Several of our faculty have incorporated feminist pedagogy promoted by scholars like bell hooks. They have replaced the frameworks of "competition" and "authorship" in the classroom with a collective, collaborative, and mutually supportive approach to the creation of knowledge. This model encourages students to take responsibility for questioning course objectives and rubrics through probing discussion and collaborative design of projects. With this, faculty and students disrupt the traditional pedagogical paradigm in which the professor is the disseminator of knowledge, and the students are its consumers. The classroom, instead, is a site of collective production. The teacher is not all-knowing, but a seeker him or herself. They teach not a stock of canonic information but techniques for crafting research questions and the best methods for finding answers. The goal here is to disrupt the vision of architecture as a single-authored building, delivered complete to a client. Instead, we promote the notion of an architect as a participant in a process that includes collective envisioning of program, building, and different modes of contributing to the process of making.

Poaching and borrowing critical research methods from many disciplines such as ethnography, history, art, and geography destabilize the Eurocentric frameworks within which they have originated. European thought has established the architect as an expert and professional, producing a very narrow and provisional canon. It has done so by delegitimizing diverse ways of creating meaning, relationships, and values found in underrepresented communities in the discipline. The body of knowledge and self-criticality of these different disciplines enable our colleagues and students to bring the same ethos to the studio and its focus on the building. They provide a critical lens for framing new questions that drive the work in studio, technology, and professional practice classes. They refine our sensibilities by pointing to the disconnect between the aspirations of service and activist based architecture and the skills and methods aimed at serving corporate practice.

Since the 19th century, architecture has been formalized into a discipline through institutions of higher education and processes of licensure. It has attached itself to the conception of the "professional"

in order to carve out a narrow territory for its members within the building industry. As it has modernized, it has slowly reduced professional know-how to technocratic forms of knowledge. At our School, we are working to also subvert this model. We have done so in a number of ways, but most conspicuously through revisioning our approach to community engagement, that has been a longstanding value of the School. Our new concept of community engagement recasts the architect as an apprentice, learning from the communities, rather than descending on them as an expert. This mindset asks that students/architects-in-the-making, be humble, and think of themselves as facilitators. They become eager to educate themselves about different ways of being in the world, making space, authorship, and spatial agency. They learn with Henri Lefebvre that architect is one spatial producer among many. All these efforts are designed to undercut the closures of western theories of knowledge and professionalism. With this, our students are reminded that our current systems are historically constructed; and history by definition is subject to change, questioning, revision, and subversion.▪

ENDNOTES

1. Bell Hooks, Julie Eizenberg, and Hank Koning. "House, 20 June 1994." *Assemblage*, no. 24 (1994): 22-23.

TURNING THE MASTER'S HOUSE AGAINST ITSELF

MICHAEL ABRAHAMSON

UNMAKING ARCHITECTURE?

A subverting action requires something be subverted. In this issue of *Dialectic*, the twin targets of our subversion are the architectural education system and professional practice of architecture.

Why might the discipline and profession of architecture be in need of subverting? Because, in short, we have proven, time and again, unwilling to confront our complicity in and perpetuation of contemporary environmental and social problems. We have been unable to meet such problems with anything more than a modicum of superficial transformation: in response to climate catastrophe we've provided self-congratulatory checklists; in response to demands for inclusion, diversity, and equity we've presented tokenistic gestures with little to no structural impact. Above all, the discipline and profession of architecture are in need of subverting because of our unmatched ability to naturalize the present order of things.

To encourage subverting actions as educators, we must emphasize the contingency, malleability, and impermanence of our inherited systems and institutions. Our students must clearly understand that both the profession and the discipline, despite their apparent resistance to change, are susceptible to subverting actions. To encourage subverting actions as practitioners, we might work to unmake the norms of authorial heroism and the conventions of hierarchical subordination.

The contributions to this issue have been divided into three sections. In part one, the articles address unexpected examples of everyday architecture while proposing ways of distilling lessons and applying those lessons in scholarship and in design. In their analysis of the pedagogies of fieldwork in the Milwaukee-based

Field School program, Seung-youp Lee and Chelsea Wait propose that through direct engagement with everyday buildings and the general public, architecture students can come to understand their societal function differently. In an ethnographic commentary featuring scenographic drawings of the Héliport housing complex in Brussels, Belgium, Claire Bosmans proposes new ways of doing architectural research that document and interpret the everyday tactics of appropriation undertaken by building occupants. In her article, Ashley Bigham subverts the format of a classic manifesto to offer an alternative formula for architectural form-making based on her ongoing studies of Eastern European shopping bazaars.

