Death and Dada: 
A Cemetery of the Mind
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Before I begin, I would like to make a preface to this book. This is not a thesis about building technology, nor is it about architectural details, nor urban design. Instead, it is an architec-tonic exploration of my perception of reality. Hence, there is no right. There is no wrong. But, there is reaction. Reaction is the core of understanding. Without reaction, one does not question. Without question, one does not learn.
"Man is a thirst for rationality yet he continually stumbles upon irrationality. He harbors in him a wild need for clarity and he is confronted with darkness and confusion. He wishes happiness or never brings life seldom or never brings happiness within his reach. The absurd is the conflict between human nostalgia for a reasonable order and the ubiquitous presence of the irrational." - Jean-Paul Sartre
DADA EXCITES EVERYTHING

DADA knows everything. DADA splits everything out.

BUT ......

HAS DADA EVER SPOKEN TO YOU?

about Italy
about accordions
about women's pants
about the fatherland
about sardines
about Fiume
about Art (you exaggerate my friend)
about gentleness
about D'Annunzio
what a horror
about heroism
about mustaches
about lewdness
about sleeping with Verlaine
about the ideal (it's nice)
about Massachusetts
about the past
about odors
about salads
about genius, about genius, about genius
about the eight-hour day
and about Parma violets

NEVER

DADA doesn't speak. DADA has no fixed idea. DADA doesn't catch flies.

THE MINISTRY IS OVERTURNED. BY WHOM?

BY DADA

The Futurist is dead. Of What? Of DADA

A young girl commits suicide. Because of What? DADA
The spirits are telephoned. Who invented it? DADA
Someone walks on your feet. It's DADA
If you have serious ideas about life,
If you make artistic discoveries
and if all of a sudden your head begins to crackle with laughter,
if you find all your ideas useless and ridiculous, know that

IT IS DADA BEGINNING TO SPEAK TO YOU
Dada is a hobby-horse in French.
Dada is extreme naïveté in German.
Dada is a derivation of the Slavonic affirmative.
Dada is die in Italian.
Dada is a hobb-horse in Russian.
Dada is a nurse in Romanian.
Dada is a mother in Italian.
Dada is the tail of a holy cow according to the Kru Negroes.

Dada is all of the above and none of the above. According to Tristan Tzara's manifesto Dada Means Nothing: "If you find it futile and don't want to waste your time on a word that means nothing... The first thought that comes to these people is bacteriological in character: to find its etymological, or at least it's historical or psychological origin."3

An important characteristic of Dada is the name itself. The inability to define it adds yet another dimension to what Crossman has described as "Dada's remarkable elusiveness."4 In his History of Dada, George Ribemont-Dessaignes stated, "It [Dada] means nothing, aims to mean nothing, and was adopted precisely because of its absence of meaning."5

The adoption of the name Dada, keeping within its own tradition, is filled with contradictions. Claims to authorship have divided the members into two factions waging "the battle of the Dada Grey-beards,"6 the main protagonists being Richard Huelsenbeck and Tristan Tzara. Huelsenbeck's version of the word's origin follows:

"The word Dada was accidentally discovered by [Hugo] Ball and myself in a German-French dictionary when we were looking for a stage name for Madame LeRoy, the singer in our cabaret."7

Acting as a true Dada would, Tzara spared no effort at making a force of the whole controversy. He summoned the help of Hans Arp to devise an elaborate but false affidavit professing Tzara's authorship of the word. The following was printed in Dada in 1921:

"I [Arp] hereby declare that Tristan Tzara found the word [Dada] on 8 February 1916, at six O'clock in the afternoon: I was present with my twelve children when Tzara for the first time uttered this word which filled us with justified enthusiasm. This occurred at the Café de la Terasse in Zurich and I was wearing a brioche in my left nostril. I am convinced that this word is of no importance and that only imbeciles and Spanish professors can take an interest in dates. What interests us is the Dada spirit and we were all Dada before Dada came into existence..."8

