

# ARTFORUM

## Systems Theory

SANFORD KWINTER ON MATTHEW RITCHIE'S *THE MORNING LINE*

AMONG THE PROMINENT DEVELOPMENTS that have marked recent art has been the incursion of "method" into the heart of what has long appeared as an array of miscellaneous, even random art practices. By method, I mean nothing more than an approach in which a certain discipline is sustained over a range of executions, sustained, that is, long enough both to leave a trace of "system" in the deposited production and for that systematic quality to serve as a principal rhetorical feature of the work. In contrast to the more circumscribed and puritanical routines we saw set in motion by the American Minimalists of the 1960s and '70s, much current work remains rooted in identity production the inward, capricious, ego-particular idiosyncrasies of slacker-generated and decidedly untestable "theories." While there remain practices of enormous power at the cool end of this spectrum (the enterprising yet sober and disciplined engagements of Studio Olafur Eliasson are a principal example), there are also emerging a number of art-cosmology practices that make reference to historical positions and campaigns—those of Buckminster Fuller, for example, and Archigram or Futurism, etc.—particularly to their imaginative components and less so to their (non-art) rationalism. Weirdest, and most notable, is the inexorable drift of much artmaking to both the domains (the city, unsentimentally defined public space, building- and worldscale interventions, infrastructure, interiors) and the mental habits (geometric, algorithmic, behavioral, systematic) that have increasingly characterized design theory and practice since the advent of digitization and globalization. The boundary, and necessary distinction, between art and design is one that has lately been defended with unexpected vehemence, in notable contradistinction to the foundational work of post-Minimalist theory that once successfully sought to invigorate art by espousing the range and scope of ambition that had till then been the sole province of the architect (and which is a prime legacy of the early October group). If such defenses today have started to border on the strident, it is a sign that the boundary for better and worse is being lost.

Somewhere amid this tangle of incomplete emancipations lies a great deal of the work that we call emergent today. A prime example is Matthew Ritchie's current traveling or is it self-replicating project, a series of structures including, most recently, The

Morning Line in Seville and The Dawn Line in London (now on view in New York). An earlier, scaled-down iteration, titled The Evening Line, was presented at last year's Venice Architecture Biennale, with the larger, more expansive and centrifugal Morning Line following soon after. This trajectory itself is a sign that Ritchie's work has found clear and unapologetic interest among architects, but, more germanely, Ritchie himself developed, resolved, and realized these structures only with the collaboration of Benjamin Aranda and Christopher Lasch, two young researchers who specialize in algorithmic design. While The Morning Line initially appears as a snarled tangle of metal filigree accidentally forming both interior and exterior cavities for inhabitation, as well as the structure of transfers and arches necessary to keep it stable and upright, it quickly resolves in one's perception as a pattern of modules that is rotated, displaced, and scaled at every level and along what appear to be determined paths. This is the moment when an underlying predisposition is sensed, which transforms one's understanding of the work (the modules, in fact, are hand-generated cartoons that are computationally "grown"). Ritchie brought to the table a taste for medieval knowledge systems and the dream of their comprehensive resolution within a pageantry of materials and narrative characters. His interest in the figures or actors of knowledge as points of compression of historical understanding and imagination, or simply as convenient ways of presenting these to the mind, belies a profound belief that the world encodes itself in its productions and that this code represents an asset and resource that could and ought to be tapped, if only we knew how.

On the one hand, this is not something you can make "sense" of. It is largely a framework of heroic delirium, not too different from the cryptic scenography played out in Marcel Duchamp's "Large Glass," only here writ across the universe, across all space and time. Yet it is also disturbingly reminiscent of the derisory project of Edward Casaubon, the sterile, deluded figure at the center of the first half of George Eliot's



Matthew Ritchie in collaboration with Aranda/Lasch and Arup AGU, *The Morning Line*, 2008, mixed media. Installation view, Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville. Photo: Benjamin Aranda.

novel *Middlemarch*, whose dream of a "key to all mythologies" is shown to be little more than a pedant's need to impose order on material in the flagrant absence of living concepts. On the other hand, Ritchie's world theater marks an unmistakable commitment to the principle of a matrix or diagram that makes form (or space) and information into a single continuum. I hesitate to see a mere continuation of two decades of cultural eclecticism in this tendency, but rather see in it—at least perhaps—the provocation one might have felt before the mystery of Isaac Newton's predominating interest in alchemical transformation during the three most (scientifically) productive decades of his life. Ritchie's interest in painting as a language—that is, as a writing in and an embedding of world into form, and decidedly not as only a signifying element in the semiotic sense—that espouses the logic and procedures of film, as well as of music and, yes, of nucleic acids, is as profound and potentially productive a delirium as any in our time. That Ritchie sees these all as "information structures" and seems to understand that there are "efficiencies" within even phenomenological experience that can be tapped with mathematical, or at least regular, devices, turns out to be the very sobriety that saves him—and just in time. With the collaboration of Aranda and Lasch (and



