Daniel Young & Christian Giroux: Are All Oppositions Equal?

This essay accompanies the exhibition Young & Giroux *presented at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal from February 3 to April 25, 2011.*

Daniel Young and Christian Giroux have collaborated since 2002 on sculptures, public artworks and film installations. In sculpture, they rework the abstract forms associated with modernism, using consumer products and items related to design and industrial production techniques. Their film pieces arise out of their investigation of the sculptural forms that underlie the built environment. In their art, they introduce sequences of antinomic yet complementary notions (systemic/arbitrary; present/past; ugly/beautiful; specific/generic; signed/anonymous; regionalism/internationalism) which generate a dialectic that shifts a reading of their works from one that is strictly phenomenological—related to their roots in formalism—to one with a political content, related to the utopian dimension of the modernist project, particularly in architecture.

The contrasting or complementarity of opposites can often lead to a simplistic, even reductive, highlighting of dualities. Indeed, more often than not it involves clichés like presence/absence or here/elsewhere, observations that, as appropriate as they may be to the work under discussion, offer little insight. However, generally speaking, the exhibiting of works of art resembles a certain dialectical model: one work sheds light on aspects of another, and vice versa, thereby setting up a dialogue which, in the best instance, fades into the background in order to better illuminate the issues that drive an entire approach. This is especially true since an exhibition, in essence, remains a dialogue between objects (the works) and subjects (the visitors).

This bias against an oppositional structure as model is all the more misplaced when applied to the work of the Toronto duo of artists Daniel Young and Christian Giroux as a whole and, more specifically, this concurrent presentation of two of their recent works in which the dialogue between a sculpture and a film takes the built environment as its subject. *Mr. Smith* is a near-monumental sculpture whose form is derived from the compositional grid employed by American artist Tony Smith (1912–1980) in his sculptures in the 1960s. The film *Every Building, or Site, That a Building Permit Has Been Issued for a New Building in Toronto in 2006* (2008) consists of a series of static shots that, as the title states, document every building or site for which a permit was issued in Toronto in 2006. It has a running time of about thirteen minutes, or eight seconds per shot of each of the 112 sites documented.[i]

The juxtaposition and confronting of these two different works yield a certain perspective: here, sculpture is to the exhibition gallery what a building represents to the city. A new set of binary

relations is thus added to those we have already proposed: sculpture/architecture, object/space, site/non-site.

Without copying any specific piece by Tony Smith, the artists have created, in *Mr. Smith*, a system of triangular surfaces and wooden struts connected to one another with a system of cast aluminum joints and assembled according to the space available. In so doing, they have produced a work that gives visual form to the structural logic of Smith's sculptures while also utilizing the non-linear spatial potential of the modular, almost architectural nature of his art.[ii] A number of conversations are going on between the different components of this piece—at the very least, between its underlying structure and its final form. The result is a hybrid structure in which a space-frame type of system cohabits with the triangular planes, adding further complexity to the relationship between the spaces (negative) and volumes (positive) of the sculpture. As was noted by Georges Didi-Huberman, Smith's sculpture "can be viewed as a big toy (*Spiel*) allowing a dialectic, visual working of the tragedy of the visible and the invisible, the open and the closed, mass and excavation." Citing *We Lost* (1962–1966) as an example, that author sees it as a work "that affirms its mass—a monumental cube—only through the close interplay of the exposed voids, those we can slip into and pass through, and the superimposed voids within the body of the sculpture itself."[iii] By making this visual dialectic an integral, internal part of the form that constitutes the sculpture, Young and Giroux multiply the original effect that lies at the heart of Tony Smith's work.

Young and Giroux's re-examination of Tony Smith is in keeping with certain current artistic practices that have a historicizing approach. And indeed, after more than forty years of differentiating and distancing themselves from the modernist canon, how do these practices broach some of its characteristics without being explicitly reactive to or in line with modernism? It should be made clear, right off, that, by modernism, we mean the application of a reductionist style that proposes a dilution of the visual components in order to form a terse aesthetic statement, as well as the subjecting of the form of the built environment to the function performed by its constituent parts (the role of architecture in the organization of capitalist society, the famous "form follows function"). Modernism would thus express a questioning of issues that are both aesthetic (philosophical) and political (ideological).

