field is simply the hybrid of what is not-landscape and what is not-architecture: 'Sculpture.'

Institutional critiques, although appearing outside of Krauss' expanded field, use existing architecture explicitly as a medium for decoding and recoding institutional conventions to "expose the hidden, yet motivated, operations typically concealed" by architecture.[4] For artists of the 1960s and 1970s, this meant spaces that mold art's meaning and modulate its cultural and economic value. Hans Haacke's Condensation Cube (1963-65) exposed the humidity level of a gallery by allowing moisture to permeate a Minimalist Plexiglas cube. Mel Bochner's Measurement series (1969) called attention to the material fact of exhibition space as a context framing art work by noting the dimensions of the walls right on them. Michael Asher's

Installation at Claire Copley Gallery, Inc. (1974) removed the partition wall between the exhibition space and the backroom, exposing the storage area and gallery director's office to the public. In each case, the artists minimally intervened upon the existing architecture to expose the truth of the programmatic elements otherwise concealed.

Following two weeks studying these artists, the Site assignment was presented to the students as an opportunity for either a Site Specific Inquiry or Institutional Critique. Using one primary material, they were to choose a site within the Storrs Building by Charles Gwathmey – which houses our School of Architecture – and amplify a certain condition of their selected site through material intervention.

Graduate student Josh Shope turned his attention to the 'salon' of the Storrs Building. Architecturally, the salon is the building's atrium – culturally and socially, it is a space of high-visibility conversation, critique and public gathering, overlooked by two tiers of faculty offices along one long wall, and by classrooms along the other – circulation through it is constant. Its use comes with one stipulation: one must reserve it from the administrative assistant at the School of Architecture front office, and only one-half of the salon may be reserved at a time. Shope's installation borrows from the strategies of Bochner: reserving exactly one-half of the salon for three days, Shope measures out and defines the reserved space in looming black plastic. Although officially 'reserved,' it lies empty and inaccessible under the black plastic: a waste of space. The project both physically manifests the paperwork of 'reserving' the space, and re-introduces the environment to its inhabitants once the plastic is removed.

Image 1: Josh Shope, Thus Spake Zarathustra, 2009.

Image 2: Josh Shope, Thus Spake Zarathustra, 2009.

In contrast to the salon, the computer lab is a public space in the Storrs Building that is typically used in high volume, but with little public interaction or physical engagement. The first step toward entering the private world of the computer is the physical and external act of engaging the computer mouse. Graduate student Ronna Gardner proposed operating upon the threshold of the mouse as the public site of her intervention. Producing a 'mouse trap' for every mouse in the computer lab, complete with a very easy-to-use release tab for the mouse, Gardner created a condition that only required a user's momentary acknowledgment of the chipboard 'mouse trap' and direct engagement with the pull tab to release the mouse in order to use the computer. This caused prolonged moments of confusion – and some delight – for students entering the computer lab who were accustomed to sitting down and slipping, unencumbered, into the private world of the Internet and their projects. Both Gardner and Shope rendered physical and real thresholds or conditions that tend toward the abstract or the virtual. Site, as the first project, set precedence within the course for working with architecture and material on a human, experiential scale.

## II. IMAGE

Julius Schulman and Bernd and Hilla Becher are among the most widely recognized photographers

Image 3: Ronna Gardner, Mousetraps, 2009

who have explored the built environment as a subject: Schulman known primarily for his documentation of Case Study House #22 and other California modernism, and the Bechers for their documentation of the disappearance of German industrial buildings: barns, water towers, storage silos, warehouses. Beyond documentation and historicization, artists have long used photography to capture transient or subjective conditions in the built environment that might lie outside of time, or the capabilities of the naked eye.

