Towards Architectural Estrangement: Here and Now

Shirley Chen

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her exhibition statement for a hypothetical museum exhibit, Shirley prepares her readers to encounter exicon terms visually and spatially. She provides her audience with **orienting** information on architectural estrangement, with clear **motivating** questions to guide audience members' experience of the exhibited objects, with **evidence** in the form of the objects themselves, and with suggested routes of **analysis** in the way those objects are displayed in the exhibition space. Overall, Shirley's exhibition invites hypothetical museum-goers to join a **scholarly conversation** on architectural estrangement and to find their own **argument** in the exhibited objects.*

Excerpt

Estrangement or *ostranenie* was first coined by Victor Shklovsky as a central concept of Russian formalism. It was introduced to architecture as a device to make works of architecture strange. Modernist architectural estrangement relies on the horror-giving effect of novelty, rupture and disjunction. Tafuri, for instance, analyzes the technique of shock at the foundation of architectural reasoning through Piranesi's *Campo Marzio*.[1] Massimo Scolari, on the other hand, describes the "laconic astonishment" induced by Aldo Rossi's architecture.[2] However, the shock effect of modern estrangement is confronted by the 'waning of affect' of postmodernism.[3] Fredric Jameson describes the waning of affect as the end of unique and personal styles which corresponds to a sense of "depthlessness" in contemporary art, exemplified by Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*. [4] Instead of the psychic experiences of anxiety and alienation, postmodern subjects are characterized with "free-floating and impersonal" feelings.[5]

This exhibition thus invites viewers to examine contemporary architectural estrangement under the waning of affects. By displaying the artifacts and texts by four architecture offices, the exhibition asks: can architectural estrangement operate after the waning of affect? How does it respond to the changing technological and cultural landscape of the digital era? Moreover, where does the contemporary practice of estrangement locate itself, in relation to its historical references? Coupling each artifact of estrangement with the architects' own

writings, the exhibition further invites viewers to investigate the tension between textual and spatial practices in architecture today.

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In response to the waning of affect and contemporary culture of digital excess, architectural estrangement today adopts different strategies from modernist shock. Instead of novel, distinctive and violent, contemporary estrangement is sneaky, subtle and almost correct. By instrumentalizing objects that are "slightly off", this new class of estrangement evokes a sense of the uncanny among its viewers. Freud defines the uncanny as "a class of frightening" which leads to what is known and familiar.[6] It is "nothing new or alien", but something "old-established in the mind" that has become alienated through repression.[7] Vidler further describes uncanny architecture to be "disquieting for the absolute normality of the setting" with an "absence of overt terror".[8]

This notion of frightening unfamiliarity of something evidently familiar is to be found in the exhibited projects. From default building conventions, generic roof typologies, ordinary material conditions to traditional furniture styles, these projects bring to light the strangeness of something utterly ordinary. Take Bonner's *Domestic Hats* as an example. Its Boolean operations highlight the exhaustive hybridizations of different roof typologies in real-life constructions.[9] Estrangement, in this case, unveils the oddity of reality which has escaped our attention.

The uncanny presents specific links to domestic architecture. Freud articulates this correlation through a study of the word's etymological root, *heimlich*, which can roughly be translated as homely.[10] *Heimlich* possesses two sets of meanings: one suggests what belongs to the house or the family, thus intimate and benevolent; the other, what is concealed from sight, suggesting unforeseeable danger.[11] Uncanny, or *Unheimlich*, thus contrasts the first meaning of *heimlich* while being identical to the second.[12] Vidler extends this etymological association through discussions of the "implicit horror of the domestic"[13] produced by the ruins of Pompeii. The uncanniness of domestic scenes is often expressed through the revelation of something homely and cozy as its opposite, which can be found in several exhibited objects. For instance, the Wrong Chairs suggests the Windsor chair's forgotten history as a symbol of colonial America beyond being a forgettable piece of furniture one often sees in grandma's kitchen.[14] Rather than the misaligned, invented half of the chair, the uncanniness lies in the original, unaltered half.