Adding another layer of confusion, Tzara, when authorizing permission for Marcel Duchamp to print the title New York Dada, gives yet another explanation:

"...in Switzerland I was in the company of friends and was hunting the dictionary for a word appropriate to the sonorities of all languages. Night was upon us when a green hand placed its ugliness on the page of Larousse - pointing very precisely to Dada - my choice was made. I lit a cigarette and drank a demi-tasse."9

As if determining the origin of the name is not complex enough, defining Dada is somewhat futile because the followers of Dada never claim-
ed [nor allowed themselves] to be an art movement. Therefore, the term Dadism was not used. Within that term was an -ism which connoted an organized group, a school of thought. Dada was the anti-thesis! 10 As Andre Breton stated in Two Dada Manifestoes:

"Cubism was a school of painting, futurism a political movement: DADA is a state of mind. To oppose one to the other reveals ignorance or bad faith." 11

The Dadas saw themselves not just as artists with a new point of view, but as people with a new view of life. Art was merely a means to an end. Ribemont-Dessaignes explained:

"What has been called the Dada movement was really a movement of the mind... aimed at the liberation of the individual from dogmas, formulas and laws, at the affirmation of the individual on the plane of the spiritual;... the movement liberated the individual from the mind itself, placing the genius in the same rank as the idiot." 12

Duchamp, too, perceived Dada as a form of escape:

"Dada...was a metaphysical attitude...a way to get out of a state of mind - to avoid being influenced by one's immediate environment, or by the past." 13

Concerning Dada as a philosophy, Breton summed it up best when he said, "Free-thinking in religion has no resemblance to a church. Dada is artistic freethinking."

Breton's analogy implies that the Dada's may have been artists, but that was no reason to delegate them as an art movement. 14

Isolating the Dadas even further from the established art world were the approaches to which their work was created. According to Hans Richter, chance was possibly "the central experience of Dada... Chance had opened up an important new dimension in art: the techniques of free association, fragmentary trains of thought, unexpected juxtapositions of words and sounds." 15 A primary example of how chance became integral to Dada thought is Hans Arp. On one occasion, Arp had just completed a pencil drawing which terribly distressed him, so much that he ripped the drawing into pieces and threw them to the floor. As he bent down to

clean his mess he was overcome by the design created on the floor. In fact, the drawing in pieces became the work of art. Giving into chance activity was Arp's solution:

"The law of chance, which embraces all other laws and is as unfathomable to us as the depths from which all life arises, can only be comprehended by complete surrender to the unconscious. I maintain that whoever submits to this law attains perfect life." 16

On an even more sophisticated level, Marcel Duchamp's "ready-mades" were probably the ultimate chance pieces. "Readymade" was the term Duchamp gave to common, mass-produced objects that he, indirectly, elevated to a status of art. At the time, they were intended neither as art nor anti-art, but merely as elements of shock value to the art world. These objects were handpicked by Duchamp in what appeared to be a totally arbitrary manner, but according to the artist, there was a rationale behind his selections. In a sense, he destroyed the status quo logic and established a logic of his own. 17
Aware of the limitations that logic placed on them, the Dadas faced it head on as Hans Richter noted:

"...we could not help involving our whole selves, including our conscious sense of order, so that, in spite of all of our anti-art polemics, we produced works of art. Chance could never be liberated from the presence of the conscious artist." 18

The chance and illogic of Dada cannot be fully comprehended without an insight into the conditions which helped bring them about. Emerging in neutral Switzerland, Dada was surrounded by the effects of World War I. In terms of the war, the Dadas saw society contradicting its positions on peace, morality, and logic in general. Therefore, they simply adopted the same type of illogic. 19 As Benjamin DeCasseres spoke earlier of irrationality:

"We should mock existence at each moment, mock ourselves, mock others, mock everything by the perpetual creation of fantastic and grotesque attitudes, gestures, and attributes.20

And that is exactly what they did! As Ribemont-Dessaignes historicized:

