

On the Work of Elisabeth Diller & Ricardo Scofidio A Life to Machine in

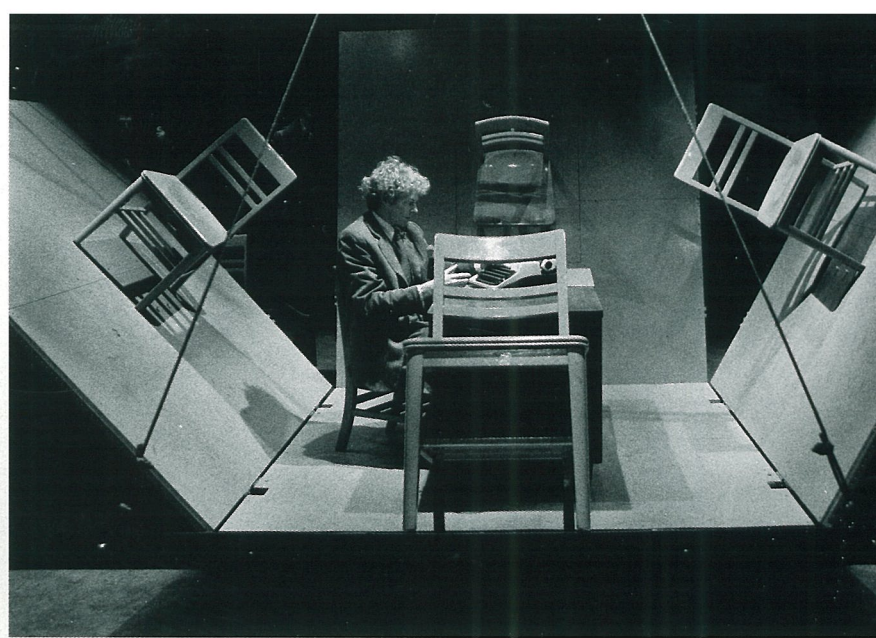
In the Slow House in North Haven on Long Island, designed by Elisabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, everything revolves around the panorama. Not a 'magnificent' panorama, but a corrupted, tormented, twisted one. It is not their intention that an observer should be able to look out from the living room, which is reached via a tortuous and deliberately frustrating *promenade architecturale*, and casually enjoy the sight of the beautiful Noyack Bay. On the contrary, the point is that the visitor is made conscious of the socio-historical conditions that have induced us to call such panoramas 'magnificent'; and of why that is no longer possible... The project is a manifesto of doubt about the dominant visual and cultural codes. It operates through a mechanism of postponed need-satisfying towards an experience of having pleasure in confusion. Simply enjoyment is kitsch. One must have pleasure at the correct intellectual level – the level at which uncertainties dance.

The most striking means the architects have employed to this end is the video monitor mounted above the living room fireplace. Using a video camera (supplied), the inhabitants can 'correct' the real view of the ocean to that of any desired season, for example by replaying a recording from six months earlier. The absolute autonomy of both seasons and climate is thereby annulled in one blow. Alternatively they may prefer to play a videotape by artist Jan Dibbets, showing a crackling open fire for hours at a stretch. In this way not only would the panorama be ridiculed, but also the experience of the interior. First the concept of the vista and then the clichés of intimacy and security are reduced to a game of codes.

The provocative approach to design taken by this New York duo of architect/artists who also make environments, installations and performances is heavily inspired by Marcel Duchamp. Since Duchamp all art has been conceptual. Diller and Scofidio set themselves up as perpetuating the halting tradition that Duchamp inaugurated, namely the decoding and deflation of 'civilised' experience. The Slow House itself makes an indirect reference to Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, the first ready-made in the history of art. This wheel, a utilitarian object from the street unexpectedly promoted to art object, acquired its new status through the very act of displacement. (This stratagem was, of course, meant to undermine the idea of artistic status itself.) Duchamp, meanwhile, setting the wheel spinning in his studio, thought he could see in it... a flickering fire. 'It was a pleasure for me to look at, just as I enjoyed looking at the dancing flames in the hearth.' This subtle interweaving of banality and the sublime, of refuse and spirituality, ushered in modern art with a vengeance.

What the bicycle wheel was to Duchamp, the video is to Diller and Scofidio. On the one hand, the sublime experience of landscape is mocked in its own setting; and on the other hand, the sanctuary of the hearth and domesticated natural beauty are definitively relocated to the T.V. screen. It is conceptualism at its apogee. Although our sensibilities appear to be challenged by the prescribed scenario of experience in this house, everything is in fact attuned to a strictly cerebral programme in which countless notions

The American Mysteries, stage set, the mystery writer revealed at opening of scene one, New York, 1984



from literature, philosophy and art vie for our attention. It is not for nothing that this architectural work has been the subject of several solid, highly erudite critiques, each more hermetic than the other.

Man is a Dividual

Entirely in accordance with the avant-garde strategy of *épater le bourgeois*, Marcel Duchamp's purpose was to deride narrow-minded preconceptions about art. His critique was primarily psychological in nature, the butt being the art lover's tendency to adulate the 'beautiful' – the 'sublime' never having really caught on anyway. This psychological approach, which went well with the early Modernism in literature and art, is now difficult to uphold; for we live in a time in which psychology is making way for technobiology – or so it would seem, with science fiction scenarios continually crossing the line to scientific reality. For Duchamp, it was still a world *without* God. Diller and Scofidio live in a world *better* than God. More intricate conceptions are needed for this world than lifeless ready-made objects in whitewashed galleries. Now at least there has to be some movement of the subject – man is himself the ready-made. At the very point in history when man seems to have taken definitive charge of improving the Creation, he is increasingly losing touch with the carrier which made this possible, his own body. Logical, because as we all know if you turn into God you are no longer in need of a body.

But not everyone has taken note of this promotion of man to Olympian status, and by no means everyone is a party to this step up in the world. To enter heaven on earth, you have to be well heeled – and be of a speculative inclination. In fact what we are chiefly concerned with here are mental conceptions. And since every one of us is still limited to the confines of his or her own physical body – with a few cryobiological exceptions – we are obliged to get acquainted with these conceptions (which as yet exist only in the mind) through conventional means: art, architecture, education

Perhaps by heeding the words of Loos, that 'every work of art possesses such strong internal laws that it can only appear in its own form', Diller and Scofidio might have placed more importance on the integrity of architecture and its ability to affect change.