Seeing one's double or repeating objects also produces a sense of uncanny, which Freud vividly captures in his experience getting lost in an Italian provincial town as well as being

confused by his mirror image on a train.[15] This uncanniness of replicas is explored by Young & Ayata's *Wall Reveal* through multiple variations of the same corner condition.

From unfamiliarity of the familiar to the uncanniness of doubles, estrangement that incites feelings of the uncanny requires a second look. Presenting resemblances rather than distinctions at first sight, the "offness" of these objects results in an initial state of confusion. Upon a curious second look, viewers are struck with a moment of revelation. The experience of something "not quite right" thus breaks the illusion of a seamless reality and reveals its internal incoherence. However, these strategies of camouflage have their limitations. As a reaction to the waning of affect through digitization, estrangement today is still subject to the leveling effects of postmodern aesthetics. When the "offness" wears off, will the uncanny disintegrate into indifference and the estranged become refamiliarized?

By showcasing previously exhibited artifacts and published texts, this exhibition foregrounds dilemmas of contemporary architectural estrangement through re-examination and new hypotheses. Remarking on the shifting nature of what is familiar and what is strange, it invites viewers to reflect upon the relationship between architectural estrangement and its present-day contexts. As a curated conversation between estranged objects and viewing subjects, this exhibition asks questions rather than provides answers, in hope of contributing to a better understanding of the current status of architectural estrangement.

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[1] Tafuri, "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology," 18.

[2] Scolari, "The New Architecture and the Avant-Garde," 143.

[3] Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,"64.

[4] Jameson, 58-60.

[5] Jameson, 64.

[6] Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'", 219.

[7] Freud, 240.

[8] Vidler, "The Architecture of the Uncanny: The Unhomely Houses of the Romantic Sublime," 8.

[9] Bonner, Jennifer Bonner: Just Roofs, Architecture League Prize Video.

[10] Freud, 221-222.

[11] Freud, 222-224.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Vidler, 18.

[14] Norman and Kelley, "Wrong Chairs,"188.

[15] Freud, 236, 247.

Author Commentary

Shirley Chen

The theme of this paper emerges from my undergraduate architecture thesis, through which I examined Victor Shklovsky's concept of estrangement or *ostranenie* as a technique in architecture. The project resulted in building a "curiosity cabinet", which is filled with "souvenirs" of everyday lived space as opposed to the iconic architecture depicted by conventional souvenirs such as snow globes and postcards.

For Professor Stan Allen's seminar, we were invited to curate a thematic architectural exhibition on a topic of our choice. Each student was asked to design an exhibition and write an exhibition statement. I decided to take on the subject of estrangement again to examine a few contemporary architectural practices I had been interested in. For my first draft, I was able to analyze strategies of estrangement in each individual work of the exhibition, but had a hard time defining a shared characteristic among all the artifacts. Professor Allen encouraged me to look into Fredric Jameson's writing on the 'waning of affect' and advised me to frame estrangement through its contemporary dilemma with a new conceptual lens, rather than suggesting a return to modernist approaches to estrangement. His suggestions led me to Freud's writing on 'the uncanny', which I happened to have read in Professor Brigid Doherty and Professor Spyros Papapetros's class on empathy and alienation during the same semester. I was able to locate paragraphs that were relevant to my investigation of estrangement. Once I restructured the focus of this paper, I found various connections between the two concepts and came to define the uncanniness of something "slightly off" as a key quality of contemporary estrangement.

Writing an exhibition statement as a final paper is definitely a new experience for me. This format allows an unconventional process for me to think simultaneously about space, images and text. In a way, the juxtaposition of text and images/artifacts is not only proposed for the speculated exhibition, but also manifests in my own process of writing an exhibition statement and preparing visual materials of the exhibition. As an architecture student, I am used to producing images to communicate architectural ideas. When I imagined myself to be a curator putting forth an exhibition that reframes critical topics of the discipline, however, I realized the curatorial statement and exhibited contents needed to speak to each other in organic ways. I worked back and forth between the two mediums, often re-editing the images after I wrote new paragraphs, or restructuring my arguments after coming up with new visual representations. While the statement frames the context and vision of the show, the exhibited

objects allow the audience to formulate their own understandings of the exhibition, which could be different from the exhibition statement.