Smithson captured entropy in his Hotel Palenque (1969), a series of photographs on the subject of a Mexican hotel that was decaying while also being renovated – a 'ruin in reverse.' In Psychobuildings (1988) Martin Kippenberger documents buildings in intermediary states of construction or demolition, "conjuring idiosyncratic spaces, unpredictable alternatives to the homogenous logic of the urban grid,"[5] a sort of exploration of the architectural unconscious. In more recent years, Waalid Raad and Hiroshi Sugimoto have used photographs to explore latent or potential conditions of architecture – Raad's Sweet Talk (A Photographic Monument of Beirut) (1992-2004) is a series of photographs of streets, storefronts and other buildings of cultural, political, and economic significance in Beirut, photographs that are dedicated to the buildings' inevitable, future disappearance due to political turmoil. Sugimoto's Architecture series (1990 – present) takes as its subject the canon of modern architecture – Corbusier's Villa Savoye, Gropius' Fagus Factory, Wright's Guggenheim, and so on – documented with a shutter speed so slow that it seems to capture the subtle movement of things that we take for granted as eternally still. They are described by Sugimoto as "architecture after the end of the world."[6]

In the Image assignment series, students were asked to use photography to document either an existing, though unfamiliar, condition of the built environment (Raad/Smithson), or to go beyond the physical properties of architecture, exploring and embodying the architectural unconscious (Kippenberger/Sugimoto). Students worked from exploration to critical interpretation and critical making, each assigned to work with one of five possible image-making devices: Single Lens Reflex Camera, Digital Camera, Flatbed Scanner, Cell Phone Camera, or Video Camera.

Employing a Video Camera, student Rex Yau drew inspiration from the work of Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, a contemporary artist who uses the specific architecture of Mies van der Rohe to explore human identity through oblique narratives that befit the atmosphere of the architecture, but conjure questions about the inhabitation of modern space. Yau chose as his site an industrial facility in rural North Carolina that he negotiated access to inhabit. His short film opens to a figure in a parking lot, back lit to obscure the details of his identity. Ambiguity defines the film: ambiguity of the origin or purpose of the architecture engaged, ambiguity of a narrative in which there is no dialogue and turning points in the film are defined

Image 4: Rex Yau, Poursuivre, 2009.

by sound and light, ambiguity of a soundtrack that is a white noise roaring at times with some promise of production, industry, fabrication, and at other times emitting an electronically emotional or spiritual tone. What the film essentially captures is an atmospheric portrait of a man. Camera angles alternate from within the architecture – behind walls, it seems – to behind the character, to in front of the character. His every image is in relationship to the architecture and lighting conditions that alternate between aggressive and absent. In the short film's climax, the character occupies a sort of nuclear zone within the industrial building, a defined interior space made of concrete masonry units. Lights flash on and off, the sounds of fax machines whir and typewriters clack, the figure is framed in doorways of this interior space, and immediately after what might be understood as an architecturally-motivated transformation, the character begins running – for the benefit of the camera, crossing and uncrossing the space, and then running completely out of the industrial building and into a blinding light that ends the film.

What resonates in this work is architecture as a means for exploring human identity. In the films of both Yau and Manglano-Ovalle, the artists are using architectures that reflect a built environment intimate to them. Manglano-Ovalle is a Chicago-based artist whose 12-minute video installation, Le Baiser/The Kiss, an opaque narrative about socio-economic castes, takes place in the Farnsworth House just outside of Chicago in Plano, Illinois. Yau, too, uses a space that reflects a part of his identity by choosing as his site the industrial building in which his father, a first generation Chinese immigrant, has worked since their arrival in the United States.

For some students, making images of the built environment was charged with the exploration of identity within architecture. For others, it was an opportunity to experiment with how standard image-capturing devices could be used in non-standard ways. Graduate student Charlotte Whitlock turned a flat-bed scanner into a 'scamera' for her series Deux ex Scanner. By connecting the scanner to a laptop and clicking 'scan,' the environment in front of the scanner is captured and converted into a digital format that provides surprising insights into the ways that forms, motion, and time are translated from the world of space and experience to the world of the image via the conventional desktop scanner. The power of deciding the image is transferred to the machine, not the person using it. A movement can fill the entire image, or be captured only in part, as seen in the image where only a pair of feet remain in the center of the subject's dance across the entire frame during a scan. The 'scamera' captures many moments, but merges them into one, resulting in real, un-retouched images that are eerily independent of the way that time, space and movement are defined in reality. The Image project allowed students the opportunity to explore

Image 5: Charlotte Whitlock, Deux ex Scanner, 2009.

the way that we view the built environment, while limiting their endless capacity for control over how the built environment is typically imaged. This loss of control, and the necessary process of working through an unfamiliar medium and tool of translation resulted in work that was as surprisingly insightful as it was beautiful.