"The activity of Dada was a permanent revolt of the individual against art, against morality, against society. The means were manifestoes, poems, writings of various kinds, paintings, sculptures, exhibitions, and a few public demonstrations of a clearly subversive character.21

Another basis for the Dada irrationality was the recent emergence of Dr. Sigmund Freud's studies of irrationality and freeing oneself from the constraints of rational thought. The Dada artists were merely on the forefront of applying Freud's concepts in an art context. 22

Aside from adopting the irrationality of the war, Dada also adopted its destructive characteristics. For Dada, the goal of the destruction was art, not humanity. Hugo Ball even made the analogy: "Dada was the artistic equivalent of the war." 23 To the Dadas, art was symbolic of bourgeois culture and its values. Thus the only way to right art was to destroy it.24 Tzara has said that the origins of Dada "were not the beginnings of art, but of dis-

gust...the aim was to humiliate art, to put it in a subordinate place in the supreme movement measured only in terms of life." 25

This self-proclaimed nihilism ultimately came full circle, swallowing Dada up into its own contradiction: "...negate everything means negate Dada also..." 26 This conclusion paralleled Tristan Tzara's proclamation: "The true Dadas are against Dada." 27

With varying degrees of success, Dada achieved what it set out to do - open the eyes of the world. The ideology and activities of Dada have had immeasurable influence on twentieth-century art, literature, philosophy, and life.

But, has Dada had the same, if any, influence on architecture? The fundamental tenets of Dada are based on chance, irrationality, nihilism, and the absurd. When thinking of architecture, these characteristics are not the first that come to mind. According to Webster's New Collegete Dictionary, architecture is "the art of practice of designing and building structures, especially habitable ones, a formation or construction as...the result of a con-
scious act." 28 Juxtaposing this definition against George Lemaitre's statement that Dada signaled that "civilization was already in a state of total disintegration and decay." 29 A Dada architecture appears to be somewhat of a paradox! Does a Dada architecture exist? That question is what I hope to answer.

If I were to follow the Dada theorists, I would abort my quest before it even began. Stewart Knight states:

"They [Dada and Surrealism] pose questions regarding what, if anything, one can now mean by 'creativity.' Their theoretical disposition and its results pose further questions, and of course the implied criticism of 'heroic modernism' in architecture even in the period in which it was being created. One might add they announced the final and in many ways irreversible break between art and architecture." 30

In reference to Hegel's and Nietzsche's predictions of the dissolution of art, Knight responds:

"The dissolution of art and later architecture, and the emergence of 'subjective skills' appear particularly from the 1850's onwards as a result of many factors. Among these the clear establishment of the forces of production - industrial, economic and intellectual - transformed not only the object of production but also the nature of artistic production." 31

The Dada disposition toward architecture was most eloquently rendered in the opening lines of Jean Arp's poem, "The Elephant style versus the Bidet Style":

Rational architecture was repressed aesthetics. Shattered, the porcelain bidets, the glass tables, the nickel chairs cover the rude floor of reality. The fog that is man resists to be put in a corner. Reason, that ugly war, has fallen off man. Logical nonsense. On the ruins of rational architecture, elephant-style, et cetera. The last architects are sitting on pedestals with mummy faces. Vigorous ornementalists benevolently feed them pills of nourishing, fortifying, and irrational art. 32

As was stated earlier, Dada had no clear organized school of thought. It was more of a college of similar fragmented ideas. I believe that the same would hold true for architecture. Therefore, I propose to approach the problem in the same manner. My intentions are to accumulate examples of architecture which embody previously explained characteristics of Dada. From this catalog of examples, I will attempt to organize patterns and/or similar ideas and document them. With this process, hopefully, sets of ideas, issues, or approaches toward architecture will be defined from a Dada perspective.

