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Derrida's garden

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Eleanor Morgan

"Derrida's Garden"

In 1985, Jacques Derrida was writing an essay on Plato's theory of the cosmos when he received a phone call from Bernard Tschumi. He invited Derrida to collaborate with the architect Peter Eisenman on a garden design for his Parc de la Villette project in Paris. This collaboration would attempt to combine the two creative spaces of writing and architecture - creating a unity of theory and practice. The problem was to find a common ground. As a possible source of inspiration, Derrida offered Eisenman his interrupted essay on Plato.

Plato offers the first written argument for the binary structure of the universe.¹ He divides it into two parts: the intelligible and the sensible. The former signifies the world of ideas, those that are governed by reason, while the 'sensible' represents the material and changeable world that is created. Plato believes that the world of ideas contains the original moulds of all 'matter'. The 'sensible' or material state is therefore an inferior copy of the 'intelligible'. But Plato finds that he needed a third term, a word to symbolize the space in which the ideal becomes visualized. He names this in-between area *chora*, Greek for "space" or "site". He defines it as a "receptacle of becoming": a site for creation, which everything passes through, but in which nothing is retained. Yet, with its very introduction Plato poses a huge problem. If *chora* lies outside the two states of the universe then how is it to be defined? It is outside description and language, outside the binary, and as such it must remain unrepresentable. Derrida writes that *chora* is: "irreducible to all the values to which we are accustomed – values of origin, anthropomorphism, and so on..."² So, *chora* comes from nowhere; it has no beginning, no essence, no nature. *Chora* is essential to Plato's theory of creation, while at the same time refuting that model. It undermines what have been the two fundamental concepts of western philosophy: the sensible and the intelligible. Plato's binary order contains and relies on its own disruption.

Derrida and Eisenman choose the indescribable *chora* as a theme for the garden. Eisenman believes that the in-between state of *chora* will tie in well with his own attempts to challenge the dominance of "presence" in architecture. He wants to create spaces in which presence and absence work together equally, against a traditional hierarchy that equates "presence" with solidity and "absence" with void. *Chora* as a

refuter of binaries seems an ideal theme for the collaboration of two men who attempt to disrupt western philosophical and architectural traditions.

The problem becomes how to represent the unrepresentable. They begin on a process of layering in which one site will be allegorically read through another. There will be three stages to their work: Derrida's interrupted essay on Plato, Eisenman's reaction to Derrida's essay and a previous building design that Eisenman created in Venice which echoes the grid pattern of the Parc de la Villette. It is hoped that this layering will rid the garden of any notion of origin or single authorship. Like *chora*, it will have no beginning. However, they worry that visitors to the garden may need some guidance as to its meaning. So, the first decision they make is that there should be an explanatory text accompanying the site. The second point they agree on is the title of the work, *Choral Works*, with its play on the word *chora* and in reference to the belief that their collaboration is like music. Textually, then, the project is moving successfully. The only problem is to translate this theory into practice, as the following exchange between Derrida, Eisenman and his colleague Thomas Leeser exemplifies:

Eisenman: Great, now we have everything – we have you, me, a story, a title

Derrida: It remains to do the work

Leeser: The work is missing³

As the meetings progress, “Matter” continues to get in the way of “Ideas”. Eisenman points out, “No matter how much we say, ‘this is *chora*’ we don’t want the visitors to feel, ‘no, it’s not, it’s a table’.”⁴ To evoke *chora* in the garden they decide to create a palimpsest, in which visitors will create and erase traces of their movement through the garden, therefore conveying both absence and presence. Eisenman proposes to build a quarry from which visitors will pick up rocks and carry them to another part of the site. Derrida queries whether it would be possible to force people to do this; he is concerned that the project might come to resemble a miniature golf course. Confusion between the two men develops as Derrida asks if Eisenman is being “concrete” (as opposed to speaking abstractly) to which Eisenman answers, “Yes, concrete” in the belief that Derrida is asking what material he will use to build the garden. The roles of Derrida the theorist and Eisenman the architect become blurred. Eisenman becomes excited by the possibility that he can make people walk backwards while they think they are walking forwards, while Derrida is more concerned with the number of handrails and fire safety. As Derrida says at one point: “Peter, I would suggest something. In this association, it

is as if you were the dreamer and I were the architect, the technician. So you are the theoretician and I am thinking all the time of the practical consequences.”⁵

The collaboration continued for two years, but the garden never materialized. In the end the design was six times over budget and no compromise could be met. The only evidence that now remains of this project is in the form of a book published in 1997. Entitled *Chora L Works* it contains transcripts of discussions, drawings, letter and essays, including an unfinished draft of Derrida’s interrupted essay on *chora*, which later became “Khora” in *On the Name* (1995). Indeed, Serge Goldberg the president of Parc de la Villette committee said at the time, “I do not think that they intend to build a garden...all they want is to publish a book.”⁶

