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Spell For The Impatient
Miranda July

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Marc and Lisa, 2006
Katie Commodore
If we needed a concept of a fur covered roof for partying under (and we did, even if we did not know it) then the 2009 P.S.1 installation finally delivered one. The Reyner Banham aficionados will recognize in this statement the opening of his endorsement of the fur covered spaceship interiors supplied in 1968 by the movie Barbarella. Unlike Barbarella’s interiors, featuring the innocent face (and body) of the “surfer girl” Jane Fonda, Afterparty was not presented in Playboy. If it had been presented in those pages, Afterparty would have of course immediately confirmed its capacity to support the promiscuity promised us by its architects, MOS, in their (third stab at a) P.S.1 blurb. But without an endorsement by Playboy, Afterparty’s “promiscuity” requires disciplinary deciphering. And yes, furiness may have to be part of that interpretive work, but it is hardly the most important issue at stake.
What was really interesting about Barbarella was not the fact that its furry, goopy, low-tech, soft-porn world made it onto the pages of Playboy, but that Reyner Banham’s “Triumph of Software” made a nearly canonical place for it in architectural discourse. Banham argued in this piece that Barbarella instantly acquired cult status among architects and architecture students because it was (unlike standard period Sci-Fi) giving precedence to a malleable and responsive environment over the usual hyper-articulated joinery of hardware. Barbarella’s fur and transparent plastic bubbles (predictably) hit the nerve of the architecture culture of the late sixties, confirming that the period interest in these was pervasive, and by extension, that architecture was part of a cultural continuum now finally tending towards matters of performance, feedback, and pliability: Banham’s world of optimizable functions and ambient effects. And it was through a patently promiscuous act of criticism that Banham lodged the images of Barbarella even deeper into architecture culture’s historical consciousness, from where they still conjure up one of his most consistent lines of argument, that the architectural field and practice ought to absorb into their body the intelligence of the world beyond them.

As we know only too well, in the post-post world, an argument for inter-disciplinarity might not be noticed at all, and if it were it might be judged in bad taste, if for nothing else than for its mimetic resemblance to an old, overly academic paradigm. And yet, since their Afterparty project, Hilary Sample and Michael Meredith of MOS have been arguing for “radical inclusion” on the lecture circuit. The notion of radical inclusion may signal to some a greedy unwillingness to edit, clarify, or focus, but it could be seen instead as a particularly contemporary commitment to remembering as many lessons in architecture culture, technology and politics, as possible. So what might be important about Afterparty is that for once the usual Gen X ambition to value all positions equally, to not be “too judgmental,” to find a way to do whatever the project called for, to dutifully work with constraints, actually began to resemble a viable position.

The statement for MOS’s 2009 P.S.1 project, a truncated manifesto for architectural promiscuity, starts mid-paragraph, as if it were continuing an already lively conversation paused only to wet one’s lips. It would not be too far-fetched to say that the Afterparty text updates the old both-and position, but it is so much more than that, as it holds particular generational contradictions in tension: avant-garde and rear-garde, the representational and the real, being serious about lightheartedness, and certain about the need to travel deep down the rabbit hole of self-doubt.

MOS is one of many young American practices that in age and intellectual constitution correspond more or less to Douglas Coupland’s Gen X. This is the generation that has both endured the overly simplistic critique leveled at it by the previous one and has inherited a thoroughly academic version of that previous generation’s legacy of criticality and skepticism together with a world in which symbolic resistance is not an option. The unwillingness to state allegiances clearly (often seen as weakness of mind, or heart, by critics and more arrogant colleagues) is not due only to their meticulously educated awareness of the criticism that could be leveled at them on the basic grounds of over-simplification or dogmatism (no matter what the particular content of those allegiances might be), but is also a symptom of an actual generational belief that collecting and repurposing pieces of old legitimating narratives might be more viable today than any of those old narratives in their totality. It is this generation’s particular historical task to construct positions after several decades of their collective dismantlement and to do this at a time when just about every reputable thinker—except for Žižek (and power to him for it)—agrees that the era of stable positions and large narratives is definitively over.

The task of staking out a collective trajectory and cultivating a vital discussion within the discipline about the practice of architecture is objectively harder at this point than at any time before, notwithstanding the flood of apocalyptic and dogooder narratives in circulation. It is in this context that MOS’s radical inclusion, and call to architectural promiscuity both begin to provide a framework for a new type of generational position. The vital notion at the basis of both radical inclusion and architectural promiscuity—consciously caring for a multitude of discourses, disciplines and realities—allows MOS to begin to narrate and perhaps qualify the all-encompassing versatility, blunt realism, and truly expanded expertise that together characterize the Gen X architects. Somewhere between those two notions, a third bigger one emerges: radical disciplinary promiscuity. If disciplinary promiscuity were to be embraced as an appropriate self-description by a group of architects who already speak of inclusion and expansion of expertise, it would also require further narration, nurturing and definition of goals beyond (or through) this methodologi-
cal lens, in order to indeed warrant the qualifier *radical*. But imagine that: not default, not matter of fact, but willed, and radical?

