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The Drawn Revolution: Lebbeus Woods' Sites of Activism

Abstract

The profound work of the American architect Lebbeus Woods I suggest falls within a lineage of great visionary architectural schemes since the Renaissance and Modernism that propose a social consciousness. Through the speculative seminal works of Giovanni Piranesi (1720-78), Hugh Ferriss (1889-1962) Antonio Sant'Elia (1888-1916) and Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005), this articles uses a comparative lens to examines the work of Lebbeus Woods (1940-2012) Terra Nova (1988-1991) and War and Architecture (1991-1994) projects . Such visionaries all engaged with drawing to express publicize an architecture that challenge the polemics of their time, promoting the robust discourse of an alternative political plan of action that visually challenged the status quo and provokes a reaction and response. Hence drawing gives a voice to the activist as a means to understand the world in terms of 'grounding.' Woods' drawings do not present conclusions; more so they are active sites of experimentation that explore particular scenarios, alternating between the literal and metaphorical, imaginary and real. Through his seminal early works, where he embeds the philosophy of Carl Jung (1875-1961), Woods introduces a political dimension in his spatial and architectural analyses of the work of these thinkers by challenging conventional methods of making architecture that is not confined by rules and regulations. Fundamentally, he reminds us not to conform to prescribed teachings, but to challenge conceptions of living by locating the 'Self' at the centre of creative activity in a times of social and political turmoil. In this article, I reflect and examine how drawing is the site for Woods to exposit his modes of activism which call for the synthesis of technology and architecture to realise a 'new vernacular' with a political conscience- something which seems to be lacking in the current milieu.

Introduction

There are many profound architectural works that fall within a lineage of grand visionary architectural schemes since the Renaissance and Modernism that propose a social consciousness. Many engage with drawing to publicise an architecture that challenges the polemics of their time, promoting the robust discourse of an alternative political and social action. With consideration of paper and architecture as typologies for site, drawings by

practice is a method of 'grounding.' Through the speculative seminal works of Giovanni Piranesi (1720-78), Hugh Ferriss (1889-1962) Antonio Sant'Elia (1888-1916) and Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005), this paper uses a comparative lens to examine how the work of Lebbeus Woods (1940-2012) *Terra Nova* (terra -land/earth; nova -new) and *War* and presents a modern voice as a means to critique and respond to specific politics of place. Visionaries use drawing as a generative and creative method, not only for the representation of a new vernacular, but more importantly to bring into question the role of the individual, the collective, and architecture in society, fundamentally calling for us not to conform to prescribed teachings, but to confront and challenge conceptions of how we live with others. These designed landscapes may appear unconventional, but they are 'grounded'¹ in knowledge of rational logic and theory - projects present new urban forms that rejected the existing political and social structures for new ones. Ideas can be conceived without drawings, but what is identified is that, with conviction, drawing contributes to the production of ideas that can powerfully propagate through books, pamphlets, newspapers, and exhibitions. What is observed in this paper is that drawings by essence being profoundly enigmatic in their drawn nature, the works are artistic manifestos calling for activism – that which seems to be missing from our current architectural environment. Influenced by knowledge regarding the physical world, the individual, and the collective, Woods' work illustrates the world that encompasses the idea of cycles through Carl Gustav Jung's idea of the human psyche called the 'Self.'² Woods suggests Jung's conception of 'Self', "is expressed first in a mythology of evolution, a cosmology in which the human being finds harmony with cycles of time and their passage from darkness to light and again to darkness, from Birth through to Growth, Decay and Death, again to Birth."³ Hence, the body of Woods' work present new social structures that reject existing social forms, therefore being inherently political. Woods' is of the view that architecture is a site for experimentation and that we are to use architecture for extending perception at every scale of experience. He states that his landscapes "may seem startling, even irrational, but they are nothing if not extensions of reasons."⁴ To consider Woods' landscapes from an architectural point of view is to see them as an existential world or milieu that is designed with the intension of questioning ideas of nature and dwelling – these are not illustrations of ideas, but ideas in themselves.