There is an inherent contradiction in this process-rationalizing the irrational. From the beginning, Dada was not intended to be understood, just experienced. It was a state of mind which "fundamentally described the means by which the industrialized world may be confronted." 33 Within this "attitude," there may not exist a Dada architecture in the same sense that there exists Dada literature. Pieces of architecture may become found Dada objects - found architecture. "Readymade" architecture, if you will.
But architecture is a rational act obtaining a product through the merger of science and art. It is a means by which man alters and, allegedly, improves his environment. Dada, however, would attack that position head on. Why must man improve his environment? Is he improving his environment? I feel that Dada would ultimately become a subversive architecture, one that destroys man's environment, or at least poses the question.

A larger issue we must confront is the validity of architecture itself. Is it doing what it should? Dada allows nothing to be above reproach, to which I wholeheartedly agree. The long range result of Dada has been a reaffirmation of art and the artworld. If the merging of Dada and architecture were to bring about the same results, I know we would benefit infinitely from a Dada architecture.
17 Coutts-Smith, pp. 55-59.
18 Richter, p. 59.
19 Coutts-Smith, pp. 2, 21.
20 Grossman, p. 38.
21 Motherwell, p. 102.
22 Coutts-Smith, pp. 31-35.
23 Grossman, p. 16.
24 Coutts-Smith, p. 23.
25 Coutts-Smith, pp. 21-22.
27 Grossman, p. xvi.
31 Stuart Knight, p. 102.
32 Stuart Knight, p. 101.
33 Stuart Knight, p. 102.
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Thesis Studio Goals and Expectations

To further explore and refine my design process.
To generate the ideals, the program, and the design of an architectural project and bring them together as an integral whole.
To explore my views on life and death.
To explore architecture as an art philosophy.
To explore Dada from an architectural viewpoint.
To explore the physiological effects of war.
To explore architecture related to nihilism.
To explore the relationship between the ephemeral nature of life and the permanence of architecture.
To explore architecture as a state of mind.
To explore architecture as a social statement.

Relevant architectural issues to be addressed by the thesis:

Architecture as a social issue
  dealing with life and death
  dealing with the transition between life and death
  dealing with war [nihilism]
  dealing with the rational and the irrational
  dealing with the rationalization of irrational acts [war]

Dada philosophy as architecture
  dealing with chance versus design
  dealing with nihilism [war]
  dealing with the unconscious and the conscious
  dealing with the rational and the irrational
The thesis statement:

Between life and death, there exists contradictions between reason and anti-reason, sense and nonsense, design and chance, and consciousness and unconsciousness.

Life and death are thought to be more or less black and white. Either you are living or you are dead. However, there must be a transition from life to death -- a gray zone. This zone or transition may take multiple forms. It may result naturally from biological cycles and biological forces. It may also result from manmade interference or obstruction, such as war, murder, or suicide. When life ends on the manner of the latter, the natural and rational life cycle has been disrupted. Life has come to an irrational, possibly chance, ending.

Society, in general, does not distinguish death between these two theories. It should though! Philosophically, it [society] rationalizes murder to the same degree as death by natural causes. Murder, however, is an irrational act! Society is contradicting itself. From the viewpoint of war, society even condones these irrational acts against life as a means to a much greater rational end -- a Dadaist contradiction!

Historically, architecture, especially funerary, has been man's eternal or enduring mark on the earth. Funerary architecture carries the dual responsibility of marking the earth and marking man's spirit. Therefore, I believe these demarcations should be true and representative. An irrational death preserved in a rational state is not true. But, society believes that all deaths should be expressed as passive, solemn, and rational. Another untruth.

Death, especially from war, may be violent, crude, and bold. Architecture should reflect these characteristics. As a medium for social comment, architecture has the right, if not the responsibility, to pass judgment, if you will, on war and its effects on life and the human environment.

The project I believe to be capable of exploring these issues is a cemetery for war fatalities. A cemetery with this type of "clientele" must decide whether it should maintain traditional/status quo burial norms or express, via architecture, critical examination of the means by which these deaths occurred. The best development, however, would be a synthesis of the two: to truly express the horrors of death in combat, but express them using society's double standards on war versus murder. Emphasizing these double standards would emphasize how immoral and irrational society has become but has yet to admit.