The *Afterparty* text is not just one of three P.S.1 texts MOS architects have written, it is also one of many recent texts by this team of architects that laments the current state of architectural discourse. Michael Meredith’s “Fighting against institutionalized formalism through ephemerality,” an introduction to a small (wall-sized) exhibition mounted at the GSD, calls out with irritation and derision the collectively accepted individual imperatives in architecture: “The imperatives are individual—get work, build it faster, get it published, repeat.”7 For most Gen X architects this statement is a truism not even worth mentioning in public, but unless it is called out as a generational frustration it merely describes the status quo and surely stays outside of discourse. It is because they yearn for a collective discussion, a cultural context to work within that is as smart and as rich in nuance as each individual architect constituting this generation, that MOS’s literary contributions often simulate a conversation.

In the reverse order of appearance, their P.S.1 blurbs begin thus:

2009 *Afterparty*: “One thing about the “Afterparty,” as we’re calling it, is the need to look for new promiscuities, new methods of design, after the party of a sort of high-formalism which has dominated academic discourse . . .”

2007 *Prehistoric Future*: “Also, you’re right that we didn’t want to do that, we wanted to make something more building-like . . . a huge singular object . . .”

2004 *Plug-in Drop-out*: “The manifestation of a temporary urban beach within a doubly sanctified institution (MoMA/PS1) is inherently problematic . . .”

It is hard to miss even in these few opening lines how much more earnest and proper (in literary terms) was their first P.S.1 description than the subsequent ones, and their first project for P.S.1 was in equal measure less present, more ephemeral than the subsequent two, although not any less interesting as a strategy. But the first proposal, as Michael Meredith admits (in *Praxis*, Untitled Number Seven), was indeed more naive (than the subsequent two) and more accepting of the contemporary themes and trends in the American scene, even if not exactly managing to hit the right note when it comes to the image of complexity (that was de *rigueur* for P.S.1).9

More importantly, Plug-in Drop-out was developed before the MOS team began to articulate their interest in the historical avant-garde and in the idea of *simulating a new beginning,* in the context of relative flatness of architectural discourse (regardless of and in equal measure due to its ever-expanding breadth and plurality) and in opposition to that individualistic imperative to get the commission, build, publish, and repeat the same steps again, simulating a break and simulating a conversation may be the only way to effectively estrange the familiar conditions of practice and discourse. Thus a new beginning (a “desert island”—in Meredith’s retooling of Deleuze), and not under the pressure of an economic or ecological catastrophe, but as an artificially induced imperative to refocus the cultural project in architecture, goes hand in hand with delirious soliloquy (earnest or exaggerated). Both the simulation of a new beginning and talking to oneself have a certain self-help value, but are also invitations to a generational conversation, if nothing else.

The affectation of texts that start mid paragraph, or the atmosphere of painful confusion that permeates Michael Meredith’s 2002 movie (*Alternate Ending 1: The Glimmering Noise*), are over-exaggerated and openly artificial (even as the affectation is one of absolute earnestness). And depending on one’s taste for artificiality (or its opposite: authenticity) this affectation either invokes hilarity or aversion. But simulation might be the only way to change the course of things today, and here
following Slavoj Žižek’s recent proposals for the course of radical politics today, by simulation I especially mean a kind of historical imagination that actually manages to change the structure of historical time itself. Only if we can simulate a belief (or actually believe) that a certain outcome of events is inevitable can we act in the present as if it were our believed, or simulated, future’s history. If we believed that a generational discourse and focus were not just possible, but inevitable, we could begin to actually produce them into existence.11

Promiscuity. Critics use this term in architecture reviews and they mean different things by it. Sometimes the most grotesque barf rendered in gold gets a wink, a nudge and a snicker, but architectural promiscuity in MOS’s work and writing is of a different kind, not some feeling we are all simply supposed to agree upon, it is not a case of personal taste turned into a pedagogical (read: religious) imperative. In MOS’s latest P.S.1 statement, quoted above, new promiscuities seem to be identified with new methods of design, and more importantly, placed historically in opposition to high formalism (the same recent bling that someone else might identify as promiscuous). But this simple qualification does not do justice to the coruscating kaleidoscope of projects presented on MOS’ website—for your pleasure and use—in the properly contemporary open source format. We need the idea of radical inclusion in order to ensure that new methods alone not be mistaken for promiscuity. It is not Processing, or MOS’s applet MOScat, that are intrinsically promiscuous. Promiscuity needs normalcy (or something like moral purity) in order to be meaningful. Only with the historical and cultural knowledge of the architectural discipline (and Gen X is well versed in it) can one really decipher MOS’s promiscuity, since it is a behavior born of exactly that impulse to truncate and splice different (and different degrees of historically incompatible) disciplinary narratives and tools. Environmental optimization, constructivist social project, and its non-objective art together with parametrically generated upside down catenary curves, real material properties, and fictional movie scripts . . . it is not any single method here that is promiscuous, but rather, it is disciplinary promiscuity itself that constitutes a new method, or at least a more forcefully stated description of a historical predicament. This narrative of inclusion and expansion of expertise is a frequent chant among Gen X architects, but MOS elevates it from a default position to an ambition.

