



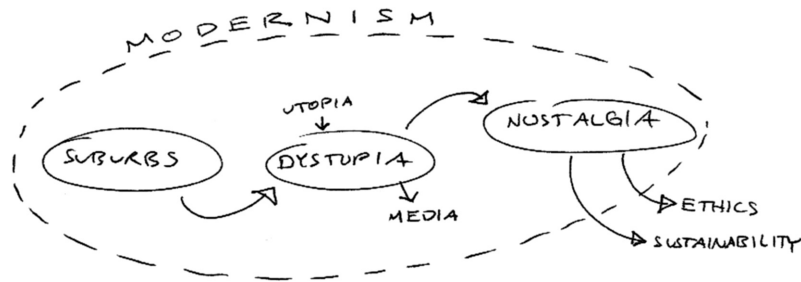
Pop installation [text/balloons/ribbon]
Althea Aarden. Winter, 2007.

Installation Poster Text:

If we are to become design leaders, then more than a cursory overview of the theories of our time must become a part of the curriculum. Students must be prepared if they are to grasp these concepts, and they must be given time to absorb. Anything less is tokenism.

PLEASE, TAKE ONE.

This installation is interactive. It is meant to form a childlike desire for those thoughts that have influenced architecture.



Modernism, Nostalgia, and Ethics: Excerpts from a conversation between Carl S. Sterner and Daniel Ebert

Wednesday, May 2, 2007, Rohs St. Café, Cincinnati, Ohio

[...]

Daniel Ebert: And I struggle with that [modernism] in some of the things I'm studying in thesis. Sometimes I really feel like I'm getting close to the boundary of nostalgia. And I have a hard time trying to balance that out.

Carl Sterner: It's difficult. Because on one hand you want to question the modern project, right? I mean, you want to question this idea of an inevitable movement in one direction, toward this uniform end product. But on the other hand you don't want to say, "Well, the only other alternative is to go back before we had modernity." [...] But in a way, the extreme fear of nostalgia is itself a Modernist idea: you don't want to copy the past because the past is bad and the future is good.

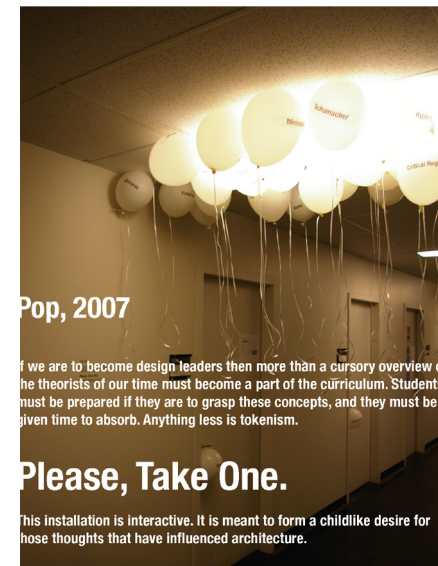
DE: Perez Gomez, in the introduction to *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*,¹ also talks about how it wasn't at least until—I'm not sure if he said it was the Enlightenment or the Renaissance—that we as a society started to think of time as a linear process, rather than as a cyclical process of ebbing and flowing.

CS: In fact, it can be tracked back to a lecture delivered [in 1750 by Jacques Turgot],² who specifically set out to reinterpret history as a linear progression toward better and better states.

I think that it is important to question those modern assumptions. And that's one of the things that bothers me about dystopias [an earlier topic of conversation]: even now that we're skeptical about where technology is taking us—technology, industrialization, capitalism, globalization, whatever it is—we're expressing skepticism toward it, but we're not expressing any doubt that it's going to continue to its logical end. All those things are seen to still continue. There aren't any alternatives being presented.

¹ Perez Gomez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

² Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot delivered a public lecture at the opening of the Sorbonne in 1750 in which he discussed history and progress. Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, *Turgot on Progress, Society, and Economics*, trans. and ed. Ronald L. Meek (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1973).