At the present, I have yet to devise a system for evaluating the success of my thesis. One approach, however, may be to look at how many of the previously stated issues are incorporated into the project and to what degree of development they were taken to. Most assuredly, a major factor for evaluating my thesis will be an evaluation of myself. Have I expanded my views and refined my design process? If the answer is "yes", then I think the thesis will be able to show it.

Note: A site selection has not been made yet.
"It all seems so stupid. It makes me want to give up, but why should I give up when it all seems so stupid."

Depeche Mode

In order to design a cemetery, one must obviously have a philosophy of life and death. I thought long and hard as to what that might be for me. As I continued to study Dada, my attitudes became more grounded. Life and everything associated with it are meaningless. Hence, death, too, is an absurd notion when placed in the context of a life without meaning. Why die? It does not really matter! To quote Warren Shifer's interpretation of Jean-Paul Sartre,

"Death is absurd because by being conscious and choosing certain concepts to explain with, we create our own notion of what death is — and that notion is nothing more than our creation. The concept of death tells me about nothing except myself. I am not free to die."

This passage denotes a key point. Life and death are paradoxical. One can be explained only in terms of what the other is. If you are alive, you are not dead and vice versa. Thus, a cemetery is only a representation of what we think death may or should be. We have no proof, no eyewitness accounts. We are dealing purely with subjectively. One approach to this dilemma of paradox is to design for both — a living cemetery! To quote the existentialist Heidegger,

"Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially. Death in the wildest sense, is a phenomenon of life."

Death is a phenomenon. How do you design for a phenomenon? Or do you?
Fly On the Windscreen - Final

Death is everywhere
There are flies on the windscreen
For a start
Reminding us
We could be torn apart
Tonight

Death is everywhere
There are lambs for the slaughter
Waiting to die
And I can sense
The hours slipping by
Tonight

Come here
Kiss me
Now
Come here
Kiss me
Now

Death is everywhere
The more I look
The more I see
The more I feel
A sense of urgency
Tonight

Come here
Touch me
Kiss me
Touch me
Now
Touch me
Touch me

There are flies on the windscreen
There are lambs for the slaughter
There are flies on the windscreen

Come here
Touch me
Kiss me
Touch me
Now
Touch me
Touch me

M.L.Gore/Depeche Mode
"Mankind has sought numerous solutions to the paradox that 'in life we are in the midst of death.'" - Unknown

Oddly enough, Existential and Dada philosophy parallel each other quite well. The existentialist's life without meaning compliments Dada's behavioral traits of irrationality, chance, and nihilism. To quote Shibles again,

"One often wants only to die for great causes and over important matters. But much of this is outside of one's control. One is to a large extent the subject of chance. It is a kind of absurdity to die for nothing at all or die from a fish bone. Of course, to die from a fish bone can show how really important fish bones are."

This quote exemplifies a Dada attitude toward life and death. It [death] could happen anytime and any way, but what does it matter.

With this absurdist attitude established, the next step was to interpret a cemetery within this framework. How do you do that? Big question. Quickly, I dismissed the idea of a traditional cemetery. I was looking for something more non-traditional, something much more ambiguous.

As I pondered this situation, I thought about what most cemeteries are. They are physical places in which we stow the dead physical remains of a person. Does that mean a person may only be dead physically. Cannot a person be dead emotionally or psychologically? Why not? In our society the mind can easily go before the body does. Therein, lies what I was searching for—a Cemetery of the Mind! A place that is too real, but all too ephemeral. A place that is totally individual and totally universal. Also a cemetery of the mind responds to my paradox of life and death. In this cemetery they are simultaneous. We are living and dying. Birth is white. Death is black. Everything in between is gray. Existence is a gray zone!

A cemetery of the mind questions many values and beliefs. One of them is reality. What is real? Is what we see, hear, and touch real? or is it a creation within our mind? Do we really die, or do we just create the scenario within our imagination? According to Shibles and Sartre, we create our own notion of what death is. This is exactly what I am doing.