Moreover, an exhibition statement, as a form of writing, also imagines a different audience from traditional academic papers. Rather than presupposing an audience with preexisting knowledge of the ongoing dialogues within architecture, I expect the audience to be a mix of "insiders" and "outsiders". Therefore, I incorporated more detailed analysis of each artifact in my discussion so that someone who was less familiar with estrangement or architecture could also follow along. As I drafted the statement, I was constantly thinking about ways to engage the public that would visit the exhibition and confront these artifacts of estrangement. How do I invite them to investigate estrangement through the exhibition statement and the exhibited objects? How can I present the initial intentions of the architects while asking the audience to critically reflect on their narratives? Ultimately, my approach was to frame a set of questions rather than providing any definitive answers. The intent of the show is not to "educate" the public, but to invite them into an ongoing conversation, whose observations may offer insights for architects and theorists about the current status of architectural estrangement.

Editor Commentary

Meigan Clark

Oftentimes in academic writing, we focus on the importance of answering questions and solving problems. We've all been taught how crucial a strong **thesis** and clear **argument** are to writing a good paper. But an equally important element of academic writing is clearly articulating the questions to be asked and the problems posed — in other words, the paper's **motive**(s).

In her exhibition statement for an imagined architecture exhibit, Shirley prepares hypothetical museum-goers for the works they will encounter through her strong establishment of **motive**. While the written portion of her exhibition does not have an argumentative **thesis** of the type we might expect in a traditional academic paper, it paves the way for other lexicon terms — such as **argument**, **evidence**, and **analysis** — to be represented visually and spatially in the exhibition itself.

Shirley begins her exhibition statement much like a traditional academic paper: by **orienting** her audience to the **scholarly conversation** surrounding her topic and the **motivating questions** that inform her exhibit. Shirley first provides historical context on the emergence of estrangement in architecture. She succinctly summarizes the **scholarly conversation** on modernist architectural estrangement, citing the scholarship of Tafuri and Scolari. Shirley next introduces the **scholarly motive** of her exhibition, explaining how the "waning of affect" — a term coined by postmodernist scholar Frederic Jameson — presents a challenge to the vision of architectural estrangement offered by scholars such as Tafuri and Scolari. It is this tension between a modernist conception of architectural estrangement and its present-day permutations that Shirley's exhibit seeks to address.

And yet, Shirley's exhibition statement does not immediately provide answers to the tension she has identified. Shirley's statement of the exhibit's purpose begins much like the magic **thesis** statement. She explains that the exhibition "invites viewers to examine contemporary architectural estrangement under the waning of affect ... By displaying the artifacts and texts by four architecture offices." Thus Shirley's "**argument**" — insofar as she has one — lies not in the exhibition statement but in the exhibition itself, through the objects she has chosen and the way in which she has chosen to display them. We might think of the architectural artifacts as the "**evidence**" of Shirley's exhibit, and the visual and spatial choices she has made in presenting them to the public as her exhibit's implicit **analysis** and **argument**.

Rather than an argumentative **thesis**, her exhibition statement provides readers/viewers with a series of questions that will guide their experience of the exhibited objects and help them to draw their own conclusions. She begins with questions expressing her **scholarly** and **global motives**: "can architectural estrangement operate after the waning of affects? How does it respond to the changing technological and cultural landscape of the digital era? Moreover, where does the contemporary practice of estrangement locate itself, in relation to its historical references?"

Shirley goes on to articulate her in-text or **evidence-based motive**, "the tension between textual and spatial practices in architecture today." Shirley expresses this tension not only verbally, in her exhibition statement, but visually, by "coupling each artifact of estrangement with the architects' own writings" in the exhibition itself. If we look at Shirley's exhibition plan, we can see how she has spatially represented her in-text motive by displaying architectural objects alongside projections of each architect's writings.