The articles in part two offer critiques of the tendency to instrumentalize architectural knowledge, particularly in its indigenous forms. James Miller and Eric Nay address the use of the term "The Rights of Nature" in contemporary architecture, arguing that while it could be used as a lever to pry open our understanding of the relation between humans and their environment, it instead too often serves as a justification for suppressing indigenous knowledge and beliefs. In an interview discussing his complex, hybrid drawings, Chris Cornelius outlines the way he understands the relationships between history, design, and research.

Finally, the articles in part three question fundamental architectural concepts in a direct and confrontational way. Annelies De Smet asks, through her lyrical collages and writing, to what extent architecture's practice and pedagogy depend upon a normative definition of the user or building occupant, while proposing strategies for unmaking this norm. And in this issue's final essay, Colin Ripley constructs a theory of subversion, atop the foundations provided by queer literary icon Jean Genet, questioning our concepts of ground, property, and propriety along the way.

To introduce such a diverse selection of approaches and aesthetics, we must also put a finer point on what we mean when we say *subverting*. A meager historical genealogy for such "subverting" might include the avant-garde artists and architects who worked to overturn cultural and political consensus through radical works and actions. But overturning the canon requires identifying alternative exemplars. Where else might one look for subversive examples to follow?

We should instead follow less-trod avenues, tracing the paths of those whose resistance to the strictures of contemporary architecture led them to other realms, taking what they learned with them as they went. In addition to "alternative practices"—which, under late capitalism, are typically forced to merely seek out alternative modes of income rather than developing alternative modes of ownership or means of production—we might also look for pathfinders who deploy time-tested techniques of subversion in new realms and in new ways.

VIRGIL IN THE HOUSE OF MIES

The contemporary art and design polymath Virgil Abloh traces his creative genesis to a skyscraper project he completed while a student at the Illinois Institute of Technology's architecture school, which he titled "Subverting the Norm." The project itself was nothing extraordinary, a bent and twisted box, but as Abloh explains, this work and its title emblematized a struggle between his fascination with the seemingly open, creative potential of design and the rigorous, professionalized strictures of the discipline:

> Architecture school for me was a conundrum. It started out with a sort of leveling of the playing field. On day 1, they began by beating us down, saying that only 11 percent of students who get a degree in architecture will actually practice architecture. What was interesting to me about that was that I went to architecture school not to be an architect, but to learn about design. So it wasn't going to be a kind of "coming to reality" lesson, but instead a lesson in making my reality come true.[1]

Abloh, we might say, *subverted* this so-called lesson by turning it against itself. So what, he seems to ask, if architecture students don't practice architecture? The message Abloh took was not that architecture requires discipline, commitment, and sacrifice (which must have been what his instructors intended in a school whose legitimacy still rested upon the long shadow of its dogmatic former director Ludwig Mies van der Rohe), but rather that "reality" is never an inevitability. His instructors' peremptory first lesson in "coming to reality" tells us little about how to understand the fact that an African American architecture student from suburban Rockford, Illinois might use what he learned when leading the menswear department at the fashion house of Louis Vuitton. "We're all investigating reality," Abloh has said, "to achieve some ultimate goal, which might be the pursuit of absolute life, or reordering the coincidences of the world so that they make sense."[2] By what outcomes should we judge the effectiveness of an architectural education?

This exceptional story isn't used here as an allegory for interdisciplinarity, entrepreneurial bootstrapping, or to suggest that everyone should chase membership in the globetrotting "design" elite Abloh inhabits. But Abloh's strategy is undeniably subversive: to inject a streetwear aesthetic—subjected to architectural discipline and tinged with conceptualism—into the heart of *haute couture* fashion.

On the contrary, subverting mustn't be understood as a mere synonym for the corporate catchphrase "disruptive innovation," or for capitalism's imperative toward "creative destruction," both of which suggest cyclical (or even circular) processes through which growth and profit are maintained. Subverting retains nefarious connotations that disruption and innovation have shed through association with the perceived heroism of entrepreneurial thought leaders.[3] A truly subverting action does not simply redirect or reformulate in order to promote further expansion. It must instead overturn conventions and expectations with the aim of delegitimizing them. Subverting actions, one might say, are a means that do not prescribe a desired end—they are primarily gestures of unmaking.