Brian McLaren

The object types of Diller and Scofidio neither serve nor dictate; they simply reveal.

Anthony Vidler

Diller and Scofidio equally operate in times when the architectural observer cannot be engaged by or take possession of a building through the ritualistic experience of its fixed and common iconography. They therefore deploy their paradoxical hinges as invitations to the observer for self-investiture, and to complete and take possession of the architecture. Their ambition perhaps is to establish an architecture where the hinges are not isolated events but pivots that activate a dense and continuous fabric of meaning, of forms and surfaces crowded with latent actions.

Architectural Review

Scofidio and Diller are involved with the idea of 'mask/masque' in a modern way. Their mask/masque covers stilled time, for its physicality has no past, no future... only present.

John Hejduk

etcetera. Our brains have long been elsewhere, but the brain's communication still takes place through the medium of printers and paper, oil and canvas, bricks and mortar. And videotape.

Sometimes this communication takes the form of an exhibition. According to curator Jeffrey Deitch, whose 'Post Human' show has been successfully touring America and Europe, our future definition of ourselves is based on the artificial. Instead of a permanent personality, we shall have to learn to rediscover ourselves continually. Deitch presumably means by this that the idea of the 'self' will ultimately disappear. However, we are not yet ripe for this kind of escape from our psychic pettiness. For the while we shall have to make do with our old personalities.

There is no point in recapitulating here every trend towards prosthetisation of the human body. The tenor of all those horror-drenched films, novels, paintings, theories and now (it seems) buildings is the observation that man and matter are becoming ever more compatible. The ultimate wish of every systems designer, the ultimate interface. Just a question of connecting up the synapses to the rest of the world. Everything in that world is transplantable. Although we have not yet reached that stage, the culture industry is working at full steam to soften us up for this operation by digitalising the analogue world view. As in hospital we have to be purged before the real cutting work can begin, i.e. we must first get rid of our preoccupations and illusions of individual autonomy. (The philosophical profession, already frustrated at its lack of social rele-

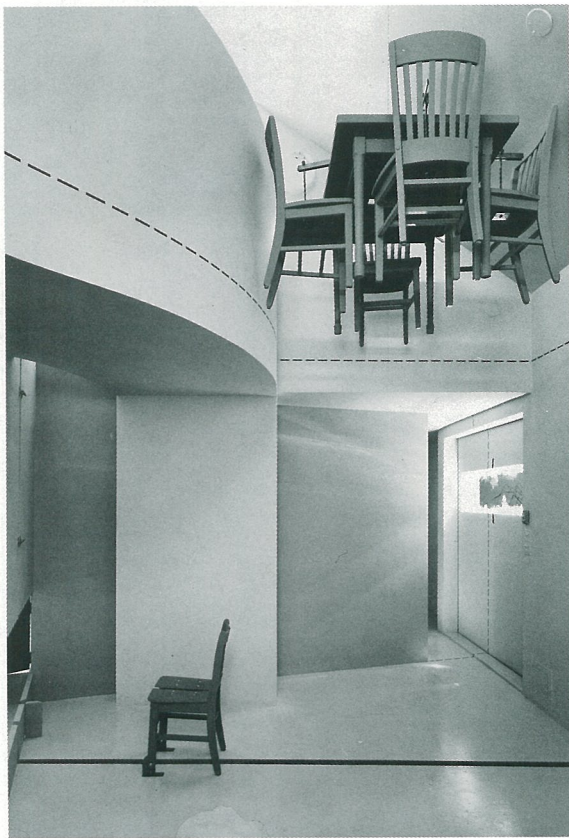
vance, will be all too pleased to lend a hand. Surely supplying material for a theory of the end of sociality was the obvious course of action.)

The end of sociality also means getting rid of the body that was regarded as the medium of sociality. In our present culture, we can detect many different shades of acceptance of this loss. The most archaic are those who still try to stem the attack on the body, i.e. those who express their alarm at the dangers of pollution and of technology and plead for islands of resistance. More or less neutral are those who clinically diagnose the end of bodily integrity. We have had the *homo clausus*; the grotesque is the new master. There is not much we can do about the grotesque after all. (For example, the Brazilian artist Tunga incorporates such powerful magnets into a piece of his work that some viewers become nauseous. Ironically it is those art-lovers with a prosthetic pacemaker who are repelled by this work!) Finally, there are those who make a manifesto of this new condition and sometimes even seem to relish the prospect of it. Or at least, they do not varnish it over with mitigating circumstances. Unflinchingly, the mangled body is displayed. Consider the kind of art and photography that shows details of death, often monstrously enlarged, the corpses of victims of drowning, rape and chain saw murders. Take Andres Serrano, for instance. Nothing remains but a landscape of putrefaction. The idea of the body has been laid to rest. But where can this idea, with or without its wounds, still live if its former house is no more than a ruin of the flesh? Whichever way you look at it our body continues to be the only vehicle for thinking this broken idea, this meta-idea. This kind of art is thus its own conceptual implosion.

Baroque 'n Roll

Of course, Diller and Scofidio must always create bodies (architectural ones, that is) and make space for bodies (the users). But what distinguishes their work more than anything else is the way they tackle the issue of the vanishing frontier between mind and body through their (architectural) choreography. Not only in the Slow House, but also in their *withDrawing room* in San Francisco or in the stage set for *The American Mysteries*, they go further than the mere representation of the body *in statu demolendi*. In the new paradigm, too, the body will move – not as the designer of its environment (Da Vinci), nor as the centre of its environment (Soufflot), nor as an objectiviser of its environment (Schlemmer) but now as the passive plaything, a mere function, of its environment. The architecture of Diller and Scofidio is that of a human being who has made himself into a puppet. The 'user', in as far as we still can speak of one, is continually led along, deceived and manipulated. Sometimes you can look, and sometimes your view is suddenly interrupted. Logical routes do not exist and everything is subservient to a process of consciousness-raising, the conceptualisation of the conditions of experience.