Image 6: Charlotte Whitlock, Deux ex Scanner, 2009.

### III. PAVILION: ECONOMIES OF SPACE

At the hands of both artists and architects, the construction of pavilions and other small structures are opportune and immersive moments with the potential to alter social conventions tied to the built environment. The Farnsworth House (1945-51), a canonic moment of modern architecture, redefines the potential of dwelling in a house. Dan Graham explored the language of modern architecture – glass, steel, and mirrors – in pavilions that challenge audience interaction and visibility – resulting in a condition Graham describes as "somewhere between architecture and television."[7] In a more recent subversion of the idea of at-home-ness, Heavy Trash, a collaborative of anonymous architects and designers in Southern California, created "Viewing Platform," a ladder-cum-pavilion that comments upon and changes the (anti)social condition of gated communities.

As presented to the students, the physical demands of creating a Pavilion required that it be transportable, occupiable by one or two people, deliberate in its material language (whether new or reclaimed) and have the ability to be prototyped. The project was to consider a site in terms of the cultural activities and social occupations that define it – and to suggest new 'economies' of inhabitation that would manage the community and environment in a more productive way, advocating for social change through the strategic employment of materials and space. Entrepreneurship, ethics, public art, and sub/urbanism were suggested as palpable concepts for consideration. The final Pavilions were exhibited in the final seminar critique at the end of the semester, and occupied by reviewers from the Department of Art & Art History and from the School of Architecture.

The environments that the students broached ranged from the emblematic skyline of downtown Charlotte to the highly visible and public spaces within the Storrs Building. In what has been called a "Post-critical" era, students were making valid and poignant critiques about the built environment

(Image 7: Ronna Gardner, Hood, 2009.

surrounding them, and room for change within it. Privacy – and the lack of privacy – were topics explored by graduate students Terry Floyd and Ronna Gardner. Floyd developed the Armadillo, a portable, self-deployable device that offers a small amount of personal comfort, mobility, and refuge on a one-human scale, with the idea of homelessness and Lucy Orta's Refuge Wear – Body Architecture in mind. Garder developed Hood, a device closer to scale of a garment, to define private space and mediate human interaction through its materiality.

Making critiques on more nuanced and specific social conditions within the built environment, undergraduate students Zac Porter and Aaron Cote examine voyeurism and identity, and capitalism within the built environment. Porter's Self-Portrait posits that the perception of the maker's identity is foremost in the thematic concern of art or architecture. In Porter's critique, a construction of two re-purposed luggage trunks offer a viewing frame, which one must crouch down in order to engage, immediately being confronted with a video screen. A pair of buttons on the side of the construction switch the video feed between a pre-recorded loop of the artist performing routine tasks in his home, and a real-time feed of the viewer looking in at the screen. The viewer is forced to decide which video feed to watch and, in this way, becomes the manager and voyeur of two manufactured identities: one of which is the artist's own self-portrait, the other the viewer's self-manufactured self-portrait. Where Bruce Nauman used the new and novel technology of live-feed video capture and television to lure the viewer to the end of his Live-Taped Video Corridor (1970), Porter confronts the viewer with a glut of intimate footage of himself, and puts the viewer in charge of constructing their own self-portrait which, in an age of Facebook, digital cameras and the constant security surveillance of public space, is no longer novel or desired, but a mandated and obligatory part of the virtual identity construction and maintenance from which nobody is excepted.

