
The First Kiss

“The basic concept was not to try to destroy or be provocative to the architecture, but to melt in. As if I would kiss Taniguchi. Mmmmm,” (said with closed eyes and elaborate flourish, a bright yellow down vest, and a heavy Swiss accent).² This is how Pipilotti Rist described her installation in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art titled *Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)*—a multichannel immersive video, twenty-five feet high, that wrapped the museum’s traditional white walls with a softly psychedelic garden of Eden populated with a prelapsarian Eve, apples, and animalism (fig. 1). The installation also included pink curtains and a gigantic, soft gray, doughnut-shaped pouf, black in the center so it would look like a pupil from above, where scores of people jostled for comfy spots, blanketed by the oozing, pinkish soundtrack playing *animato*.



1. Pipilotti Rist, *Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)*, 2008. Multichannel audio video installation. The Museum of Modern Art, New York



Rist was not, of course, talking about actually kissing Yoshio Taniguchi, the architect of the museum. Taniguchi was long gone by the time she entered the scene, as was Barnett Newman's largely phallic broken obelisk that initially punctuated the center of the atrium. Rather, Rist was describing how her work would come into temporary contact with Taniguchi's, how her moving images would brush up against his still volume, how her shifting colors would apply moist pressure to his white walls, how sound-filled nipples would bud from his flatness, and how this "big room," 7,354 cubic meters of uselessness devoted to ritualized transcendence, would get filled up by sensuous bodies pouring in and out (fig. 2).

She was speaking with the voice of a non-architect about how a new medium (I call it *superarchitecture*) and a new sensibility—postfeminist certainly, but more acutely one of intense affect—could simply and with devastating generosity slip itself on and over the old medium of architecture and its even older sensibilities of authority and autonomous intellection, thereby enveloping the increasingly archaic figure of the architect in an entirely new cultural project. Her remarks offer a starting point for reconsidering disciplinarity, expertise, and medium specificity in architecture today, because her affective yet alien embrace marks a regime change that is happening with neither the confronta-

tion or violence prescribed by the avant-garde nor the endless accommodations of new practice, but through the gesture of a sweetly gentle and yet thoroughly overpowering kiss.

A kiss has been many things in many places (fig. 3). In the seventeenth century, Martin von Kempe wrote more than a thousand pages on kissing. But even von Kempe could never have imagined that kissing would serve as a theory of architecture. The kiss offers to architecture, a field that in its traditional forms has been committed to permanence and mastery, not merely the obvious allure of sensuality but also a set of qualities that architecture has long resisted: ephemerality and consilience. However long or short, however socially constrained or erotically desiring, a kiss is the coming together of two similar but not identical surfaces, surfaces that soften, flex, and deform when in contact, a performance of temporary singularities, a union of bedazzling convergence and identification during which separation is inconceivable yet inevitable. Kissing confounds the division between two bodies, temporarily creating new definitions of threshold that operate through suction and slippage rather than delimitation and boundary. A kiss puts form into slow and stretchy motion, loosening form's fixity and relaxing its gestalt unities. Kissing performs topological inversions, renders geometry fluid, relies on the atec-



2. Pipilotti Rist, *Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)*, 2008. Multichannel audio video installation. The Museum of Modern Art, New York







3. Tino Sehgal, *The Kiss*, performed in 2009. Guggenheim Museum, New York

tonic structural prowess of the tongue, and updates the metric of time. Kissing is a lovely way to describe a contemporary architectural performance.

Kissing is also a gentle way to say goodbye to an old architectural drama in which architecture is inevitably cast as a tragic figure, sometimes victim sometimes villain but always closer to failure than to success. While architecture's sense of disciplinary inferiority ultimately derives from the antique pyramid of expression that placed language and poetry at its lofty apex and building down amid the mud and toil of the ground, architecture's Sisyphean effort to achieve elevation only became more futile with the development of modern capitalism on the one hand (to which architecture is inevitably attached) and avant-garde strategies of opposition on the other (to which architecture is attached not inevitably but by desire). Architecture's original sin was that it could not tell stories in the manner of poetry and painting, although it has certainly tried, offering up such gestures of atonement as *architecture parlante* and postmodernism. Abstraction solved that problem, because by at least the nineteenth century, painting and all the typically figurative and narrative forms, from graphic design to the novel, were no longer interested in telling stories, and therefore the promise of parity between architecture and the other arts seemed almost in reach. But the very abstraction that made it possible for painting to define itself no longer in terms of the lit-

eral content of its images also made it possible for capital to seemingly float free from the literal labor of its production—capital that most obviously, more obviously than in painting, was needed by architects to build. Different mediums understood and exploited the apparent freedom of this world (which Marxism called the *superstructure*) in different ways, but for architecture this fantasy freedom became just another source of envy and a new form of cultural privilege—the glorious stance of the rejecting, angry avant-gardist in need of nothing but a paintbrush—to which it did not have access. Consider this irony: abstract expressionism is historically coincident with the invention of corporate architecture.