How do you create a cemetery of the mind? It has no site. It has no context. It is what you make it. A problem I was repeatedly faced with was that it was becoming too real. By real, I mean that it was becoming too much of a physical place. It was becoming tangible. I did not want that. What I truly wanted was something that was locked up inside my mind and was only for me. Selfish? Maybe. But I would prefer to call it personal. Death is a rather personal thing. Whenever I tried to express it or share it with someone, it changed. It became compromised. Putting it into words or three dimensions made it something it was not. [Just as I am doing now!] It was an idea, and ideas are only pure in thought. This poses quite a problem. How then do I let others know what I am doing, or that I am doing anything at all? I have never faced this type of design problem. How do you design thoughts or feelings?
The initial attempt at designing this cemetery was through the development of a game. Briefly, the game became an absurdist representation of what life and death might be reduced to. The following are essays elaborating on this subject and the processes it involved.
What I will call "the four major principles of Dada" are overwhelmingly represented in board games: absurdity, chance, irrationality, and nihilism. Clearly, the most dominant of the four is the notion of chance. Almost every game involves chance one way or another. Nihilistic tendencies run a close second. In many games winning isn't enough. Destruction of the other players sweetens the taste of victory. In some instances, however, even victory is achieved only through destruction: self-destruction. Whoever can disassemble or destroy first wins the game. How's that for a paradox? Success through self-destruction.

Absurd: marked by an obvious lack of reason, common sense, proportion, or accord with accepted ideas: ridiculously unreasonable, unsound, or incongruous: self-contradictory: fallacious by reason of contradiction.

Chance: something that happens unpredictably without any discernable human intention or direction and in dissociation from any observable pattern, casual relation, natural necessity, or providential dispensation: the fortuitous or incalculable element in phenomenal existence.
Irrational: not endowed with reason: lacking powers of reasoning or understanding: lacking usual or normal mental clarity or coherence.

Nihilism: a viewpoint that all traditional values and beliefs are unfounded and that all existence is consequently senseless and useless: a denial of intrinsic meaning and value in life.
"We shall not have succeeded in demolishing everything unless we demolish the ruins as well. But the only way I can see of doing that is to use them to put up a lot of fine, well-designed buildings."
from "Ubu Enchained"
by Alfred Jarry

The goals of life and board games are mirror images of each other. The prime objective in life is to be successful. It doesn't really matter at what though. Likewise, a board game's prime objective is to win, to have the most [or least], to finish first, to be the best! Maybe this similarity forms a basis for the enormous popularity of board games throughout history. People have the opportunity to gamble, take chances, and live on the edge: everything that they have always wanted to do in reality but either couldn't or wouldn't.

Games draw an immeasurable line between reality. For the person too intimidated by the rules of reality, games provide the opportunity to rule the world, become a millionaire, or go to the head of the class. For the stereotypical "go better" of life though, games are merely practice matches for the real game - reality!
It appears that life begins and ends in similar fashion - an arbitrary fashion. Just as birth is ruled by chance, so is death. We are merely waiting out fate's lottery. When will I die? The only answer to this question is suicide. Drastic, but for those who must know, it tells the toll.

The influence of chance on our lives may be fashioned after an inverted bell curve, most influential at birth and death and least influential around midlife. This is not based on some absolute theory. [Nothing's absolute.] But from general observation it can be true for some of us. If this is the case, then what we're saying is that at middle age we're most in control of our lives. Are we? Or is it just a rationalized front for one's children and one's peers.
"We are all born but never asked." *We're just products of chance conception. Sure, we all say that our parents planned on having us, but it was still a matter of chance as to when we were conceived. From the point of conception to birth, a living being's existence is without any order or control - life in a void!

The act of birth places the new life in an ordered context, or does it? Was there a system which determines its sex? NO! It was just a case of genetic jeopardy. Is there a system now that places this new life into reality? NO! An endless series of chance determinations are thrust onto the newborn. Who are my parents? Where do I live? What will I do? What will I be? Will I be pretty? Que sera sera! Whatever will be will be, will be! The future's not ours to see. So, Que sera sera!