It seems that Plato’s division between the “ideal” and the “sensible” pervades the project, with the “sensible” still positioned in its subordinate state. For Derrida, architecture is exactly the kind of western totality that he is challenging, a “fixedness”, similar to the totality of the book, which he describes as, “profoundly alien to the sense of writing.”⁷ He is a slightly detached figure in the discussions, continuously pointing out his incompetence in architecture. This is a wise stance to take, as he is able to distance himself from a project that will ultimately move against his theoretical beliefs while elevating his position as theorist. He later says of the project: “I was resistant to architecture, while at the same time hoping, no doubt, to be more of an architect than Peter.”⁸ Eisenman admits to being slightly in awe of Derrida, excited by the theoretical process that he hopes will ultimately challenge traditional architectural forms. The problem is that both understand solidity in a different way. Eisenman believes that a theoretical challenge to binaries can shift the fixed state of material forms and understanding. He wants to create a new idea of the “sensible” from the “intelligible” by weaving between the binaries. Derrida understands forms in a more practical way. Eisenman says of his collaborator, “He wants architecture to stand still and be what he assumes it appropriately should be in order that philosophy can be free to move and speculate [...] he said things to me that filled me with horror: ‘How can it be a garden without plants?’, ‘Where are the trees?’, ‘Where are the benches for people to sit on?’ This is what philosophers want, they want to know where the benches are.”⁹ He is amazed by Derrida’s “architectural conservatism.” For Eisenman, then, the material is something that can be shifted in relation to theory, while Derrida understands materiality as a fixed form around which ideas can move. The distinction between Eisenman’s and Derrida’s idea of the object becomes clear when Derrida is asked to design for the final

part of the garden a monument without referent, similar to the slab of stone in Stanley Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey*. Derrida draws a sieve (one of the metaphors that Plato uses to describe *chora*) much to the distress of the architects who are hoping for a less literal representation.

However the object that most distinctly captures this disjuncture between theory and practice is the book itself. As part of the book's design nine one centimetre squared holes have been stamped through the middle. The only page to be left untouched is the index. Otherwise all the transcripts, essays and drawings have been made incomplete. Apart from making the book very difficult to read, this design attempts to reflect the ideas that are contained within the object - the holes convey both presence and absence, evoking *chora* through a "mark of erasure." The reader must use his or her knowledge of language to complete a word, sentence or meaning that has been removed. As such, the boundary between reader and writer is blurred. We must fill in the gaps ourselves. For example, a transcript of Derrida speaking is written on page 170: 'As soon as something like deconst ... become ... urce of I ... acy, we ... egin to ... truct it. Of course, I know that this happens, and not only in architect ... institutio ... tions an ... tions of t ... ught mak ... nevable.' However, in my copy of the book some clues have been left. Three of the squares are not quite stamped through – they are hanging on to their holes by a thread. The material takes over; I become aware of the process of object production – imagining a factory floor with a huge pile of stamped out paper squares and a machine that didn't quite do its job. This all adds to the slightly farcical air of the transcripts: by fixing the spoken word in writing even an offhand remark becomes set in stone. Derrida admits to being slightly embarrassed at the thought of these discussions being published. There is a sense of foolishness, then, running through the project. However, although the project fails to create a garden, it absolutely succeeds in conveying the foolishness of trying to represent the unrepresentable.

Bernard Tschumi writes that he conceived of the Parc de la Villette as "a grid of follies." It would seem that the two men achieve this better perhaps than any garden could, precisely because they attempt to bring together theory and practice. The problem of the garden collaboration was not that it was attempting something foolish, but that neither man admitted the foolishness. In the movement between theory and practice, between binary divisions, there is a gap of understanding and representation, which cannot be crossed without a jarring effect. Roland Barthes states in "Barthes to the Third Power" that in the moment before he writes he is stupid: "what first comes to mind is stupid."¹⁰

Stupidity is perhaps part of this movement between the idea and the sensible – between thinking and making. In order not to be paralysed by fear, Barthes attempts to exorcise his own stupidity by mimicking it. In this way, he admits his own stupidity while distancing himself – making an ironic representation to distract from his “real” stupidity. If the sensible is subordinate to the idea, it asserts its power through the dumb object – waiting to trip us up. In this sense, stupidity is not the same as ignorance, it is not simply the opposite of knowledge but steps out of the system entirely – it has no interest in or relation to knowledge. Yet its threat to knowledge is limitless and this is perhaps why it holds such fear for Barthes, whose only option is to invite stupidity to the table to be exorcised. Within the order of the intelligible and the sensible, *chora* acts as the central disrupter that the binary division denies. *Chora* doesn’t look like anything, it doesn’t resemble anything, but if it did, it would look a lot like stupidity.

¹ Described in the *Timeaus*, trans. H.D.P. Lee (London: Harmondsworth, 1965), 66-70.

² Jacques Derrida and Peter Eisenman, *Chora L Works*, ed. Jeffrey Kipnis and Thomas Leiser (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1997), 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 73

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48

⁶ *Ibid.*, 125

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 18. Cited by Jeffrey Kipnis in *Chora L Works*, 146.

⁸ Derrida and Eisenman, 166.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 139

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, “Barthes to the Third Power” in *On Signs* ed. Marshall Blonsky (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 189.