Critiquing the effect of capitalism on public space, Aaron Cote examines the painting Paris, A Rainy Day (1877) by Gustave Caillebotte. In the painting, pedestrians mill about vast expanses of the new Haussmannian boulevards of Paris. Flanked by cafes and shops, these boulevards made a profound influence on the everyday lives of Parisians. Cote's critique focuses on the couple in the fore-

Image 8: Zac Porter, Self-Portrait, 2009.

Image 9: Zac Porter, Self-Portrait, 2009.

ground of the painting, sharing an umbrella while ignoring one another and a passing man, focused

instead on the environment surrounding them. In fact, Cote notices, all of the figures in the painting occupy their own worlds, signified by the umbrellas. Linking the rising capitalism made possible by the newly opened boulevards with the 'privacy' of individual worlds and wealth, signified by the umbrellas, Cote produced an installation that evokes the sense of simultaneous independence and isolation linked to economy and architecture.

**IV. ARCHIVE**

Collecting, storing and archiving are all established arts practices that require architecture to prescribe an ordered interaction between content and audience. In the context of the archive, architecture is a deliberate interface meant to conceal, protect, and reveal its contents in highly determined ways. In projects such as Mark Dion's On Tropical Nature (1991), the archive is the result of an intensive site-specific inquiry—the artist ventures to an uninhabited part of the rain forest near the base of the Orinoco River and spends three weeks collecting specimens of plant and animal life that are picked up at the end of each week in crates and delivered to a hosting gallery in Caracas, Venezuela. The archiving is made visible when the specimens are uncrated and displayed for audiences. Andy Warhol's 610 Time Capsules contain nearly all of the correspondence and small artifacts that came across his desk at The Factory beginning in 1974. The boxes were added to until they were filled, at which point they were sent off to storage – an atemporal archive whose unit of measurement is the interior space of a standardized storage box.

In the final quarter of this four-part seminar, students were asked to refer back to one of their first three projects, Image, Site, or Pavilion, and to produce a record of that project in the form of an 8" x 5" artifact – the interior space available in a typical cigar box. Each student was responsible for manufacturing 25 copies of this record, so that 25 Archives of this seminar course could be made – one