Once they have convinced us to consider disciplinary promiscuity as radical and not just as a titillating apology for confusion and lack of judgment: how do we evaluate that furry collection of chimneys? How is the architectural artifact implicated in this narrative? Processing and thatch, the most advanced and the most primitive of architectural techniques, don’t simply produce a promiscuous object together. And even if some aspects of the Afterparty beast were grotesque or abject (as Meredith suggests in his Artforum confession) every photograph and certainly every digital representation that accompanies the project is mesmerizing.12 They are like the images of the sixties modular furniture rendered in more saturated Dan Flavin neons, but with more taste and a tinge of ecstasy.

The shape of Afterparty chimneys is one of the instantiations of MOS’s research into the assemblies of shapes that are, well, chimneys on one end—both in terms of their thermal performance and their figural reference—and hipped roofs on the other end. From certain angles, the hipped roofs provide the cartoon gabled roof house image, and when spliced with chimneys, they turn into elongated houses or squashed, primitive hut versions of chimneys. The hybrid shapes are not standard, but they are also not without reference. Some are more and some are less housy, some are more and some are less chimney stacks, but their aggregation into assemblies ensures that the effect of recognition is elastic and hovers over the entire grouping, even if unevenly. Equally importantly, recognition here is not only recognition of the archetypal reference at play, but also of the deformational logic that is
clearly effecting results without being didactically available to the viewers.

The qualifier that describes the ’09 P.S.1 installation the best comes from Mark Goulthorpe’s quotation of William Forsyth’s aesthetic ambitions—precise indeterminacy.13 In Afterparty, precise indeterminacy applies to some extent to the composition of shapes, and in this sense the term corresponds to Goulthorpe’s use of it, but the multitude of references invoked by the project and ultimately impossible to synthesize into a singular reading could also be described as ensuring a whole new level of interpretive instability. I saw Barbarella in it, and Chewbacca, natural history and the Muppets, primitive huts, African spas, Rossi’s chimneys, minimalist furniture (underneath), Surrealist objects, MOS’s own formal motives. Some of those references were funny, others operational. But this is not to say that the architectural artifact was disheveled or incoherent, even on a bad hair day. It was precise (and tasteful) even as it summoned up referential and compositional instability.

Postmodernism 101 (Jameson and maybe Lyotard—not Jencks)? Maybe if it were 1999, but since we are talking about the generation that “grew up” with sampling, with networks as fully internalized and lived protocols, contributing to and learning from Wikipedia, actually taking their environmental responsibility seriously, a generation that remembers with nostalgia (of someone who has never been there) the world in which external, authoritative truths were preconditions for action—I beg to differ. MOS is struggling to reconnect to broken narratives, to simulate referentiality and with it to simulate both the effects of recognition and strangeness that are only possible against a background of references and their baggage.

Recognizing MOS’s own formal research among the rush of personal and cultural references triggered by Afterparty is of great consequence for any possible interpretation of the narrative of architectural promiscuity. The imperative to radically include even incompatible issues and methods does not also mean that MOS’s form making is circumstantial or determined by that inclusion alone. Radical inclusion is not everything goes. Radical inclusion may describe MOS’s generational baggage, with an invitation to interpret its possibilities as radical, but it is not an exhaustive, critical description of their project. The structurally unstable pile and the composi-
tionally unstable stack exceed the narratives of inclusion and architectural promiscuity, they are born of MOS’s particular formal interpretation of a confluence of issues and methods, they are not inevitable outcomes of picking up Processing and caring about the science behind air flow patterns.