Taking non-hierarchical elements from the built landscape (urban, industrial) and subjecting them to an analytical gaze is a strategy that has been employed from the very beginning of conceptual art, and that offers an experience of the everyday site in comparison with the historicized ("mythologized") site. While Young and Giroux, in formulating the title of their film, may refer to Edward Ruscha (more specifically, his 1966 work *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*[iv]), there are numerous examples of this type of representation in images of a (quasi) systemic protocol between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s: Dan Graham (*Homes for America*, 1966–1967), Robert Smithson (*A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey*, 1967), Jeff Wall (*Landscape Manual*, 1969), Ian Wallace (*Elevator Piece*, 1970) and Bill Vazan (*Yonge Street Walk*, 1969–1972), to name only a few. In these works, the objects (often photographic) are the result of more or less predetermined actions, forming a documentary corpus that bears witness to a system

which existed for a given period of time, in some random, often urban, space and which carries little symbolic weight.

The film *Every Building, or Site, That a Building Permit Has Been Issued for a New Building in Toronto in 2006* charts the city of Toronto, not by locating the sites in a defined spatial grid, but rather by setting them within a specific time frame that is actually determined by a bureaucratic procedure: the issuing of permits in the year 2006. The sequence of shots is based on the chronological order in which the permits were issued. Consequently, while this interest in documenting the current state of the vernacular architecture necessarily looks at the present, it also traces a link (less direct than the reference to Tony Smith) with the conceptual art of the 1970s, evoking practices that tend to combine the systemic (procedure, protocol) with the random (the subjects covered).

We can see Tony Smith as another case of meaningful ambivalence. He belongs to the generation of the Abstract Expressionists yet is also considered a pioneer of minimalist sculpture. His visionary works foreshadowed the emergence of the resolutely minimalist art of Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Robert Morris, among others;[v] however, from the generational standpoint, he was no doubt one of the targets of the defenders of conceptual art who advocated a certain devaluing of the object. And yet, in 1966, Smith wrote a famous piece which appeared in the December issue of *ArtForum International*—and which complicates the question. Even though this text has been oft-quoted since it was published, I would like to reproduce an extended excerpt here on the limitations of art compared with an experience of the built environment:

> When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the '50s, someone told me how I could get on to the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. I took three students and drove from somewhere in the Meadows to New Brunswick. It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art.
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> The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most paintings look pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it. Later I discovered some abandoned airstrips in Europe—abandoned works, Surrealist landscapes, something that had nothing to do with any function, created worlds without tradition. Artificial landscape without cultural precedent began to dawn on me. There is a drill ground in Nuremberg, large enough to accommodate two million men. The entire field is enclosed with high embankments and towers. The concrete approach is three 16-inch steps, one above the other, stretching for a mile or so.[vi]

In this passage, Smith compares his experience of a semi-industrial landscape with the most basic form that underlies it. He would thus be, in spite of himself perhaps, a forerunner of both the minimalism of Donald Judd and the Land Art of Robert Smithson.[vii] Closer to us here, this excerpt provides a greater understanding of what connects *Mr. Smith* and *Every Building…*. The exhibiting of these two works side by side does more than illustrate a metonymy in which the relationship between object and place becomes a link between sculpture/building and gallery/site. In light of the description of an experience similar to the Industrial Sublime[viii]—evinced by Smith in the preceding text—a certain political (ideological) perspective takes shape. Smith paints a striking picture of it by evoking, without dwelling on it, the *Reichsparteitagsgelände* (the site of the Nazis' mass rallies in Nuremberg). In seeing this charged space as nothing more than a monumental, sparsely built open area (cold form), Smith raises reluctantly (and *in absentia*) the question of the ideological import of architecture (hot content). If Young and Giroux, like other artists who carry out systemic inventories, focus intently on the current architectural landscape of Toronto, it is because they are also sensitive to this question. The disarming banality of today's vernacular architecture itself carries meaning. On the one hand, we can see in the buildings they filmed the antithesis of the utopian architecture that was characteristic of twentieth-century modernism. On the other hand, the predictability of the urban landscape they observe leads us to believe that the advent of technocratic urban societies is accompanied by an aesthetic neutrality that tries not to offend anyone. Contemporary urban development seems to follow a logic of popular consensus that imposes a banality on the built environment. This is certainly taken up in the language used to describe the evolution of urban development. As Lucy Lippard has noted: "From 'slum clearance' to 'urban renewal' to 'redevelopment,' the nomenclature of efforts to re-engineer cities has gone from blatantly imperialistic to pseudo-optimistic to a neutrality that almost admits past mistakes."[ix] The clean aesthetic desired to bring out the function of a structure's components (elimination of ornamentation, purity of line, emphasis on materials, simple geometry, open spaces) would imply avoiding any ideological reference in designing a new vernacular, in spite of the many attempts to apply this ideology in the latter half of the twentieth century. (We only have to look at how brutalism and housing projects have become synonymous with alienation in the collective imagination.)