These architectural environments bring the history of the spatial concept to a new milestone. For about three hundred years, since the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, architecture has been in the grip of subjectivism. No single (divine) order was still acceptable as the absolute criterion of the universe. Space, formerly identified with divine substance mediated by light, was declared profane and empty. Man had to find



The withDrawing room, installation 65 Capp Street, dining formation at virtual second level, San Francisco, 1988

Diller and Scofidio call our attention to the possibility of presence of something non-figural - the spatial structures that order our bodies. (...) Their method is descriptive rather than prescriptive, culturally analytical rather than psychological.

Robert McAnulty

By confining their focus to a limited number of peculiar spatial relationships, Diller and Scofidio shift attention from the figural presence of the body acting within a world of objects, to the conditions under which the body comes to embody certain social definitions.

Robert McAnulty

Leonardo da Vinci and Schlemmer constructed two fundamentally different models for the relationship between man and this world. As we slip further away from the model of Leonardo and that past of Schlemmer, into a time of revered artifice and spatial implosion, the relation of man to his world has become a subject of renewed interest. What could a new model of this relationship be? Could there be one?

Diller & Scofidio

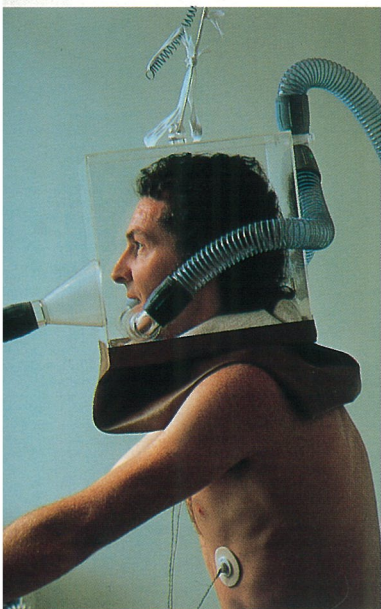
From the outset, I should note that although Diller and Scofidio have somewhat disingenuously attempted to unify their projects to date by identifying them as 'bodybuildings', I find the work lacking the unitary character of a 'body' of work. Hence, whether consciously or subconsciously, there is already a questioning of architecture's traditional insistence on identifying the body with the self-enclosed figure. My reading, prompted by Deleuze and Artaud, is that Diller and Scofidio are attempting to make themselves a 'body without organs'. Lacking a fixed hierarchy of ideas/organs organised by an internal logic of function and circulation, the projects indicate multiple directions for reformulating the body; as such, these so-called

his way in the new space. At first this undertaking was marked by great emancipatory optimism: in this space, man could become conscious. But when that quest failed over and over again, with Freud finally presiding over its bankruptcy, there was not much option left but to fetishise space itself. The Moderns made it an *absolutum inconsumsum* and were forever putting off the question of *who* the space was actually for. Now that man at the centre of space is not only having a hard time of it, but has been literally handed over to the machine, it is no longer possible to preserve the illusion that that space is still for him. On the contrary, he is there for the benefit of space. The things in that space, too, are not there for us but we for them. To paraphrase Jean Baudrillard, the world is taking revenge on our pride.

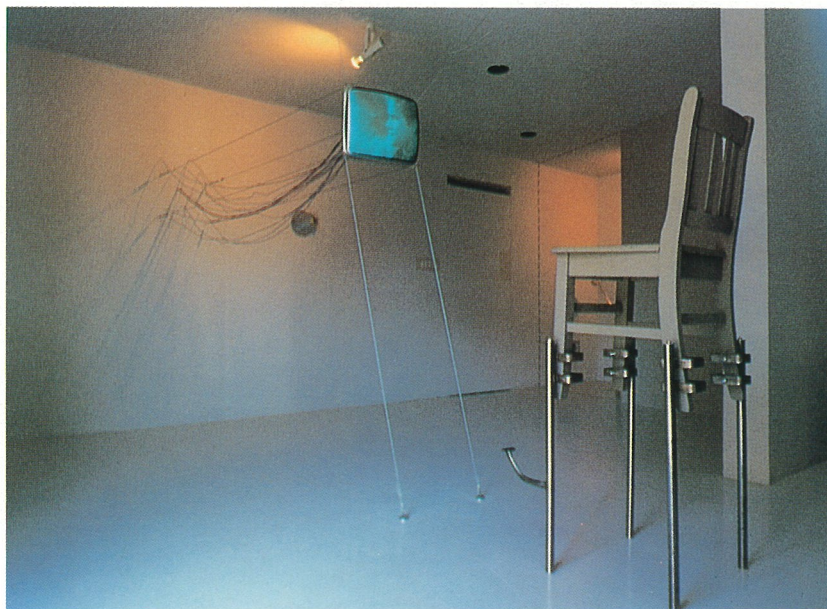
Diller and Scofidio supply the *thinking space* for this new condition. Space has definitively mastered us. We have moved from the pretence of a 'machine to live in' to a 'life to machine in'. Now that architecture is no longer an extension of our body, the time-honoured basis of classical anthropomorphism, man can now become an extension of

Epater le Cyborg

All the same, we should note that this programme has now run its course. The self-styled agitators of today are agitators no longer because the glass houses they bombard with their artistic devices are no longer inhabited. Now that everyone tries to be astonishing, there are no longer enough of the good old bourgeoisie left to be shocked. The Duchampian project has been fulfilled and now suffers from the very thing Marcel Duchamp himself despised, repetitiousness. In other words, it has both succeeded and failed at the same time. Duchamp characterised Classical painting as masturbation of the sense of smell and gave a similar description to repetition in its own right: 'To me, repetition by an artist is equivalent to a form of onanism'. All the same, Duchamp realised that such repetition was an inevitable fate. *Ewige Wiederkehr* and the like. Thus we remain eternal bachelors who, in their longing for the unreachable bride, perpetually turn in the same tight little circle: longing, lust, onanism, frustration, longing... *ad infinitum*.