The Ground for Drawing

The conscious modern man can no longer refrain from acknowledging the might of the psyche, despite the most strenuous and dogged efforts at self-defence. This distinguishes our time from all others. We can no longer deny that the dark stirrings

of the unconsciousness are active powers, that psychic forces exist which, for the present at least, cannot be fitted into our rational world order.⁵

In *Paper, Scissors, Blur*, Mark Wigley describes paper as the real building site for an artist or architect, and its surface is not just worked on but is worked across. He comments that it wasn't until the fifteenth century that drawing was acknowledged as a site to display unique ideas and work, and that in the late 1550s Giorgio Vasari affirmed the notion of 'drawing and idea' as being the basis of all art. For Piranesi, the ruins of the past provided the basis of a site and gave way for a vision of architecture of his day, while for Ferriss, technology and the new forms of contemporary metropolis promised an ideal city of the future.⁶ Although Woods' intentions for architecture are not to present the 'ideal,' he is aligned with Piranesi and Ferriss in that drawings are drawn out from conditions of the site, and illustrate a dystopic milieu. With regards to the Terra Nova projects, Aaron Betsky makes connections between Woods drawings and those of Piranesi as well as with Hugh Ferriss - he remarks that the works are "similar, from the vertiginous perspectival compositions that swirl from the lower depths of the page, where scraggy lines quickly sketch out a cut-off base, to the nebulous regions of the image, where the forms fade off into a soft wash of infinity."⁷ Although there are clear similarities in their visions of monumental architecture and the interest in excavations and attention to detail, what is essential is how through drawing, the fragmentation of form and ideas are materialised. Woods', Piranesi's and Ferriss' visions, all propose sublime new vernaculars. Woods states, "these[His] works will always be at first strange and ugly judged by what we have known before, and to some extent, they will do violence because they will violate the conventions we have known."⁸ Betsky argues Woods' and Piranesi's works reject established orders. The structures of Woods Underground Berlin (1988) project appear as a new version of Piranesi's *Carceri* and *Antichita Romane* projects. Betsky sees that Woods and Piranesi's visions share:

"similar[ity], from the vertiginous perspectival compositions that swirl from the lower depths of the page, where scraggy lines quickly sketch out a cut-off base, to the nebulous regions of the image, where the forms fade off into a soft wash of infinity".⁹

In *On Site*, Wigley comments that by drawing on the physical conditions of a site, the story associated with it can be told and becomes legitimate. The project constructs the site unveiling its real characteristics and its story. In architecture, the site becomes the ground on which a project is constructed. In terms of an imagined site or real site, the ground is the stories associated with its context. Wigley states, "the project is the story that produces the image of the site's reality, drawing some kind of a line between its own fantasy and the reality of the

site. Each such story, each architectural fantasy, acts as if part of it is not a fantasy.”¹⁰ Here Wigley is commenting on how architecture uses and draws inspiration from the site to design a project, but more importantly, it is the situation/condition/story that is realised and not the project. Therefore the ground is reflective of past occurrences. When designing an architectural project, the ground needs to be treated with caution and respect. A site can construct or reconstruct its cultural identity by acknowledging its history. An investigation of site prompts a subterranean-look, both literally and metaphorically. This involves considering what is beneath the surface, in addition to what is above the ground surface.

The Terra Nova (1988-91), projects situated themselves within a milieu of real societies with real political and social conflict. Terra Nova is described by Woods as “an earth reconstituted and reformed by human thought and feeling, by the human necessity to invent nature, and thereby the world-by-action-into knowledge”¹¹. The inhabitants of the Terra Nova projects are conceived to exist in a realm of the metaphysical within given situations of pre-unified Berlin, the DMZ in Korea, and aerial space in Paris. Woods’ detailed drawings of the Terra Nova projects present new urban forms that rejected the existing political and social structures for new ones (Woods 1992c) similarly to Constant Nieuwenhuys and the Situationists New Babylon (1959-1974). As part of the Situation International, Nieuwenhuys added drawing to the group's method of visualising a future vision for the city that was unitary urbanism and an infinite playground.¹² Alongside models and photographs, drawings added a systematic and practical voice to their statements. Enigmatic in their nature, the collective work presented an artistic mode of activism based on Marxist politics. To be in the ‘present’ was necessary, and like Woods drawings, they called for a form of cultural revolution. The Underground Berlin (1988) is the first project in Terra Nova series that addresses a real city and overtly presented the architecture of anarchy. A subterranean community exists with living labs along the U-Bahn subway lines, reacting to the wall that separated East and West Berlin free from the political authority above.¹³ The drawings depict an inverted city with inverted towers that break the surface datum of the ground to burrow down beneath in opposition to the authority above - “the only goal of the people of the underground city is to exist as fully as possible in the present moment, to open their senses and minds, to feel and think and act completely in the present moment – in short, to live’.¹⁴