Matthew Ritchie in collaboration with Aranda\Lasch and Arup AGU, *The Morning Line*, mixed media installation view, Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, Seville. Photo: Todd Eberle

the Advanced Geometry Unit at the engineering firm Arup), the glyphs of free-form writing/drawing that typify much of Ritchie's work are captured within "virtual" modules (the digital-mathematical scaffold supplied by Aranda and Lasch), then manipulated with the help of formal instructions (code, keystrokes, and so on), just as such instructions have, over the centuries, become embedded into the syntax of natural languages to be deployed with every speech act. Through its expression of variation at all levels (scale, orientation, density, number, etc.) and in every combination, the project becomes an inchoate study in the syntax of pattern, offering the possibility to see in the world what Sergei Eisenstein, in his early days, asserted for film: that everything-i.e., meaning-happens in the conjunction of frames, in the in-between.

Ritchie will reproduce and transform *The Morning Line* in a variety of locales, including Vienna in May 2010 and then New York in September, and each work in this line-or phylum, as it were, should one wish to press the evolutionary metaphor-represents a kind of performance in which a score is reanimated within, and in response to, a given set of spatial and temporal conditions (variations in physical and social site). (This posture could hypothetically be strengthened to include the specific historical conditions of place and time and their nontransmutable meanings. Though it is not in Ritchie's worldview to do this, he opens the possibility of a practice that would.) There is an undeniable experience of beauty and lyricism as one surveys the work, generated by the dislocations one cannot help but discern and play with within one's own internal rhythm section, between the beats and syncopations of the absent but insistent (because virtual) modules and the glissandi and arabesques of the drawn lines in aluminum that are all one literally sees. To begin, this provokes a different habit of seeing-

different at least from what has become routine in the media and art worlds-in that it is a type of what Theodor Adorno might have called structural seeing, which reads primarily the generative formations that underlie appearance. Second, it introduces a new type of object into our world: environmental but not burdened by rationale and utility as would be a standard work of architecture logical in its propagation and organization yet also in a state of magic compression, like the cosmological constants that characterize at once the universe of the late-medieval cosmologist Nicholas of Cusa and the contemporary "scientific" universes of string and brane theory. These cosmologies are in one sense no more coherent or less arbitrary than, say, the ever-expanding universe of the fictional Pokernon legend (a world that is relentless in its commitment to evolution yet that is also now endowed with papal benediction), and they are certainly closer kin to today's omnipresent RPGs (role-playing games, generally video games) than to the masterworks of the panoramic novel that figured so strongly as cultural references-and as philosophical and aesthetic guideposts-as late as the 1980s. If playing the role of primitive or naive "seer" or visionary and cosmologist has become a legitimate posture for contemporary artists, it may, ironically, be a symptom of the recent wholesale abandonment of the will to theorize in systematic fashion in the first place. Yet here is where the ethos of that interloper "design" is beginning to play an increasingly prevalent and enchanted role within some contemporary art practices. Although it will initially appear unsophisticated to say so, the reality of adding a certain modicum of formalist reflection to the production of objects and environments in today's largely individualist and non-brilliant art practices has been no bad thing. (Think preeminently here of Thomas Demand, whose

practice serves as a beacon in the darkness.) Design thinking, especially over the past decade, has become an increasingly trenchant and analytic practice of engagement with economic, technological, and sociological developments at virtually every scale. Part of its newfound responsibility to think and rethink the modern environment in its manifold crises-urban, economic, technological, natural, and, yes, anthropoecological-is indisputably a principal factor explaining its recent transgression into certain areas of art practice, most notably, the physiological aspects of perception. It is interesting to see how the sometimes guileless utopian movements of 1960s design milieus have begun to form a massive bloc of reference and a historical anchor point for some contemporary art practices, such as those of Tomas Saraceno, Carsten Höller, Ai Weiwei, Tobias Putrih & MOS, and even the whole mongrel pack of relational-aesthetics producers. The crisis of art, long forecast by Marxist critics, albeit during moments when such cries carried little convincing power, has indeed arrived in our midst, and it is, as the best of them (Debord et al.) prophesied, a crisis of experience, not representation. The crisis was brought about not by philosophers or cultural producers, and not even directly by economic developments (not, that is, in the predictable "vulgar" sense), but by the transformation of human communicational and even epistemological (knowledge) ecologies, the direct product of, at once, a society given over to the cult of automatic processes and a populace exiled from the reasons and realities of nature. In works like the (endless?) suite announced by *The Morning Line*, one may well glimpse not only an open world but perhaps a new way of working and thinking, one in which imagination and science, method and caprice, the sociocultural and the natural, are inseparable and no longer subject to the scolds and disciplinary distinctions that seek to protect the sanctity of artistic practice even if such protection will surely destroy art for good. Art's occasional but growing fascination with design methodology and thinking is partly a recognition of an ancient but unacknowledged complicity and partly a dawning recognition that the problems and issues that matter today are presenting themselves at a scale, depth, and technicity that art can no longer afford to ignore-nor can it remain entirely reliant on its own history, or on its stale commitment to irony, as a guide to action. □

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