Athlete's breath monitored to determine metabolic rate



The withDrawing room, installation 65 Capp Street, prosthetic chair, San Francisco, 1988



Marcel Duchamp, The Large Glass / The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even, 1923

architecture. Architecture is no longer the serviceable forum for *homo faber*; instead, *homo cyberneticus* is subservient to those prostheses for our central nervous system, the computer, the modem and the video. Man no longer has to feel threatened by technique. Now he can unequivocally identify with it. Diller and Scofidio are the perfect illustration of this analysis. They show us the final consequences of the Post-Modern role-swap of man and space: man has become inert and space has become mobile. Literally mobile, in the sense that the Slow House overflows with hinges and mirrors – not as an aid to ergonomics but as a reflection on our pivoting world view. *Trompe l'oeil* is as nothing in comparison. Figuratively mobile, i.e. without locus: *trompe le corps*. That Baroque should triumph anew in this day and age...

Diller and Scofidio, too, show traces of this affliction. During a lecture titled 'A Delay in Glass', during which Duchamp's life work *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* was brought to life, Diller described this performance as follows: 'Everyone is in hot pursuit. The bride is in pursuit of her fall. The bachelor is in pursuit of his rise. The Oculist Witness is in pursuit of the vanishing point. The Juggler is in pursuit of the centre of gravity. And I am in pursuit of a conclusion'. But there was none.

With their bachelor machinations, they underscore our cultural condition all the more poignantly. No sooner was adolescence invented, we found ourselves condemned to eternal adolescence. The idea of presenting a urinal as art appears to have originated in Brussels. According to Duchamp's civilisation black book we have all become a sort

'probes' are intended to ignite our desire to engage the body anew. This body is not to be understood either as a corpse awaiting our autopsy, inert and static, nor as a figure to gaze upon, upright and complete. The readings of Diller and Scofidio's work that follow attempt to map their body (of work) as a multiplicity of simultaneous trajectories sharing neither originary source, nor similar speed, nor parallel direction.

Robert McAnulty

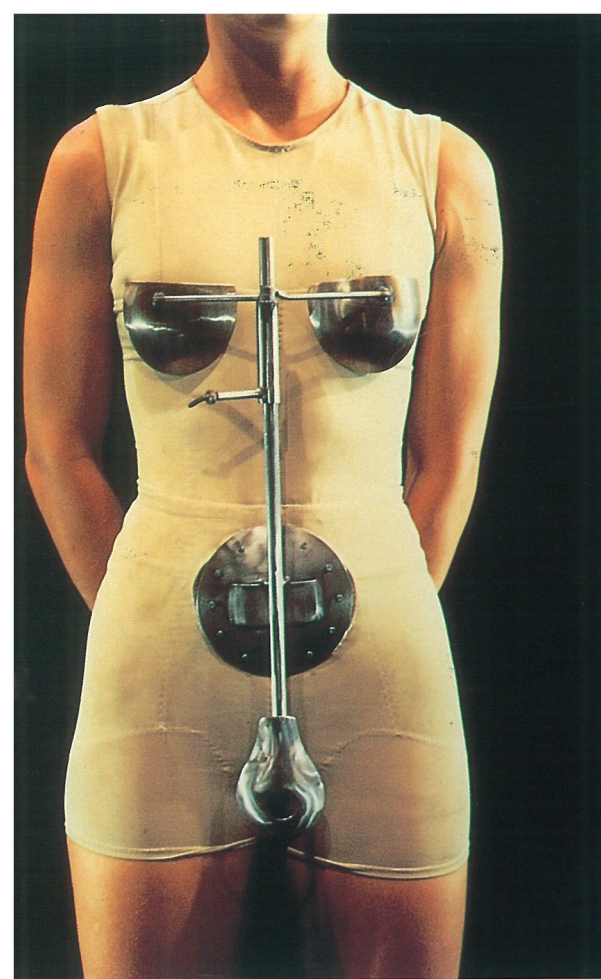
By the simple but critical act of 'realising' the model in practice, Diller and Scofidio establish a host of half-completed, half-broken refracted lines between mechanical objects and organic subjects; this network is in a real sense the cyborgian construction. Emulating at the same time as provoking both inner 'hacker' or 'cyber' space and outer or body space, the apparatus acts for all intents and purposes as a complicated and imaginary prophylactic among its subjects. The machine-age bachelor mechanism was forced to construct a real barrier, as in the hymeneal wall of Alfred Jarry's 'island of lubricious glass', which took on the form of any sexual organ when touched. The contemporary cyborg, in contrast, is already insulat-

ed by a deflected gaze of a constructed gender and needs no traditional home.

Anthony Vidler

Thus the 'house' implied by Diller and Scofidio demands continuous consciousness of physical and psychological discomfort from its para-inhabitants; it converts the pabulum of Heideggerian nostalgia into a *Hausangst* that reveals the banal and everyday nature of the *unheimlich*; the dream of *Heimat* founders on the reality of the coffin-hotel in the zone.