*Laurie Anderson - "United States I - IV"
From the moment that we are born, we begin the process of dying. Every day our body, ever so slowly, ages. How often have you heard the comment, "My! Look how old he/she is getting." This realization prompts the contemplation: Is birth the beginning of the end, or is death the end of the beginning? Does life have any relevance in this questioning? As long as we are living, we are simultaneously dying. A contradiction! How can we live and die at the same time? Does it hurt? Yes! It is probably the most excruciating pain that we ever experience. In fact, we constantly experience the pain up until death, when it subsides.

This pain has no physical symptoms. It resides entirely within the mind, slowly ticking away like a bomb. This pain takes the form of a tiny voice endlessly telling us that we are dying, and that some day we will be dead. Now, I ask you, what rational meaning does life have knowing that we are steadily becoming closer and closer to being lifeless? Is the purpose of birth to prepare for the experience of death?
Only saints and poets really live life. A similar quote is found in the play "Our Town." Ever since I read that line as a junior in high school, I've always been intrigued by it. If I were to take it at face value, then I'm not living life. Not living life!? Well then what am I doing? Living a charade? a joke? Is that it? Life's a joke and death is the punch line. Absurd, but oh so believable!

Back to the quote, I've wondered often whether poets and painters who became famous after their death felt like they lived their lives in vain. A life of poverty, a death of wealth. That's placing life and death in material terms, but isn't that how we usually view them. I could say that the painters and poets were fulfilled spiritually and emotionally, regardless of their acceptance, but that's romanticizing the whole issue. Life isn't romantic, only June brides are.
Death is a phenomenon of life. So much and yet so little is known about it. But that almost seems appropriate. To factalize a phenomenon is to negate it. Therefore, speculation or questioning should emphasize it. I want to emphasize, to people to come face to face with it. The way to do this is to ask questions, lots of questions, or maybe just one question – the question! What is death?

In order to ask this question, a framework must be established. That framework will be a game, a series of events to be wandered through confronting various issues of death. I'm not saying there will be an answer found at the end of the game [if it ends], not in the least. I am merely asking people to question their attitudes, beliefs, and values concerning death. That question happens to be a three-dimensional environment instead of a two-dimensional text like the one I am writing!
Life and death are absurdities. There exists no sound reasoning for explaining them. Each viewpoint of one contradicts the other. Life is thought to be an evolutionary process understood in terms of death. The only problem with that idea is that we cannot experience death; therefore, how do we qualify life in terms of a state which we cannot experience. Once we do, however, it becomes permanent. The same contradiction happens when death is qualified as the opposite of life. We don't know that it is and we cannot prove it is or is not.

"Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially. Death in the wildest sense is a phenomenon of life." Heidegger

Another example of paradox. Once again death references life for meaning. Granted, a phenomenon is itself unexplainable, but then to state that death is a phenomenon is redundant.
A phenomenon. No right answer. No wrong answer. But there still exist many questions about death. These questions have become the focus of my thesis. To generate a question on death. That is the goal.

The form that this question is assuming is three-dimensional, experiential. It is a sequence of board games. In no way will I attempt to play God/architect. Thus, this question games is open ended. There are no right or wrong conclusions, no prerequisites, except are: The initiative to think! Without that initiative the mind becomes complacent. It dies. Paradox? A game of death requires a live mind!

This game becomes a cemetery in the most non-traditional sense. It is a non-existent place for the mind to go. Ephemeral Architecture. Or is it architecture? Yes and No. No. It is not architecture. The initial premise of my thesis is a Dadaist philosophy of life and death. They are absurd. Therefore, all previous architectural attempts to understand death and funerary customs and practices are also absurd. Because architecture has failed, a non-architectural attempt has been made, highly architctonic but not architecture.