DE: The interesting thing is not only that we have started to question these things but we haven't thought of any alternative—but even the act of questioning a lot of these things is kind of a dirty little sin. You were talking earlier about the fear of nostalgia being, in a way, one of the constructs of this modern way of thinking—; and so it really is taboo to be anti—not even necessarily anti-Modernist, but to question it. You're all of the sudden this crazy hermit guy who's going to live off in the middle of the woods and grow your own opium.

CS: Nostalgia can wipe out any argument. The charge of nostalgia even today completely invalidates anything.

DE: I sort of equate it to—at least architecturally—it's kind of like calling someone a communist or a racist.

CS: It is!

DE: You brand them with nostalgia. And the thing is, a lot of things that are questioned, accused of [being nostalgic], or branded as nostalgia, are not necessarily anywhere near nostalgia. I'm reading Kenneth Frampton right now, *Studies in Tectonic Culture*,³ and he talks a lot about the way we build and the way we used to think about building versus the way we build now. He does some philological studies—looking at words and where they came from and how they evolved into their current meanings—of words like “build” and “room” and things like that. [...] And even some of that stuff you could say “Oh, it's nostalgia.” But if you really look at his arguments, he's not advocating going back and building the exact same buildings we used to build; he's just questioning. What I think he's really questioning is the *tabula rasa* of Modernism—of just completely wiping that stuff out and starting from scratch, rather than some sort of evolution or progression on the knowledge that we've built up over time.

CS: It's like the architectural Hitler card. Like in any argument if you compare the argument to Hitler you automatically win because you completely delegitimize the other side. It's like that. Once you say something is nostalgic you completely wipe out—without even necessarily establishing an argument against it, you just sort of undermine what they're saying, just dismiss it out of hand.

DE: I struggle with that sometimes because of what I've been thinking about lately.

CS: I struggle with it, too, in sustainability. Because obviously sustainability has major problems with industrialization—the way that modernization has occurred—and so you want to question that from an ecological point of view, but you're not necessarily saying, “Well, we're going to erase the Industrial Revolution.” You're asking, “Where can we go from here?”

DE: Or “where *should* we go from here?” I think in a way that was the essential misstep of Modernism—they were asking “where *can* we go from here?” and not necessarily “where *should* we go from here?”

CS: Right. And I think that the normative part is hugely important. Because for

so long we've been asking as a culture—not just as architects—“what can we do?” and we haven't been asking “what should we do?”

DE: Or even, “what can we imagine?” or “what can we think of?”

CS: Right. But at a certain point that becomes a very empty exercise. Because we can think up anything—but that doesn't make it all worth doing. So the ethical argument of “what should we do?” I think is really important.

And a lot of contemporary theorists and architects have neglected that—because “should” [...] starts to imply a universal—

DE: Ethics or morality.

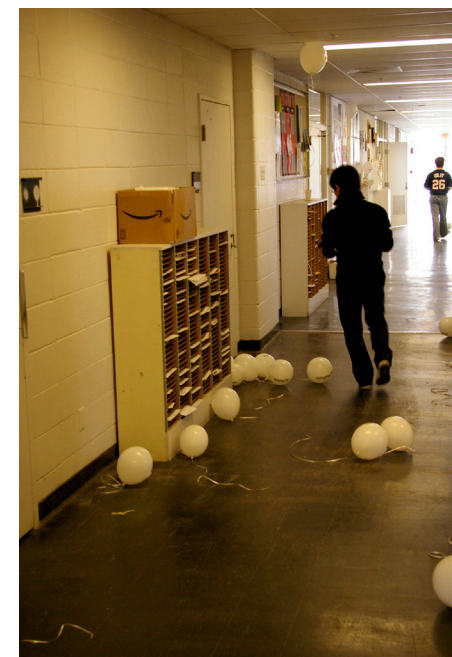
CS: Yeah. Whereas the present discussions have tended toward completely saying “it depends on perception; it depends on all of these other factors; we're not going to be absolutist; we're not going to question anything”—therefore, anything goes. But to me that's a very dangerous lack of a moral framework for architecture. And I feel very conservative when I say that, but I feel that it's also necessary. To create environments that are livable, enjoyable and sustainable we really do have to ask the normative questions.