Architectural critic Michael Sorkin suggests that the architect Antonio Sant’Elia is an excellent model for understanding Woods work. He proposes that Sant’Elia’s work was a research tool looking for the unknown, and that drawing was the means to explore the role of architecture in society.¹⁵ The Futurist movement believed in the power of the machine and the need for a revolutionary restructuring of society. Sant Elia in the pages of ‘Messaggio’ wrote of the need

to draw inspiration from modern life and the mechanical world, rather than be subjected to laws of historical continuity. The Manifesto prescribed architecture “must be new, as our state of mind and contingencies of our historic movement are new.”¹⁶ Ironically, the Futurist manifesto believed in the redemptive power of war and had the conviction that war would bring about change and the downfall of an old corrupt order. Woods argues it is no longer possible to believe in the universal liberating power of the machine because, like war, the implications of building monumental architecture based on industrial technology would have a detrimental effect on an environments economy and ecology, and assert an authoritarian form of control. However, Woods work, much like that of Sant Elia, is concerned with change, producing revolutionary architectures through the medium of drawing to present possibilities for social change. Sant Elia called for a revolution of the way we think about architecture and the city, one that would challenge pre-existing fashions and controls of established authority. In the same vein as the Futurist Manifesto, Woods’ Manifesto of drawings question how we can imagine the social and political conditions of urbanity. Drawings protest what is needed is a radical change. In the way, we think, and design architecture for places affected by turmoil Woods states:

“My projects are concerned with the invention of new conditions of living. They are deeply political in nature, yet anti-ideological, in that they do not follow a programme for social relationships established. Instead they develop architecture of continuous transformation. Any ideology is betrayal.”¹⁷

Linking architecture and politics can be difficult, if a connection can be made, it may be viewed in the light of architecture’s role as a cultural object. Through the act of drawing, Woods architecture has becomes a cultural object whereby he “invents spaces, experiments with them, and then discovers in them a possible modus vivendi. They express a world of knowledge that is essential for our understanding of time and ourselves.”¹⁸

During the early years of the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), Lebbeus Woods was compelled to address the aggression by proposing the War and Architecture series (1991-1994).¹⁹ In this series, Woods drew projects for the city of Sarajevo based on examining the “relationships existing between violence and creativity, destruction and construction.”²⁰ The drawings presented in the series, which fall under the title Walls as Mediations, consider an approach for the reconstruction of sites damaged by war.²¹ The exposition of these projects, in essence, speaks to the negativity of destruction and violence. Here the focus was on constructing an architecture that reflects possible new social parameters for Sarajevo. Like Nieuwenhuys, Woods is proposing an extension of the modernist claim that architecture has a social purpose,

stating that he “constructs worlds that more directly critique current society.”²² Woods suggests the early twentieth-century modernist architects declared a war of ‘urban renewal,’ with their ideologies of industrialization, on a culture devastated by WWII. He points out that even though they were successful, they failed to reach their goal of producing a better world and had become too fixed in the doctrine of the machine that was too deterministic.²³ Michael Menser argues that the chaos depicted in Woods War and Architecture series presents the “architecture of transformation so extreme that all our habits and thoughts concerning dwelling start to twitch and shudder or set adrift.”²⁴ The transformative nature of war causes changes to social and political structures, and the expansion of architectural language is needed. Since war throws social, political and cultural arrangements into disorder causing dislocation for many, new rules and language that comprehend a new structure of stability needs to be disseminated. Fundamentally reinvention is required to house civilized communities that are thrown into dislocation. Through Woods’ drawing he boldly reinforces that merely rebuilding what is demolished will not help the inhabitants with their grief; it will only remind them of what was once fallen and that its shelter is susceptible to the same attack it once took. Hence Woods exposita a view through drawing new architectural process of recovery – the Injection, Scab, Scar, and New Tissue. Architect and theorist Neil Leach affirm these propositions put forward for Sarajevo are, however, an “aesthetic celebration of war.”²⁵ Leach argues that he uses a superficial play of seductive images backed with a philosophical intellect to justify forms. Leach holds the opinion that Woods distances him from the reality of the situation, and his work remains locked within the aesthetics of form that proposes a techno-architecture as science fiction.²⁶ However, Menser argues that Woods’ “drawings are not designs to be implemented, but scenarios, event/scenes arising in landscapes populated by processes of decomposition, regeneration, and all manners of transformation, violent or healing.”²⁷