Although her exhibition statement may not have a traditional **argument**, Shirley does intervene in the **scholarly conversation** by providing a lens through which the exhibited objects could be viewed and better understood. In response to the tension between modernist understandings of architectural estrangement and the postmodern "waning of affect," Shirley introduces Freud's concept of the "uncanny" (*unheimlich*). She suggests that viewing these contemporary architectural artifacts as "uncanny" could help us to understand new strategies of architectural estrangement in the postmodern world.

In the final paragraph of her excerpt, Shirley describes her exhibit as "curated conversation between estranged objects and viewing subjects." In this way, Shirley's exhibit invites viewers to themselves participate in a **scholarly conversation**. Although Shirley gives her readers a suggested scholarly lens through which to view the objects, it is ultimately up to each museum-goer to perform their own "**analysis**" of the exhibited objects and to draw their own "**argument**" from the exhibition as a whole.

Works Cited

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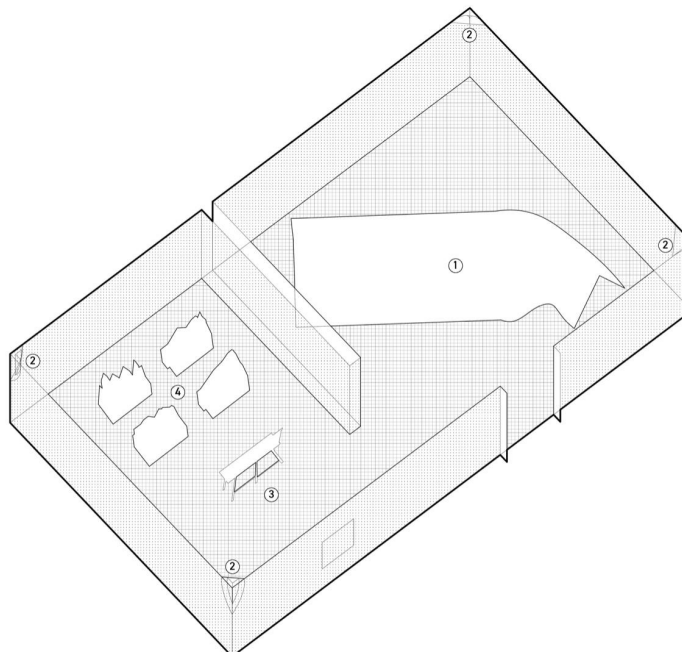
Appendix

EXHIBITION PLAN
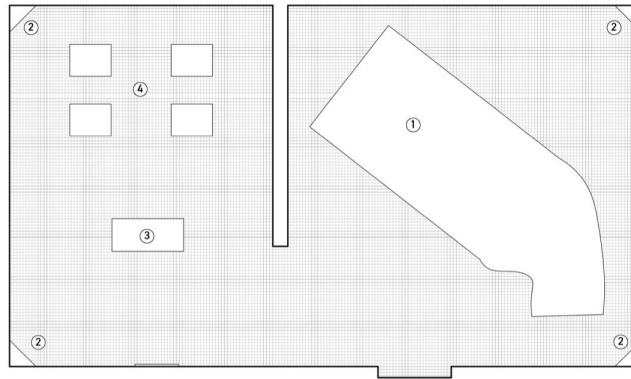
① Jason Payne, Raspberry Field   ② Young & Ayata, Wall Reveal   ③ Norman Kelley, Wrong Chairs   ④ Jennifer Bonner, Domestic Hats

Image produced by author

AXON VIEW OF THE GALLERY

① Jason Payne, Raspberry Field
② Young & Ayata, Wall Reveal
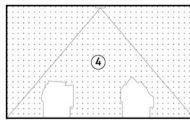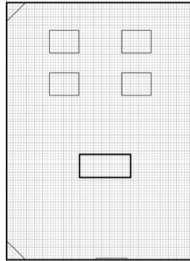③ Norman Kelley, Wrong Chairs
④ Jennifer Bonner, Domestic Hats
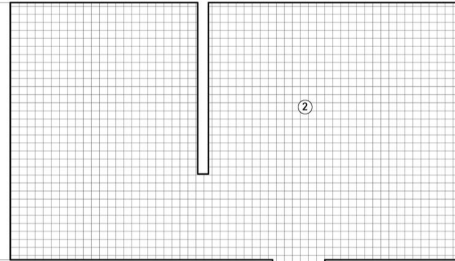
Image produced by author