Figure 1: Virgil Abloh photographed by Richard Anderson for *KALEIDOSCOPE* magazine at Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (Plano, Illinois, 1948-51), wearing a vest he designed for Louis Vuitton and a version of the iconic Air Force One sneakers he designed for Nike.
Courtesy: Richard Anderson, by permission of Virgil Abloh and *KALEIDOSCOPE* magazine.

IRONY AND INCLUSIVITY

Does Abloh's rise to the highest echelons of *haute couture* represent a co-optation of an otherwise subversive streetwear, aesthetic by what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer famously called "the culture industry"? Perhaps. As Marxist and feminist critics never tire of reminding us, society's institutions are powerful enough to co-opt subverting actions and, thereby, avoid undergoing transformation. All too often it is the critique that's transformed rather than its target. Characteristically, Marshall Berman wrote that:

> Bourgeois society, through its insatiable drive for destruction and development, and its need to satisfy the insatiable needs it creates, inevitably produces radical ideas and movements that aim to destroy it. But its very capacity for development enables it to negate its own inner negations: to nourish itself and thrive on opposition, to become stronger amid pressure and crisis than it could ever be in peace, to transform enmity into intimacy and attackers into inadvertent allies.[4]

To avoid this trap, subverting must mean something other than trying to use "the master's tools to dismantle the master's house" (to borrow Audre Lorde's famous architectural metaphor).[5] A subverting action must instead turn the master's house against itself. We might say this is embodied in one of Abloh's most common tactics—placing everything in quotation marks—which is intended to reveal the contingency and constructedness of trademarks, brand names, and "artwork" alike. These quotation marks cue the viewer to consider the context that surrounds the work—what Abloh calls the work's "halo." And, Abloh believes, the more reciprocal the relationship between a work and

its "halo," the better. Both context and content can and should be designed.[6]

The stylistic content of much of Abloh's work (such as his canted skyscraper produced at IIT) is easily copied, and this is intentional, as his near-universal use of all-caps Helvetica Bold reveals. Value isn't inherent to his generic objects but is instead built through the exchange of images in a contemporary, social media-conscious parody of Marx's commodity fetishism. Abloh's work and its designed "halo" accelerate this basic capitalist conceit to the point of absurd irony. The brazenness of this subversive parody is what distinguishes Abloh from other contemporary designers and artists.

This approach need not result in a "minor" or elitist practice; it can also be inclusive and populist. Abloh, for example, tries to appeal to two constituencies in his work: the tourist and the purist. Whereas the purist (a connoisseur, in other words) may have extensive knowledge of the history and context surrounding a work, a tourist may situate it within a different, more personal history and context. Appealing to both requires pulling at the "sharp distinctions," such as the distinction between streetwear and *haute couture*, or Architecture and buildings that, as Adorno and Horkheimer observed, "do not so much reflect real differences as assist in the classification, organization, and identification of consumers."[7]

Indeed, despite his appeal to broader constituencies, the problem with Abloh's approach may be his conscious perpetuation of narratives of exclusivity and luxury, and the propping up of a personal design signature as the embodiment of these narratives. A more generous reading might interpret this inhabitation of the Houses of Mies and Vuitton as an example of what Michel de Certeau called *la perruque*: a subtle kind of sabotage in which one uses company time to make one's individual creative voice more visible.[8]

THE PERSONALITY TRAP

Well-founded educational systems and professional practices, like those of architecture, are supremely adept at transforming subversive critique into an engine of profit and progress. A familiar example of this process is the discipline's piecemeal adoption of

that most canonical critique of modernist architecture, *Learning from Las Vegas*. In this case, the all-too-enthusiastic embrace of Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steve Izenour's *aesthetic* critique among architects who had grown bored with the "less is more" ethic of modernism effaced the authors' equally powerful *political* critique of architecture's elitism. Countering the professional ideal of individual artistic authorship and the academic ideal of canonical exemplars, Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour offered a collaborative, conversational working method and a "nonjudgmental" perspective on everyday architecture. These aspects of their critique were sidelined, as a new aesthetic of combinatory historical reference and an arguably even greater lauding of *Fountainhead*-style artistic heroism took hold. Postmodern architecture proved to be just as elitist as its antecedent.[9]