MOS is in the “business of producing images”—to invoke Banham again (and merely to confirm what the architects confessed already). Some of those images are good enough to be centerfold pin-up sized posters, good enough to decorate architecture students’ desks just as Barbarella lounging in acrylic tubes did at the end of the sixties. They are filled with the thrill of hip color and the perfect measure of optimism and doubt, and if the formal obsessions that permeate these projects were not “doing it” for you on their own they are now held together with a narrative of disciplinary promiscuity. MOS’s version of inducing the fleeting utopian sentiment through objects, images and their own positioning narrative works insofar as they manage to reframe and teach us about the historical architectural projects they are interested in, and of course get us to pay attention to the artifacts they are churning out. Most importantly then, MOS is in the business of simulating discourse around their work and around their generation’s predicament. This is perhaps what it means to both begin anew and use everything at one’s disposal to do it.

The world we live in is everything Reyner Banham had dreamt of and more. Barbarella and her furry spaceship have been canonized, and made mundane again, functionalism with a small “f” is everywhere refracting through one or another kind of parametric command and control, and dealers in architecture culture are fast to get on the iPod app bandwagon (or any other equally trendy and virally spreading medium for dissemination). Architecture is everywhere, everything is architecture, and transgressions of disciplinary boundaries, or of the once useful boundary between art and life don’t phase us. In a world in which “damn near everything presents itself as familiar” as Jonathan Lethem described it recently, making familiar strange again through simulating new memories and conversations might reframe our role in that world. The contemporary imperative is to construct narratives of relevance again, and to do that without forgetting who we are in the process of rewiring the links to the history and to the future of our discipline. In offering Afterparty as our own version of Barbarella, I too hope we can begin again, restart a conversation (that has not happened yet) about radical disciplinary promiscuity as a position that enabled an entire generation to leverage its expanded expertise as it embraced and rewrote the old political and cultural projects in architecture to fit its time.
Endnotes

1 "MOS definitely" was, according to Hilary Sample and Michael Meredith of MOS, their own self-cheering slogan when they launched their practice. See, "Notes on MOS," on the firm’s website, http://www.mos-office.net/.

2 I won’t go into the politics of the P.S.1 Young Architects program, but the fact that MOS had a chance at three tryouts, whether they liked it or not, and it would be hard to 'hate' that opportunity, highlights the fact that a number of the 'elders' in the field who get to be asked by MoMA to make recommendations support or are intrigued by MOS’s work.


4 Michael Meredith and Hilary Sample started calling out this notion of radical inclusion before the 2009 P.S.1 competition took place. They at least discussed radical inclusion at their Emerging Voices talk at the Architectural League in New York in 2008, and Michael Meredith has published an article in Perspecta 41 on the theme of inclusion as well. See Michael Meredith, "Radical Inclusion! (A Survival Guide for Post-Architecture)," Perspecta 41: The Grand Tour, December 2008.

5 Douglas Coupland, Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture (St. Martin’s Griffin, 1991).

6 A number of Žižek’s books can serve as examples of his holding out against the common description of the inevitability of the intellectual disintegration of the contemporary moment. His In Defense of Lost Causes even starts with a literary maneuver that teases the reader into nodding in agreement with the description of a flattened world, before it forcefully states a contrary position (Verso, 2008). And his First as Tragedy, Then as Farce is dedicated to charting a possible trajectory for a real contemporary legacy of Marxism, which admittedly even here requires a type of reconstitution of the Marxist narrative to properly address the contemporary fabric of political issues (Verso, 2009).

7 The text for Michael Meredith’s GSD exhibition on Avalanche Journal is posted on MOS’s website, http://www.mos-office.net/.

8 All of the P.S.1 texts are published on MOS’s own website, http://www.mos-office.net/.


10 Michael Meredith’s studio brief for a fall 2008 option studio at the GSD was entitled Desert Island and it invited students and critics to consider what a new beginning in architecture might entail. The title and much of the sentiment of the brief were indebted to Gilles Deleuze’s essay “Desert Island,” in Desert Islands and Other Texts (1953–1974) (Semiotext[e], 2002).

11 Of course this is only a small and some may think trivial instantiation of Žižek’s “project time,” since his point with this way of rethinking the structure of historical thinking is aimed at making serious, or lost causes possible to think radically again, or anew. I agree with him on those larger issues, but I also think that what he describes is transferable to thinking about the contemporary predicament of the architectural profession and discourse as well. See for example the ending of First as Tragedy, Then as Farce (Verso, 2009).


14 It is relatively easy to draw parallels between Michael Meredith’s recent description of the Bouroullec brothers and the ambition and effects of MOS’s own work. “Utopian jouissance” could be said to be an effect of MOS’s work, equally localized in scale and in time and conceived of as “aggregated assemblies” as the work of the Bouroullec. And so far, MOS architects seem in equal measure satisfied and frustrated with this. See Michael Meredith, “Whatever Happened to ‘Whatever Happened to Total Design’? The Momentary Utopian Jouissance of the Bouroullec Brothers.” Harvard Design Magazine, What About the Inside? Number 29, Fall/Winter 2008–09.