One important strain in contemporary architectural discourse is defined by the net result of these convergent histories of capital and culture. Today the discipline is crippled by a futile debate between those who hold that architecture has failed to establish autonomy and those who contend that architecture has failed to develop adequate means of engagement. During the past thirty years, some have even argued that architecture's most important social role is to reveal and repeat this symptomatic hopelessness. As a result, the field has generated a plethora of responses to this double bind, referred to variously as postmodernism, deconstruction, or the neo-avant-garde, that have in common the pursuit of devices for admitting, articulating,



4. Andy Warhol, *Kiss*.
Still. © 2011 The Andy
Warhol Foundation for
the Visual Arts, Inc./
Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York

describing, mapping, and representing architecture's cultural paralysis. Today, I would say at last, this disciplinary Tourette's syndrome, where suddenly and even in the face of tremendous productivity architecture still blurts out a sense of shame, is starting to be understood as self-imposed and more likely to prolong paralysis than move the discipline further. It is precisely release from architecture's suspended state of repeated mea culpas that kissing offers.

Andy Warhol once wryly remarked, "Two people kissing always look like fish" (fig. 4). Now, however much Elmo the Muppet loved his pet goldfish, fish are not generally known for returning such affection. To turn kissers into fish is therefore to call into question not only the romantic tradition of the kiss as expression of love but of the kiss as expression of *any* traditional set of emotions. Warhol's comment does not eliminate the force of kissing, as he ascribes to it an utterly transforming capacity—it takes a lot of something to turn a person into a fish—but it does interrupt the chain of signification into which kissing is historically locked. "Two people kissing always look like fish" makes it possible to argue that kissing does not a priori signify a particular set of emotions but rather produces sensation and affect that are subsequently named a posteriori and variously by culture, language, and disciplines.

Warhol's comment had to be about fish. First, fish are cold-blooded and therefore a good species to use to

evacuate feeling from flirting. Second, fish do not have faces. Sometimes, they even have both eyes on one side of their heads. It's hard to feel dreamy looking at a flounder staring at you from two adjacent globules, and a far cry from looking longingly at the big-eyed, small-nosed, pouty-lipped visage of, say, an overly cathected Disney rodent. Kissing cold-blooded fish not only divorces the kiss from traditional notions of emotion, love, and death, but kissing gets in the way even of the language and apparatus we use when we do want to express such emotions. No one can speak when kissing. Kissing is distorting and obstructing to the mouth. In short, kissing interrupts how faces and facades communicate, substituting affect and force for representation and meaning.

If fish don't love you, they don't hate you either. Fish are not like the traditional psychoanalytic mother, of which it is said that there are two kinds, critical scolders and idealizing kissers. Even if alienating and deforming, kissing cannot be critical. A critical kiss is a bite, not a kiss. And kissers, whether or not they like each other, inevitably lack the separation needed for critical distance and opposition. Kissing fish are also not like the Lacanian mother through whose gaze the infant's uncoordinated body becomes a legible face, because kissing aborts the regime of faciality in toto. In the middle of a kiss, there is inadequate space for any of the things that are needed for a face to appear as a face, and

certainly no room for the mother's detached gaze to give the infant autonomy. Bringing architecture and kissing together is therefore not only to reconsider architecture's relation to other mediums but to think beyond prevailing models of the critical. Because architecture has served long and well as a model of failure, disaster, and complicity, it now really deserves a kiss, needs to kiss, needs a theory of kissing.

Before losing ourselves further in kissing, I would like to consider for a moment why Rist would ever kiss Taniguchi in the first place and what it means, if anything, that this kiss took place at MoMA (figs. 5 and 6). The Museum of Modern Art has long considered itself to be the very home of good architectural design. It remains the institution of record for architecture, using its exhibits and collections to constitute itself as the standard bearer of value and importance, not only in the United States but for Europe as well. In other words, what happens at MoMA does not stay at MoMA but rather aspires to the status of disciplinarity as such. Yet MoMA has consistently betrayed its obligation to architecture by constructing a series of buildings that is each more boring than the last. By the 1980s, the difference between the exhibited architecture of deconstruction (1988, the apex of the critical turn) and the built architecture of Cesar Pelli's mall-like addition (1984, the apex of capitalist capitulation) was stupefying. The most recent failure—Taniguchi's 1997 addition—was

5. Barnett Newman,
Broken Obelisk,
1963–69. MoMA
Gallery Second Floor,
Public Space, winter
2005. © 2011 The
Barnett Newman
Foundation, New York/
Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York



an expected but no less disappointing confirmation of MoMA's historic commitment to distinguishing (and benefiting from the contrast) between the progressive architecture displayed in the museum and the unspeakably banal architecture of the museum.