Revisiting and highlighting this subversive theme within such a canonical book is worthwhile because we are still dealing with its consequences. The authorial conventions of originality and autonomy remain pervasive, despite the increasingly disingenuous nature of claims to individual authorship due to ever-more-intensive modes of project delivery and design. Postmodernism's individualist form of aesthetic pluralism was and is a "skittishly stylish" practice which, in the words of critic Craig Owens, requires cultural actors like artists and architects to "simulate schizophrenia as a mimetic defense against increasingly contradictory demands—on the one hand, to be as innovative and original as possible; on the other, to conform to established norms and conventions."[10]

Owens's observation raises an important question: To turn a system of norms, conventions, or laws against itself, must one first master that system? Perhaps not, as evidenced by the political and pedagogical culture of our present moment, when norms have been subject to rapid erosion by forces with little regard for what came before. Subverting influences seem omnipresent today, and they are no less impactful because of their often-willful ignorance or naiveté.

How, then, might one avoid co-optation by the object of one's subverting action? One strategy might be to forcefully distinguish project from personality in one of two ways: to exaggerate the "simulated schizophrenia"

of postmodern practice into a caricature personifying subversion, or to assert the primacy of ideas and actions over individual identities. For the former, Abloh's generically innovative work and his mastery of contemporary communication media serve as a perfect example. For the latter, we might once again learn from the example of Venturi and Scott Brown. Presciently, Venturi wrote in a "Note on Authorship and Attribution" preceding the first edition of *Learning from Las Vegas*:

> I feel the role of the prima donna culture hero even in its modern form as prima donna anticulture antihero is a late Romantic theme as obsolete for the architect and for the complex interdependencies of architectural practice today as is the "heroic and original" building for architecture. An architect strong on his own feet does not need this illusory support at the expense of other architects. As a firm, we look best when we stand as we are, a group of strong individuals who share enthusiasms and work well together, not as a pyramid with the figurehead of an Architect at the top.[11]

Though this biting critique proves that Venturi and Scott Brown were openly disparaging of the "star system," they were ultimately unable to escape its pull as a tool for marketing their practice, and to add insult to injury, Scott Brown was often passed over for the awards and accolades that flowed to Venturi because of his privileged positionality as a man. Unfortunately, the discipline and profession are still wrestling with their misogynistic foundations, even as compensatory gestures cascade toward Scott Brown.

On the one hand, the struggle for today's architectural subversives remains how to avoid co-optation by the market for professional services. But on the other hand, perhaps we need contemporary models of subverting that are more in touch with our contemporary conditions of labor, media, exchange, and value. Learning from Abloh's balanced attentiveness to content and context, tourist and purist, offers one possible way forward. We hope that the articles in this issue of *Dialectic* offer a menu of further strategies and tactics. ▪

ENDNOTES

1. Quoted in Michael Darling, ed., *Virgil Abloh: Figures of Speech* (New York: Prestel, 2019), Book 3: Archives, unpaginated. Presumably the "11 percent" that Abloh's instructor cited was actually the number of graduates who would go on to become registered architects.

2. Jack Self, "Dissolving Power: Virgil Abloh in Conversation with Jack Self," *Real Review*, no. 8 (Spring 2019): 48.

3. For a recent critique of the widespread use of these particular words and phrases in contemporary business culture, see John Patrick Leary, *Keywords — The New Language of Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 65–69; 114–19; 170–72.

4. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 118–19.

5. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," [1981] in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 2007), 110–114. Lorde employed this metaphor as a critique of the latent race and class discrimination within the second-wave Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. She felt that the movement would always fall short of truly liberating women unless it first overcame its persistent tendency to amplify only the voices of economically privileged white women.

6. Self, "Dissolving Power," 46.

7. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," [1944], translated by Edmund Jephcott, in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, eds., *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 43.

8. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984), 24–28.

9. A classic exposé on this aspect of Postmodern architecture is: Suzanne Stephens, "The Fountainhead Syndrome: The Skyline's the Limit, Says Suzanne Stephens, When Architects Build Reputations on a Foundation of Ego," *Vanity Fair*, April 1, 1984.

10. Craig Owens, quoted in Hal Foster, "Against Populism," in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1985), 214, note 11. "Skittishly stylish" is Foster's phrase (18).

11. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1972), xii.