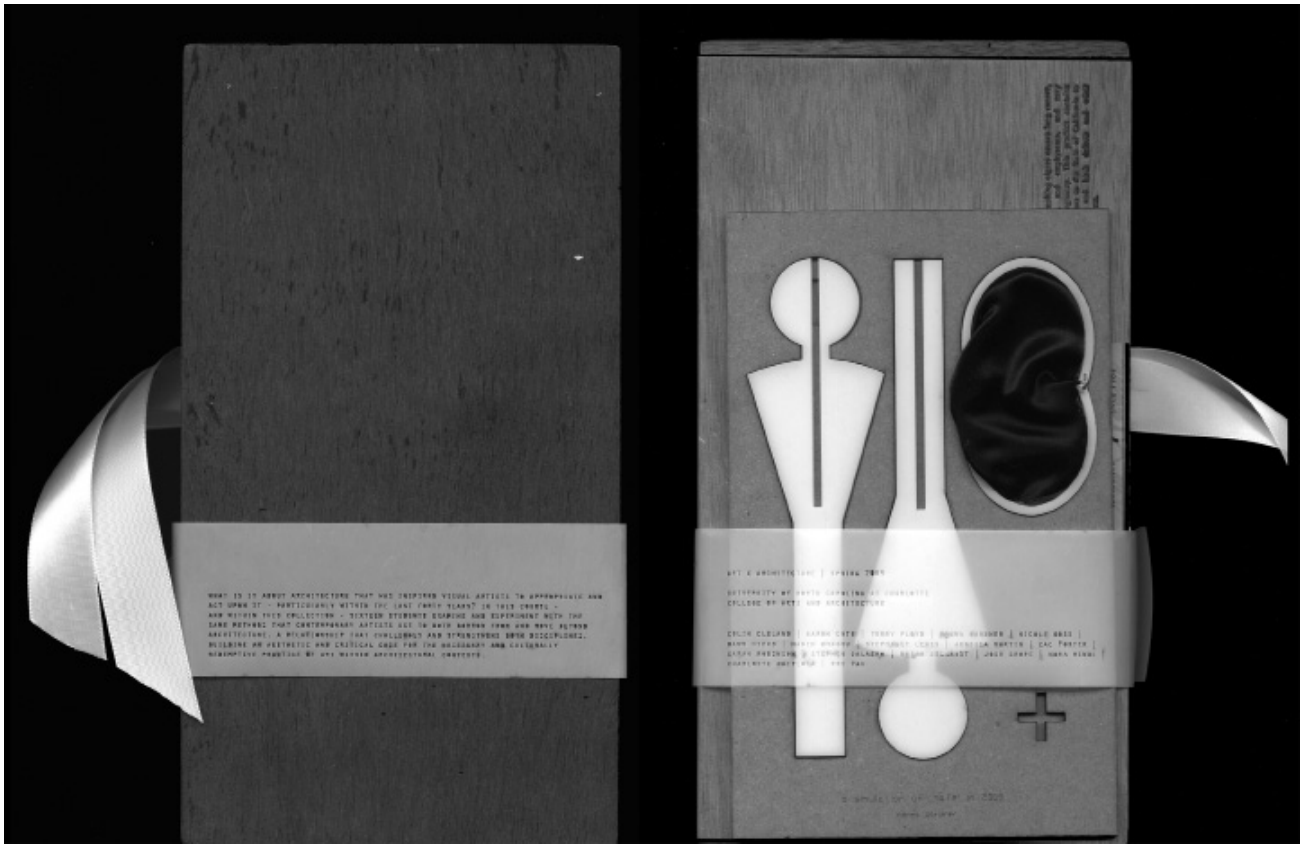

Image 10: Art, Architecture & the Built Environment, Archive, 2009.

for each student, one for the professor, and seven to gift to reviewers that had been present throughout the semester for critiques.

The method of translating a project into an archival record was left to the students to determine, and the ranged widely from graphic posters to laser-cut acrylic pieces that could be assembled into models and apparatuses for a viewer to employ themselves in an intervention. Graduate student Ronna Gardner used digital fabrication methods to produce a model of her Hood pavilion as A Simulation of Safe in 2009, expanding the idea of private space to the idea of 'safety,' a comment on American obsession with national and personal security in public spaces. Graduate student Josh Shope simply sampled one 8"x5" piece of his black plastic tarp from the site installation within the Storrs Building's salon, and included it as his contribution to the Archive. All archival records were collected at the final review, and distributed to collected cigar boxes around which were placed uniform laser-cut labels identifying the contents of the Archive.

## V. A CONCLUSION

Critical explorations of the built environment at an experiential scale are necessary in the education of an architect. This paper has introduced how, since the 1960s, artists have been exploring the built environment outside of the client relationships, significant financial limitations, and conventional building processes that can hinder architectural advancements. Making use of techniques and knowledge that architecture students have already mastered, this seminar + making course offers the opportunity to move beyond the increasingly limited time for exploration within the architecture studio, and into direct interpretation and critique of the built environment using strategies that have been used by contemporary artists for over forty years. Working in this vein, architecture students are able to operate directly within the space of culture, making progressive social and spatial interventions that, as Le Corbusier suggested, may act as prompts for meditating on how those rooted in the discipline of architecture can redefine, and re-enliven, the critical performance of our built environment.

## ENDNOTES

1. Le Corbusier, Toward an Architecture, trans. John Goodman (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 97.
2. Ibid.
3. Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," October Vol. 8 (Spring, 1979): 34.
4. Miwon Kwon, "One Site After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," October Vol. 80 (Spring, 1997): 89.
5. Ralph Rugoff, "Psycho Buildings," in Psychobuildings (London: Hayward Publishing, 2008): 17.
6. http://www.postmedia.net/03/sugimoto.htm (accessed July 1, 2008)
7. Randy Kennedy, "A Round Peg," New York Times, June 25, 2009, Arts section.