And yet banality is an integral part of why and how Rist's kiss operated architecturally. *Pour Your Body Out* inserted an intensely affective environment into an



architectural volume that itself was nothing, barely even rising to the occasion of the generic or white box with a few windows punched out to remind you that you are located in the center of the world, the common if parochial view of New York. Instead, the architecture of MoMA (and all architecture for which MoMA is not a scapegoat but a stand-in) is merely what you bump up against when you back up to see some art, with neither

6. Pipilotti Rist, *Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)*, 2008. Multichannel audio video installation (video still). The Museum of Modern Art, New York

an inside nor outside, neither utopian nor existential, but rather perfectly and intentionally insipid. In fact, MoMA's architectural banality is the key means by which the museum has attempted to maintain its commitment to the modernist, or, in Clement Greenberg's terms, the avant-garde project. For Greenberg, the proof that the spirit of modernity was present was revealed when the viewer's response to an object was purely and laboriously cognitive without affect.³ All experience of intensity or immediacy betrayed, he thought, the presence of emotion that risked overcoming intellection and therefore risked turning art into kitsch. Insisting that architecture maintain such a profound lack of character without even the hint of any feeling is not a lack of position or an accidental design flaw but rather a commitment to a once progressive but now painfully outmoded position struggling to maintain its faded hegemony. What was once radical abstraction in pursuit of universality and utopia is today just banal accommodation in pursuit of free corporate expansion.

The behavior of MoMA visitors immediately reveals this transformation. A continuous movement of people, goods, and images ties the museum together. The trajectory begins in the street, where most visitors' time is spent waiting in a slow-moving line. After money has been paid and each person has squeezed through the narrow turnstile, a space that seems generous by comparison invites visitors to move more quickly up the

stairs, through the atrium, which we now know has 7,354 cubic meters of space, to the once again more controlled upward motion of the escalator. When they finally arrive in a gallery, the pace picks up even further. No one can actually stop to look for long. There are always others behind you, jostling you forward so they can keep up with the speed of their prerecorded itinerary murmuring into their headphoned ears. Even those following their own itinerary do not stop for long, because the exhibition spaces are only weakly distinguished from the non-space of circulation. As in an airport, the intrinsically peripatetic museumgoer is, in the Taniguchi addition, rendered as a potential obstacle that needs to be constantly moved along. The final descent and channeling of the herd into the artfully designed store, where versions of objects glimpsed along the ride can be found for sale, is just one more in a chain of peripherally perceived attractions.

MoMA is characterized by a consistency of movement and distracted forms of attention that equate the experience of being in line to buy a ticket at the beginning of a visit or a postcard at the end with looking at a work of art, or moving on an escalator. This equalization is by no means unique to MoMA. Rather, the choreography describes a well-known collective and inescapable performance that collapses the opposition between kitsch (characterized for Greenberg by commerce, desire, and immediacy) and the avant-garde

(characterized for Greenberg by the slow pace and focus of intellection). Less understood is what this collapse produces: an index of the flow of affect and its effects on behavior. In this case, the logic of the museum that separates the aesthetic and the commercial realms is undercut not just by the capital that operates in both, but by unleashing acquisitive desire in the store as a means of compensating for the “don’t touch” distance demanded in the galleries. Increasingly, museums offer mere foreplay, creating excited visitors who can only consummate their aesthetic experiences elsewhere. The museum is an affect-producing machine, an ideal mechanism for a culture that contains, as Brian Massumi has argued, an excess of affect but a lack of places to put it and even less vocabulary to describe it.⁴

By kissing Taniguchi, Rist provided a first step in developing a new vocabulary for the character of contemporary culture, because their kiss was utterly impersonal: it did not involve their bodies, it described no feelings of love, and yet it generated disciplinary intimacy and material closeness. The visitor to *Pour Your Body Out* could perceive the heat of entanglement but could not read a love story. Their kiss produced experience, but no narrative of that experience. Our capacity to understand the aesthetic, particularly the range of the aesthetic that is housed at MoMA, is still rooted in Greenberg’s belief that art comes into being at the very

moment when experience is superseded by intellection. In order to launch what was first written as an argument against fascism and its appeal to unreflective sentimentality, Greenberg had to go so far as not only associating but even equating affect as such, the apprehension of experience, with personal feelings shaped by and therefore susceptible to symbolism, language, and other forms of cultural predeterminations. Thus for Greenberg *all* affect was kitsch.

Greenberg, however, belonged to an era still dominated by Kantian notions of the disinterested viewer. For Kant, an aesthetic response was characterized by detachment. To react to a representation of grapes with feelings of hunger or other sensations of interest in the fruit was to obliterate the aesthetic dimension. Today, on the other hand, we need the aesthetic to produce new experiences rather than to evacuate them and more forms of interestedness rather than less. If, thinking along more Deleuzian lines, we avoid assumptions about natural or causal links between sensation and feeling, we can explore more broadly what it feels like to kiss or to cry. When we cry it is said and assumed that we feel sad, whereas we may feel myriad other and perhaps unnamable things. Today, affect should be defined as the internalization of perception and not as feelings overdetermined by cultural codes. We no longer need to equate detachment and distance with intellection and abstraction nor feeling with crude sentimentality,

and so we can return to experience with new theoretical vigor. Rist's kiss was neither a shock to the architectural system in the tradition predicated on the detachment of the critical avant-garde, nor a reinforcement of the distinction between architectural abstraction and kitsch, but a vivid moment—the pulsating pink swerve itself—of intense affect in the otherwise opiated milieu of MoMA.