Anthony Vidler



The Bride's armour



The Automarionette



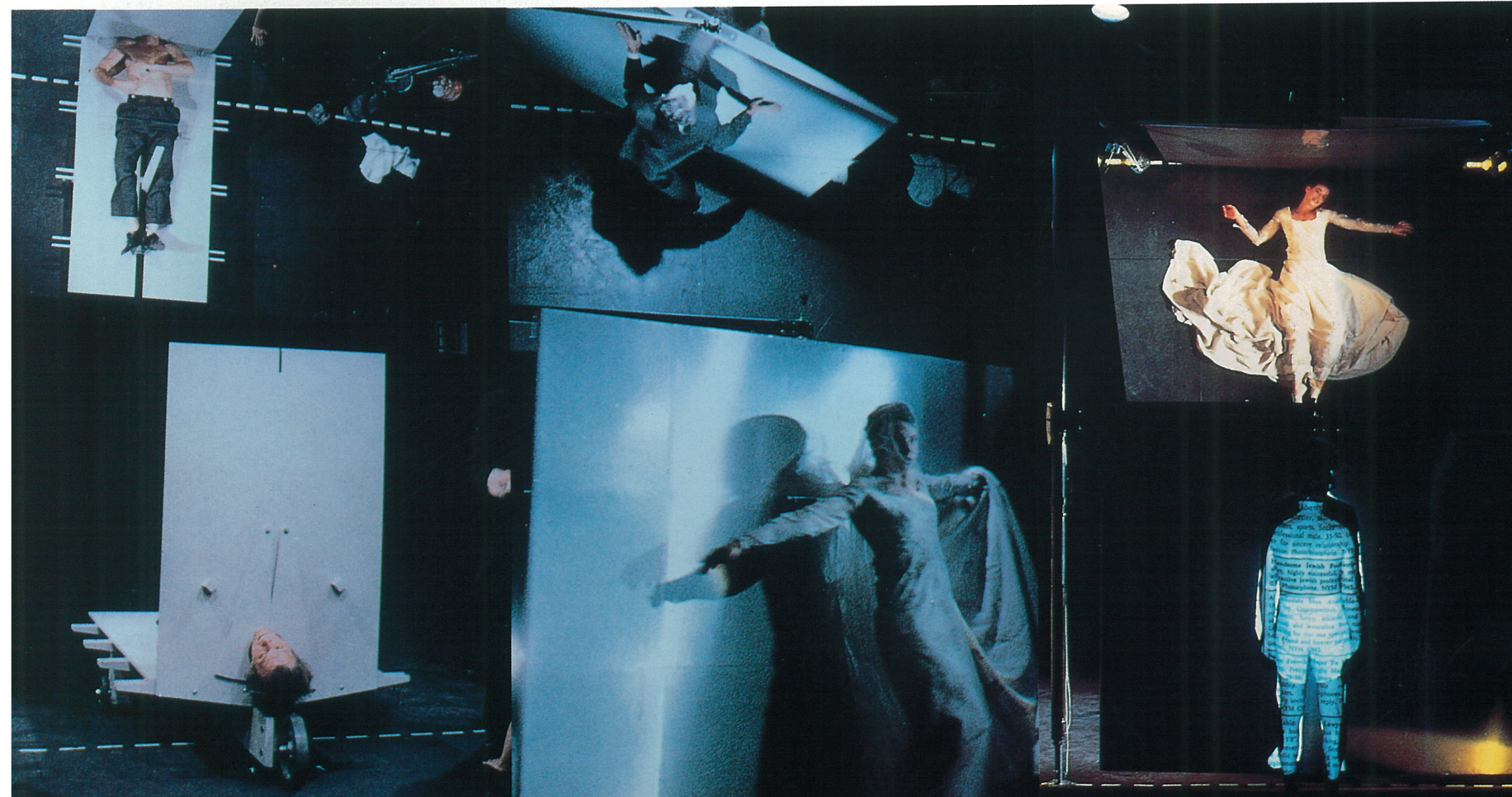
The Oculist Witness

The Rotary Notary and his Hot Plate

The disembodied head of the Bachelor gives commands to his beheaded body

Bachelor: I adore you.
 Bride: I'm taboo for you.
 Bachelor: I adore you.
 Bride: I'm taboo for you.

The Bachelor longs for his object of desire





Tourisms: suitcase Studies, 50 Samsonite suitcases on the way to the airport

of *Manneke Pis*, urinating like awkward, oversexed youths on the tombstone of the classical world with its honourable, well-integrated personalities. Manneke Pis with borderline syndrome.

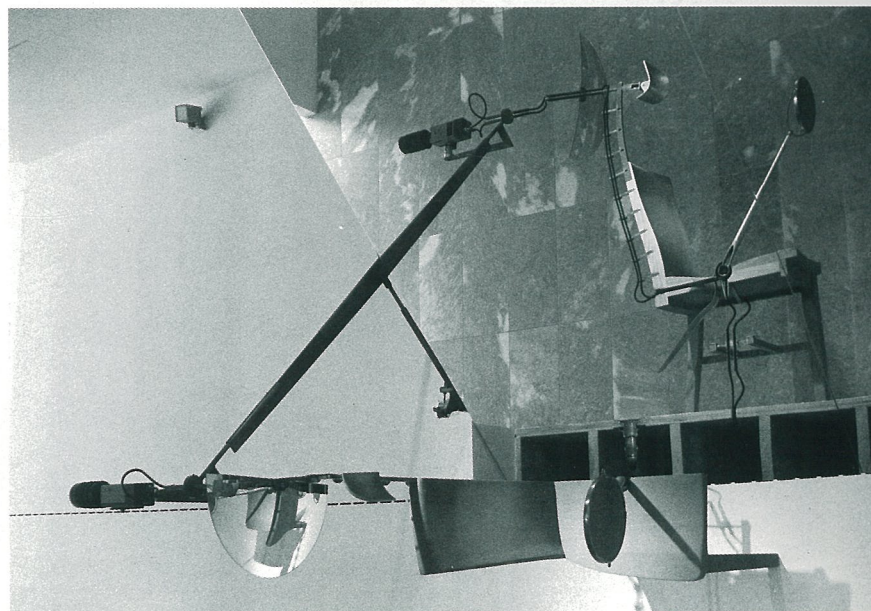
The venerable tradition of the shock of the new (Duchamp style) has become one massive, endless orgy of self-gratification. The work of Diller and Scofidio is still obsessed by Duchamp's nerve-jangling show. Art has rescued itself from its anarchists by stamping their anarchy as the paramount form of art.

176 But at the end of the day, perhaps, this work is principally interesting to those artists and architects who still feel entrapped within the frontiers of their trade. For anyone else, dispensing with the bourgeois concept of art has become an incomprehensible, futile meta-strategy. For architects, in particular, it is a *testimonium paupertatis* of those who are disappointed in their faith in Architecture. However, those who direct their faith not at an abandoned concept but at the politics of life itself have something better to do. Or so we thought. Duchamp, too, had a better idea – playing chess.