DE: I think even as architects we have to admit that if we abstract ourselves from our own milieu and think about the spaces, buildings and the places that we actually enjoy, not that we find interesting theoretically or formally, that we enjoy being in, and the places that we tend to spend our time in ... they're not necessarily the things we're interested in from a professional or academic perspective. I really agree with what you were saying as far as the [relativity] of things. I think we're to a point now—and I think this started with postmodernism—that we really lost any sense of [...] an absolute goal or ideal that we're working toward as a profession, now all the sudden it's “just as long as we're not [Modernists]”. Then whatever we are is essentially okay. And [postmodernists] define themselves as “not this” in a very specific way that led largely to a fairly homogenous style. But then we got to the next level of where we're at now, [...] which is complete avant-garde eclecticism. We've gotten to the point where you've got architects like Eisenman whose design principles and design processes are abstractions of abstractions. [...] There's nothing concrete whatsoever. And then you end up with environments like [Eisenman's] Aronoff—or even like the Tschumi building, which is conceptually interesting, spatially interesting, but experientially terrible. [...]

You can take it to the level of thinking about some of the classic Modernist architects—and would you want to live in Villa Savoye? Would you want to live there? Would you want to live in the Farnesworth house? [...] Would you rather live in one of their houses, or would you rather live in a Wright house? Or not even a Wright house, but—

CS: —an 1850s building that you don't even know who the architect is, but it's just a row house somewhere, with brick bearing walls and lots of daylight and wood floors.

³ Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture*, ed. John Cava (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).



DE: And years and years of this accumulated embodied knowledge of all the people who have been there, worked on it, modified it, changed it. And how it's evolved over the process of its life.

I think in some way it makes you realize your own place in the world, rather than thinking of yourself as this conqueror of everything. When you realize that you're coming into something that's been there—not only since before you were born, but before your grandparents were born—and will probably be there for 100 years after you're dead. It begins to situate you as this small player in this big game, rather than the Modernist idea of the conqueror of the environment.

CS: That idea of understanding your place in the world is almost a religious idea. That's what many religions—I'm thinking especially of many Native American religions—that's the function that many of them serve: to ground you, in a way. And you understand your relationship to what came before and to the rest of the world as it exists. And I think that's a really important dimension that has been largely neglected in Modernism—in the way that Modernism is completely timeless and wants to erase any trace of time or history. It seems really dangerous to me. Not just unfulfilling or unsatisfying from the point of view from the person inhabiting it. I don't know how to articulate this, exactly ...

DE: I think—this is my interpretation of where you're going—or just one of my thoughts—but to me the question is: at what point are you not necessarily done or finished, but at what point are you satisfied? When does it stop? When do you stop redefining yourself and become comfortable with your existence as it is? I think the dangerous thing with Modernism is that you take this slate, you wipe it clean, and you start over—but what happens if it doesn't work? Do you just wipe it clean again and start over again? Which I think is the attitude.

CS: The way I was thinking it's dangerous is that from the point of view of sustainability the idea of time and duration and your place in the grander scheme of things is important for the coherence of societies—knowing the individual's relationship to others and to the larger whole—and also, I think, for society's relationship to the environment. [...] Not knowing that—not understanding your place in the grander scheme—seems like it's inviting social and ecological problems. I'm not saying this very well. That's the basis for all ethics and normative frameworks, I guess is what I'm saying. [...] Without that, you're just going to create [...] a self-centered individualized society that doesn't understand the effects of their actions and doesn't see how it has any bearing on the rest of the world or on the future of society. And I think you can see that as the cause of a lot of social and environmental problems.

DE: This sort of extreme narcissism.

CS: Yeah. Not that architecture is the cause of that—but that Modernist architecture definitely manifests that mentality—and, if nothing else, reinforces it, even if it doesn't create it initially.

I just sort of said that off the top of my head; I don't know if it's really true. [...]