TEXT AS TEXTURE

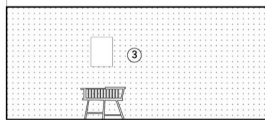**WALL ELEVATION,** TEXT AS PROJECTION ON MODEL

④

FLOOR PLAN, TEXT AS CARPET

①

CEILING PLAN, TEXT AS CEILING FINISH

②

WALL ELEVATION, TEXT AS WALLPAPER

③

① Jason Payne, "Hair and Makeup"

② Young & Ayata, "The Affects of Realism: Or the Estrangement of the Background"

③ Norman Kelley, "Wrong Chairs"

④ Jennifer Bonner, "Domestic Hats"

Image produced by author

JASON PAYNE / HIRSUTA
Raspberry Field + "Hair and Makeup"

ARTIFACT / MODEL:
Raspberry Fields
2011
1:1 Roof Prototype
First exhibited for "Rawhide: The New Shingle Style" at SCI-Arc

Image by Joshua White, from World Architecture News. "No Place to Hide."

TEXT:
Payne, Jason. "Hair and Makeup." Log, no. 17 (Fall 2009): 41–48.

Photo collage of Rasberry Field with "Hair and Makeup" printed on the floor by author.

YOUNG & AYATA
Wall Reveal + "The Affects of Realism: Or the Estrangement of the Background"

Photo collage of Wall Reveal with "The Affects of Realism: Or the Estrangement of the Background" mapped on the ceiling by author.

Young & Ayata (Michael Young and Kutan Ayata)
2016
Wall Reveal
Gypsum board, Lumber, Simpson joist hangers, 3D printed reveals

Image from http://www.young-ayata.com/wall-reveals

TEXT:
Young, Michael. "The Affects of Realism: Or the Estrangement of the Background." Architectural Design 86, no. 6 (November 2016): 58–65.

NORMAN KELLEY
Wrong Chairs + "Wrong Chairs"

Photo collage of Wrong Chairs with "Wrong Chairs" printed on the wall paper by author.

Norman Kelley (Carrie Norman and Thomas Kelley)
Two-Place Low-Back Settee
Wrong Chairs Collection
2013
Physical Prototype
H 31 5/16, W 47 1/8, D 20 ¼
Fabricated by Rives Rash, Rash, LLC.

Two-Place Low-Back Settee
Wrong Chairs Collection
2013
Front elevation modified by Norman Kelley from John Kassay, *The Book of Windsor Furniture:Styles and Technologies*

Image from https://www.mascontext.com/is-sues/23-ordinary-fall-14/wrong-chairs/

TEXT:
Norman, Carrie, and Thomas Kelley. "Wrong Chairs." MAS Context, no. 23 (Fall 2014): 188–99.

Jennifer BONNER / MALL
Domestic Hats + "Domestic Hats"

Photo collage of Domestic Hats with "Domestic Hats" projected on model from above, by author.

Jennifer Bonner / MALL
Domestic Hats Models
2014
First exhibited at The Goat Farm Arts Center, Atlanta

Image from https://www.mascontext.com/issues/23-ordinary-fall-14/domestic-hats/ , Domestic Hats models. © Courtesy Studio Bonner.

TEXT:
Bonner, Jennifer. "Domestic Hats." MAS Context, no. 23 (Fall 2014): 106–23.

Bios

Shirley (Dongwei) Chen, 2023 is a Post-Professional Master of Architecture student from Fuzhou, China. She received her undergraduate degree from Tulane University, New Orleans, LA. Shirley enjoys reading and ceramics, and she wrote this essay as a first-year M.Arch student.

Meigan Clark, 2022 is a Comparative Literature major and Theater certificate student from Middlebury, VT. When she's not analyzing literature or writing plays, she enjoys cooking, singing, hiking, and watching period pieces with friends. She wrote this as a senior.