
In seeking to isolate a specific phenomenon at the intersection of contemporary art and architecture, editors Isabelle Loring Wallace (Associate Professor of Contemporary Art, University of Georgia) and Nora Wendl (Assistant Professor of Architecture, Portland State University) have compiled a corpus of scholarship that is both ambitious and novel. The focus of Contemporary Art about Architecture: A Strange Utility centers on artists who, in taking architecture as a subject of critical investigation, create works that themselves serve as contributions to architectural history and discourse. Consisting of fourteen essays by international scholars of both architecture and art history, the contents of this volume evidence and theorize a “non-verbal form of architectural history” manifest in a multiplicity of visual media.

The volume’s essays explore this emerging phenomenon in five sections: Origins, Photography as Architecture, Re-Building Mies’s Modernism, Re-Visionaries, and Impossible Architectures/Immodest Proposals. The latter two sections’ topics revolve around, respectively, works of art that serve to revise received or known histories of architectural structures, and the notion of the unbuilt or unbuildable. Focusing on works created over the last twenty-five years, artists whose work receives notable attention in the volume include Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Thomas Demand, and Janice Kerbel. Titan of modern architecture, Mies van der Rohe takes center stage in four of the book’s essays. His legacy is interpreted in a diversity of revealing modes, including author Martin Søberg’s provocative essay on the parallels between modernist architecture and photography as revealed through the work of Thomas Ruff. Matthew Barney’s notorious Cremaster Cycle is breathed new interpretive life in Rebecca Brantley’s essay, as the author deftly positions the work as a revisionist history of both architecture and biological processes.

While scholarship on the intersection between art and architecture is by no means novel, the editors and authors of Contemporary Art about Architecture: A Strange Utility illuminate a developing area of this crossing that is distinct and for which no other volume of its extent exists. The text’s tone is highly academic and intended for audiences versed in contemporary art history. Illustrations in this volume are limited but illuminative. The book contains sixteen colored plates, as well as scattered black-and-white images throughout the text. Ancillary materials include expansive endnotes, a substantive bibliography, and index. This book is a welcome addition to the interdisciplinary literature of art and architecture, and it is highly recommended for libraries collecting in both contemporary art and architecture.

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