Just as modernism seems to waver between the technocratic efficiency of urban planning (Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe) and the apparent political disengagement of formalism (Clement Greenberg, post-painterly abstraction), the contemporary world imposes its own politico-ideological readings that are distinct from those put forward by the champions of post-modernism (Neo-Geo, Pictures Generation), which developed reactively in the 1980s. Young and Giroux go back to the Foucauldian perspective associated with modernism's architectural utopias,[x] in response to the major issues that arise out of the globalized capitalist economy. Their choices in terms of style (abstraction) and production techniques and materials (aluminum and plywood, made in factories and woodworking shops from maquettes created with 3-D modelling software) form the core of their practice.

The artists thus challenge the received notions of modernism in general, but wonder, above all, how today's architecture and sculpture, as close or far as they may be from modernist issues,

continue to be formed by an ideology at the same time as it is informed by them. For Young and Giroux, it is a matter of establishing a dialogue about the form contemporary society continues to give itself: they observe the evolution of this form over time (the more, or less, distant past) and space (more, or less, nearby places) in order to better draw from it sources of inspiration and subjects to explore.

One source of this way of doing things may be found in a change in attitude perceptible at the centre of the emergence of post-modernism. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour comment on it in their groundbreaking study that came out in the early 1970s, *Learning from Las Vegas*: "Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and to begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way: that is to question how we look at things."[xi] Since then, what matters goes beyond any distinctions between present and past; ugly and beautiful; specific and generic; signed and anonymous; regionalism and internationalism; and, above all, function and form. In their scope, the works of Young and Giroux endeavour to move away from their status as signs; they become paradoxical objects that sustain both a retrospective and a prospective gaze while also keeping very present this dual perspective.

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i Previous presentations of this work included 107 buildings and sites. Five more sites were added here to complete the film.

ii Tony Smith also maintained an architectural practice.

iii Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, Collection "Critique," 1992) p. 77-78.

iv On the connection between *Every Building...* and conceptual art, see Peggy Gale, "Assembling the Givens," *Prefix Photo* 19 (May 2009), p. 20-33.

v Smith sets himself apart from the Minimalists in stating: ""The main difference in approach, as I understand it is that the minimalists are aiming at certain results, while my work is the product of a variety of processes which are not governed by conscious goals.".." Quoted by R. Neu in the brochure accompanying the exhibition *Tony Smith*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968, reprinted (in French translation) in Jean Pierre Criqui, "Trictrac pour Tony Smith," *Artstudio* 6 (Fall 1987), p. 39.

vi Samuel J. Wagstaff Jr., "Talking with Tony Smith," *Artforum* (December 1966), p. 19.

vii This "bridge" between minimalism and built environment is probably expressed most clearly in Dan Graham's *Homes For America*. As Scott Watson puts it: "By means of photographs of tract houses that had an uncanny resemblance to Judd's rows of boxes, Graham, in *Homes for America* (1966), implicated the minimalist row of boxes in a more general economy." Scott Watson, "Discovering the Defeatured Landscape," in Stan Douglas, ed., *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1991), p. 252.

viii For more on the link between the industrialization of the United States and the emergence of Industrial Sublime, see David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), in particular Chapter 5, p. 109: "The Factory: From Pastoral Mill to Industrial Sublime," which contains the following: "At first, steam-driven factories were subsumed within the pastoral tradition, but by the end of the [19th] century, they were seen as sublime precisely because they were intensely unnatural."

ix Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 204-205. See also Camilo José Vergera, *The New American Ghetto* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

x By Foucauldian, I mean more specifically Gilles Deleuze's reading of Foucault's theory of the Panopticon: "The abstract formula for Panopticonism is no longer 'to see without being seen' but to impose a particular conduct on a particular human multiplicity." Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. S. Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 34. Originally published in French as *Foucault*, 1986. This, of course, is articulated best through the production of space that is architecture and urban planning.

xi Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972–1977), p. 3.