Infra-thin and Neo-Eleatism

Henri Bergson, the philosopher who in his theory of Creative Evolution defined *élan vital* as the fundamental principle of the cosmos, thought he had found the definitive solution to the famous paradox of Achilles and the tortoise which was devised by the pre-Socratic philosopher Zeno of Elea. Bergson observed that movement and distance, and thus time and space, were not mutually reducible. In the paradox, time is measured in spatial units; in Bergson's view movement is thereby incorrectly characterised as a succession of contingent moments of being, which are in fact totally alien to movement. In that way you can endlessly continue chopping up distance into smaller

Para-site, Narcissist's Chair



portions without ever arriving at the core of the matter, fluid motion itself. By strict adherence to the categories, the error of the paradox was now unmasked. The tortoise would always be overtaken because movement is not a succession of tiny distances but a category in its own right.

However, for Bergson's contemporary, Duchamp, Zeno was still alive and kicking. What Zeno did to space – conceptually slice it into an endless number of tiny autonomous pieces – Duchamp did to time (see his painting *Nude Descending a Staircase*, for instance). 'The Large Glass (*The Bride...*) is an inframince pulled out of a continuum,' Diller tells us. Duchamp set the scene, and here it is, visualised literally by Diller and Scofidio. The free movement of man in a neutral space such as the Moderns envisaged has been made obsolete by the digitalisation of humanity into a cyborg/cyberpunk. Man has become ever more definable as a collection of ones and zeroes, as flip-flops. The self, formerly one and indivisible, now falls into particles. Everything is compatible but only because everything is divided into discrete energy packets (the packets are interchangeable, not the person). And so we return to the world of Zeno and live our lives by the rule of neo-Eleatism, with our bodies animated by prosthetic souls. Achilles the epic hero is the loser again. We are all tortoises, slow but continually ahead. Ahead but always single. In our bachelor homes, under our armour, we remain bereft of one another. And still jogging...

Hence the name, Slow House.

The home is the perfect vehicle of self-representation and one of tourism's most potent themes. The home is also the only apparent certainty in touristic geography, a fixed point of reference, marking both departure and return. Travel is a mechanism of escape from the home. In fact, the word *vacation* derives from the Latin *vacare*, to leave (one's house empty).

Elisabeth Diller

The sanitised reenactment of national narratives is called *living history*. In *living history*, the tourist can go back in time as a passive observer without any effect on the outcome of the future, a classic dilemma of science fiction time travel. In the space of the reenactment of time, the tourist unproblematically accepts the role of the voyeur.

Elisabeth Diller

Being sick of home may lead to travel, which may lead to *homesickness*, the common malady of travel. In response, tourism domesticates travel by dispersing the idea of home.

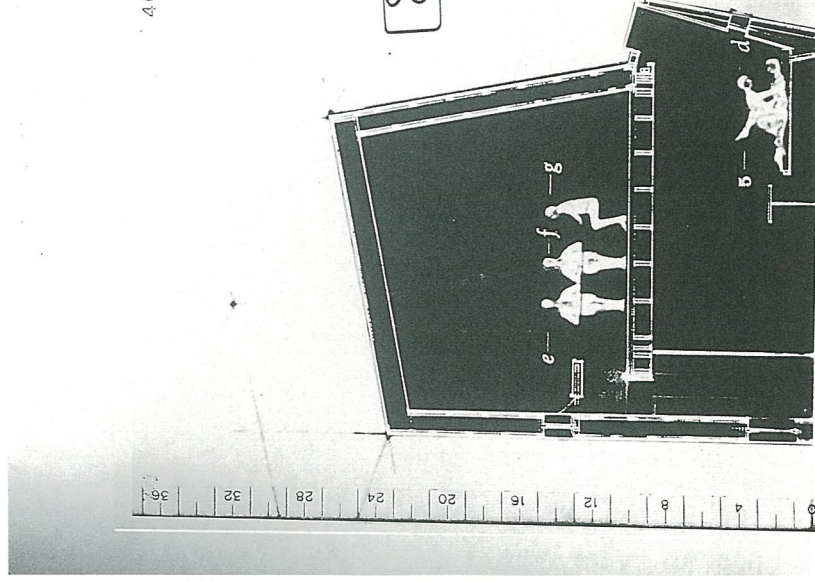
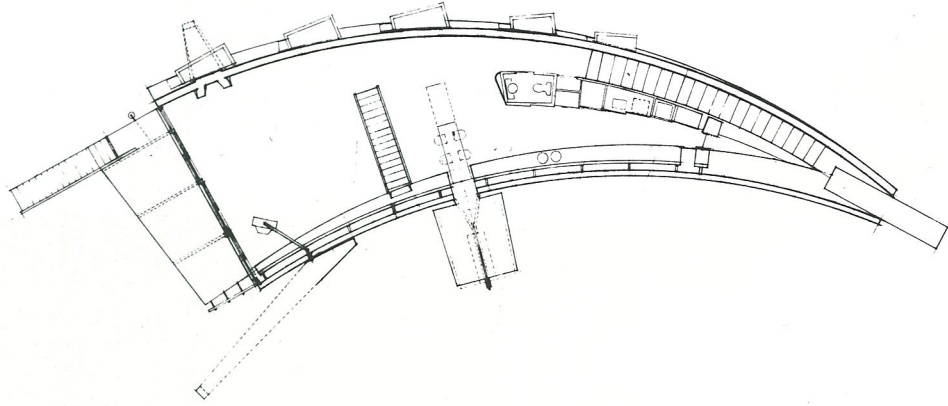
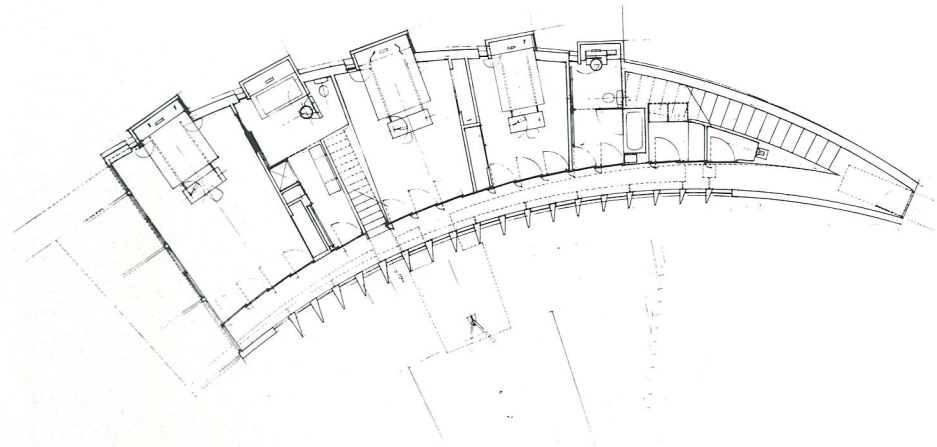
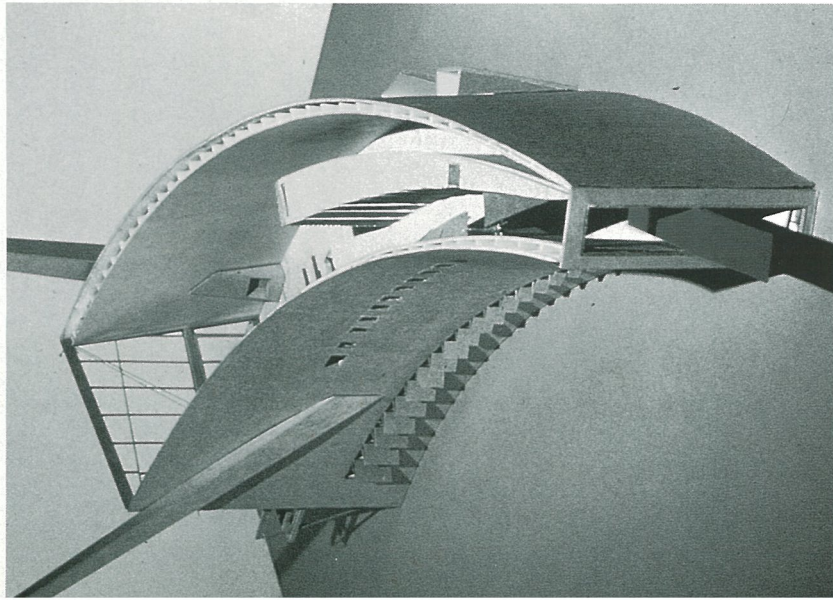
Elisabeth Diller