Concluding Comments

Through an examination of Woods’ work, it is evident that an indeterminate fluid drawing process allowed himself or the ‘Self’ to be in the present. His drawings are precise, detailed, and deliberate. Ideas can be conceived without drawings, but what Woods identifies, as well as his visionary predecessors, is that, with conviction, drawing contributes to the production of ideas, and it is clear that he leaves behind a manifesto of activism can disseminate. Therefore, with paper being the site for ideas to be grounded on, in and through, the drawings speak with purpose. The Terra Nova and, War and Architecture projects engage with sites that are socially and politically charged. They are dynamic and incredibly vibrant and illustrate architecture with the aim of understanding that the modern world is about discovery and ambiguity. Piranesi, Ferriss, Sant Elia, Nieuwenhuys, and Woods are similar in their vision

whereby they created an architectural vision that activates a critique on the social milieu that is often concealed. Woods' projects are significant in that they express existential space designed with the intention of questioning the nature of dwelling that remains current today - especially with regards to pressing matters of the social, political and ecological. For affect projects of this nature need to appear unconventional, however once they the drawing pulls you in, it is clear they are grounded in knowledge of rational logic. What is observed through Woods' body of work is that drawing is generative and creative, not only for the opportunity to represent a new vernacular but also working to engage as an agency of visual activism; they are "instruments of spontaneous experimentation, fluidity of thought, mobility of invention."²⁸

Endnotes

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- ³ Lebbeus Woods, 'Architecture, Consciousness and the Mythos of Time', *AA Files*, 7, (1984), 3-13.
- ⁴ Lebbeus Woods, *Radical Reconstruction*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).
- ⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, *Civilization in Transition*.
- ⁶ Carol Willis, *Hugh Ferriss, The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, (New York: Ives Washburn, 1986)
- ⁷ Lebbeus Woods, *Lebbeus Woods: Terra Nova*, (Japan: A+U Publishing, August 1991).
- ⁸ Lebbeus Woods, *OneFiveFour*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989).
- ⁹ Woods, *Terra Nova*.
- ¹⁰ Wigley, 'On Site', in *Triennale di Milano X1X Esposizione Internazionale; Identity and Difference*.
- ¹¹ Woods, *Lebbeus Woods: Terra Nova*.
- ¹² Mark Wigley, 'Paper, Scissors, Blur,' in: Catherine Zegher and Mark Wigley (eds.), *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architecture from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*, (New York: The Drawing Centre, 2001), 22-27.
- ¹³ Woods, *OneFiveFour*.
- ¹⁴ Woods, *OneFiveFour*.
- ¹⁵ Michael Sorkin, *Exquisite Corpse*, (London: Verso, 1994).
- ¹⁶ Esther da Costa Meyer, *The Works of Antonio Sant'Elia: Retreat into the Future*, (US: Yale Publications, 1995).
- ¹⁷ Lebbeus Woods, *ANARCHITECTURE: Architecture is a Political Act*, (Great Britain: Academy Editions), 12.
- ¹⁸ Leo Modrcin, 'Preface', in Lebbeus Woods (ed.), *The New City*, (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992).
- ¹⁹ Lebbeus Woods, 'Taking on Risk: Nine Experimental Scenarios,' in Tracey Myers, Lebbeus Woods & Karsten Harries (eds.) *Lebbeus Woods: Experimental Architecture*, (Pittsburgh: Heinz Architectural Center Books).
- ²⁰ Lebbeus Woods, *The Wall in La paret*. (Barcelona: Fundació "laCaixa", 1995).
- ²¹ Woods, *The Wall in La paret*.
- ²² Aaron Betsky, *Violated Perfection, Utopias, Dystopias, Heterotopias*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1990).
- ²³ Lebbeus Woods, *War and Architecture*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993).
- ²⁴ Michael Menser, 'We Still Do Not Know What a Building Can do,' in Lebbeus Woods (ed.), *Radical Reconstruction*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).
- ²⁵ Neil Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*, (London: The MIT Press, 1999).
- ²⁶ Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*.
- ²⁷ Menser, 'We Still Do Not Know What a Building Can do,' in Lebbeus Woods (ed.), *Radical Reconstruction*.
- ²⁸ Lebbeus Woods, L. (1997). *Radical Reconstruction*.