



The Art-Architecture Complex

By Hal Foster

Verso, £14.99 (hardcover)

The essays that comprised *Design and Crime* (2002) saw Hal Foster morphing from formidable art theorist to flexible analyst of the built and designed world. *The Art-Architecture Complex*, which expands on the former book's concern with spectacular architecture, makes the transmutation complete. The American writer now evidently has a worldview expansive enough to see dominant tendencies in contemporary architecture and (fairly) recent art as flip sides of the same coin, and both as reflective of the contemporary political order. This, then, is criticism with vaulting ambitions.

Foster lays out his thesis – broadly, that art and architecture have influenced each other decisively since the 1960s and are now tightly interlaced – via three sections of three essays each. In the first segment, he traces the influence of Pop and modernist ‘transparency’ of medium on the architecture of Richard Rogers, Norman Foster and Renzo Piano (all Europeans, notably, whereas *Design and Crime* focused on American architects). By the end of these well-rounded case studies, which pull together architectural antecedents as well as artistic ones, the author is usually raising an eyebrow: Rogers is ‘seduced by the dubious analogy between architectural transparency and political transparency’; Norman Foster delivers ‘a heady air of refined efficiency that almost any corporation or government would want to assume as its own’. The critic is alert to when buildings become logos for power or a mendacious, dazzling distraction: the book’s heart is Situationist, assessing contemporary reality in terms of spectacle, distraction and a transparency more apparent than real.

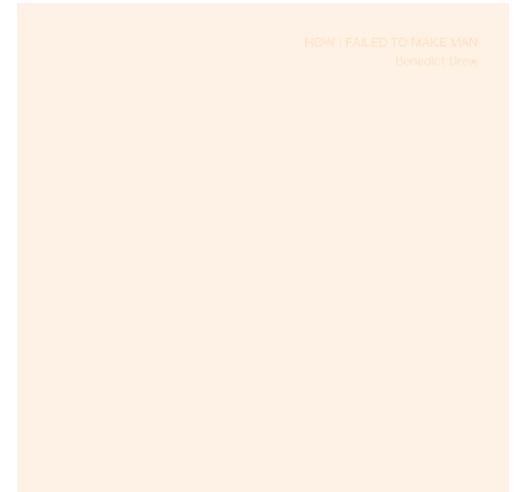
The second section interweaves art and architecture more directly, dissecting Zaha Hadid’s canny redeployment of Suprematism and Constructivism, the cross-media adventures of Diller Scofidio + Renfro, and the influence Minimalism had on the venues and organisations that house it, from Dia:Beacon to MoMA. The ‘decorum’ of these ‘epic sheds’ ‘reduces the pressure that the art exerts on the architecture’,

the author notes. Pressure, tension, contradiction: these are qualities he prizes, and sees intermittently in the aforementioned architects; in the book’s final third, he notes them repeatedly in hypernuanced readings of how Richard Serra, Anthony McCall and Dan Flavin promulgated artistic styles that leaked into the spaces in which they were shown, activating them and privileging the mobile viewer.

Serra – whose *Promenade* (2008) adorns the book’s cover and who is garlanded via a lengthy, probing essay and a forensic interview that serves as the book’s coda – is the primary exemplar here. Foster never quite comes out and says it, but the architecture he interrogates – which variously ‘sees’ for the viewer (eg, Diller Scofidio + Renfro’s Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, described in Corbusier-like terms as ‘a machine for looking’), retails spectacular surface (Hadid) or gestures to a civic role without really fulfilling it (Rogers) – is counterpointed by the work of Serra, McCall and Flavin, which genuinely finds a privileging and activating role for the viewer. Roped together by Foster, these artists also sit in contrast to artists who disavow productive tension in favour of envelopment and distraction: fans of James Turrell, approach with caution.

Foster’s problem, one that he never quite resolves, is of temporal disjunction: he wants the approaches of Serra et al, which were initiated in the 1960s and early 70s, to critique and counterbalance contemporary starchitecture. This pretty much works: the artists and (some of) the architects are of comparable ages, though the surface-fetishising, corporate-logo buildings he has particular issues with mostly date from recent decades. But it leads to a certain amount of special pleading: Serra’s insistence on the industrial, he suggests, ‘can be taken to rebuff... the “novel tectonics” of much contemporary design, with its fascination with extreme engineering’. Foster (Hal) can seem, at times, dangerously entranced by Serra. The upside is that the interview – a meeting of minds – offers what feels like an unprecedented insight into the artist’s thinking, and in any case Foster’s fascination doesn’t hobble his book. *The Art-Architecture Complex* posits a paradigm; one completes it as a believer.

MARTIN HERBERT



How I Failed to Make Man

By Benedict Drew

Merkske, £6 (softcover)

The physician, the biologist, the neurologist and the nutritionist. The psychiatrist, the psychologist, the sociologist and the anthropologist. All engaged in considering what makes the human. As is Benedict Drew in this artist’s book, published in an edition of 100, each copy signed. Drew’s got a simpler explanation than any of the disciplines mentioned above offer. He reduces man to the four main elements of the human body: water, air, carbon and calcium. This 36-page publication consists almost wholly of step-by-step photos of Drew assembling these ingredients and then, by some degree of sledgehammer alchemy – picture a low-fi Dr Frankenstein – demonstrating his attempts at creating a human. The simplicity of the black-and-white photos, reminiscent of an old science manual, affirms the bathos of the end result of Drew’s absurdist project: a soggy, mucky mess of spent powder. Another dream shattered.

OLIVER BASCIANO