If video technology offers infinite destinations without the expenditure of movement, the paradox of going without leaving, then tourism reverses the logic – a sophisticated technology, with invisible hardware, that produces the paradox of leaving without going – transporting the body anywhere while atomising the home everywhere. The ultimate home, however, is where the trip must be authenticated. The tourist's accountability of the authentic experience resides in the snapshot, an irreducible piece of portable evidence of the sight having been seen. The camera is the ultimate authenticating agent, one point in the nexus between tourism and vision.

Elisabeth Diller

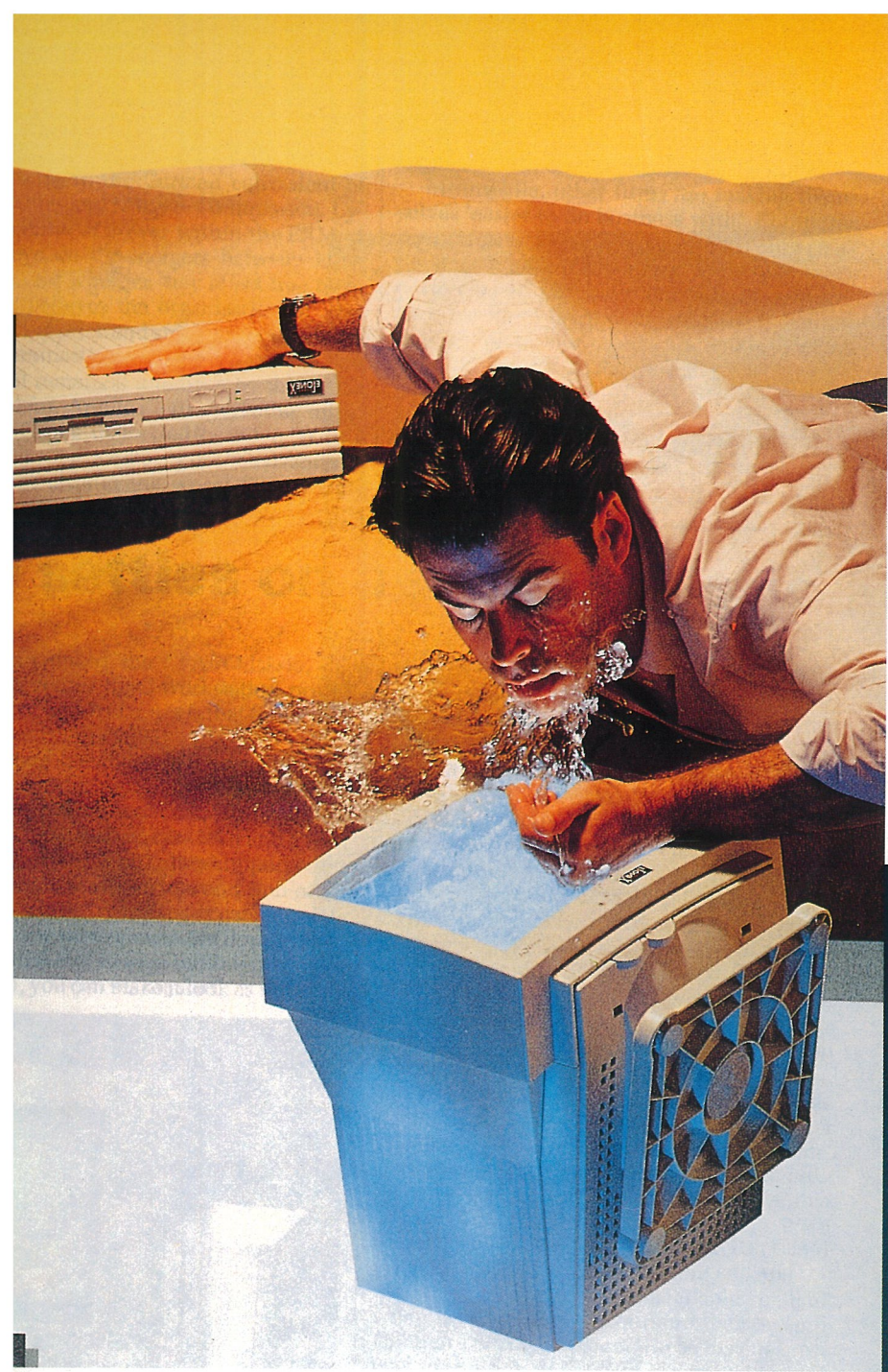
And I am in pursuit of a conclusion.

Elisabeth Diller

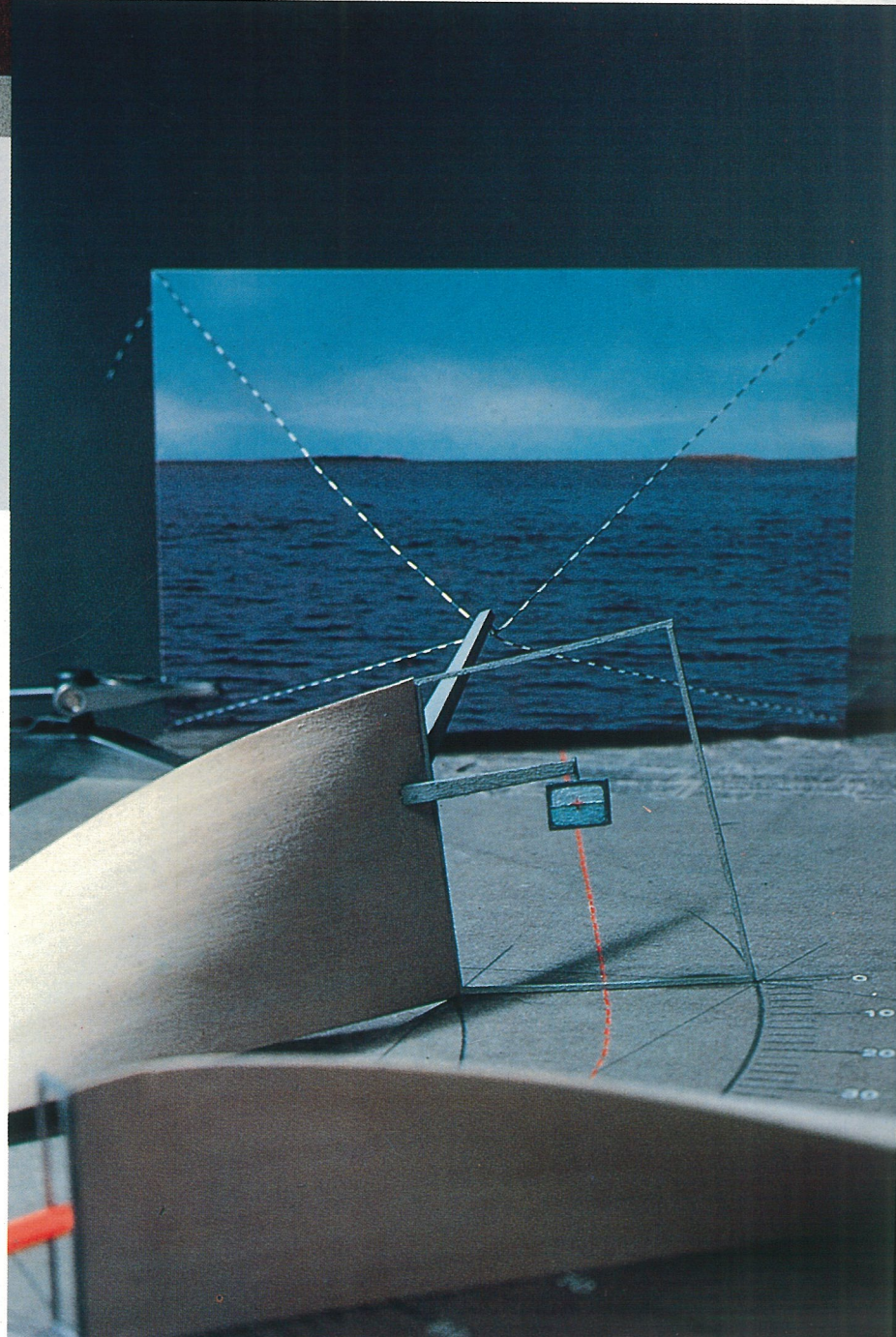


The Slow House is a vacation house currently under construction in a resort community near New York. For the vacation house, 'view' is the object of desire. The ocean view, in particular, is the most highly valued commodity; 'view' at its most reductive and most dramatic. In the unobstructed view to the horizon, vision is only limited by the frame of the 'picture window' and the falling away of the earth's curvature. It is precisely because there is nothing to see but the edge of the earth, that the observer's concurrent feelings of mastery and feebleness are evoked. The Slow House is conceived as a 'decelerating' passage to the view. Specifically, it is a door to a window, physical entry to optical departure. The passage through the house is anti-perspectival, the axis of vision is bent. The only direct view is withheld until the last moment. The fireplace and television, both domestic icons, create a

split focus around the picture window. Broadcast television can be switched to a closed circuit system in order to receive input from a video camera, mounted at a height of 40 feet and directed at the water view. The T.V. monitor, cantilevered before the actual view, offers an alternate picture window. The lamination of the two images of the view produces a disturbance, the horizon line will always be discontinuous. The view may be recorded and deferred. Day may be played back at night, fair weather played back in foul. The view is also portable; it can be transmitted to different locations in the house. The Slow House can be understood as a complex instrument of vision, employing mechanisms of desire and denial. 'Nature' and 'artifice', normally thought to be oppositional, are put into a fluid exchange. *Elisabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio*



Advertisement for Elonex, Personal Computers, 1999



Barbara Kruger, Untitled, installation, Columbus, Ohio, 1990