Yes. It is architecture. Architecture is more than
doors, walls, and roofs. It is meanings, emotions, and symbols. I am choosing one of those directions. To create an architecture that addresses intellect, that causes one to think, that is the intention. There is more to consider than whether someone likes or dislikes it. The important point is what does it make you think!
"There's people who think we're strange. But if they only joined in all the games we play." - Blanckmange

The game is based on the standard chess game. Two sides or positions strategically move across the board in symbolic battle until one becomes the victor. I found this to be quite applicable to a game about life and death. Representatives of life and death battling across a universal grid. Battling for dominance, only to realize that they are one and the same. There is no winner. There is no loser. There is only chaos. Chaos is the core of existence. Without chaos one does not perceive order. Without order one does not perceive reality.

The representations of the game presented are the result of calculated chance. What I call archtypal funerary elements, the obelisk, the mausoleum, the tombstone, and the wall, were placed on the checkerboard by the roll of dice, the numbers on the dice corresponding to points plotted on the board. In addition to determining where the objects were placed the dice also determined how many of each type of object was to be used in each composition.

T = Tombstone
M = Mausoleum
O = Obelisk
W = Wall

T-5: 3, 2; 6, 8; 6, 2; 4, 9; 4, 1
M-1: 6, 6
O-4: 6, 4; 5, 6; 9, 6; 5, 2
W-5: 5, 8 - 3, 2

There was a problem with the game however, As I stated earlier, it became too tangible. It established a definite image, one not totally true. I also found myself being limited by how games are traditionally perceived. It seemed too easy to create something that looked like Milton Bradley's "Game of Life." That was not at all what I wanted. I do not mean to say that his was a waste. The concept was very valid, but I did not know how to best pursue it. I think I saw the game as being something much more cynical and sarcastic than the product I created. Maybe I see everything more cynical than it is.
About the time I became disillusioned with the game, I had been reading A Coney Island of the Mind by Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Delirious New York by Rem Koolhaas. Both authors fascinated me intensely for similar yet different reasons. Ferlinghetti is probably one of the best known writers of the 1950's "Beat Generation." I do not really know how to describe my fascination with his book. His poetry seemed to say much of what I felt and say it in a way I could not begin to do. The following are some examples of his writing.
In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see
the people of the world
exactly at the moment when
they first attained the title of
'suffering humanity'
They writhe upon the page
in a veritable rage
of adversity
Heaped up
groaning with babies and bayonets
under cement skies
in an abstract landscape of blasted trees
bent statues bats wings and beaks
slippery gibbets
cadavers and carnivorous cocks
and all the final hollering monsters
of the
'imagination of disaster'
they are so bloody real
it is as if they really still existed

And they do

Only the landscape is changed

They still are ranged along the roads
plagued by legionaires
false windmills and demented roosters

They are the same people
only further from home
on freeways fifty lanes wide
on a concrete continent
spaced with bland billboards
illustrating imbecile illusions of happiness
Just as I used to say
love comes harder to the aged
because they've been running
on the same old rails too long
and then when the sly switch comes along
they miss the turn
and burn up the wrong rail while
the gay caboose goes flying
and the steamengine driver don't recognize
them new electric horns
and the aged run out on the rusty spur
which ends up in
the dead grass where
the rusty tincans and bedsprings and old razor
blades and moldy mattresses
lie
and the rail breaks off dead
right there
though the ties go on awhile
and the aged
say to themselves
Well
this must be the place
we were supposed to lie down

And they do

while the bright saloon careens along away
on a high
hilltop
its windows full of bluesky and lovers
with flowers
their long hair streaming
and all of them laughing
and waving and
whispering to each other
and looking out and
wondering what that graveyard
where the rails end
is
The poet's eye obscenely seeing
sees the surface of the round world
    with its drunk rooftops
    and wooden oiseaux on clotheslines
    and its clay males and females
    with hot legs and rosebud breasts
    in rollaway beds
and its trees full of mysteries
and its Sunday parks and speechless statues
and its America
    with its ghost towns and empty Ellis Islands
and its surrealist landscape of
    mindless prairies
    supermarket suburbs
    steamheated cemeteries
    cinerama holy days
    and protesting cathedrals
a kissproof world of plastic toilet seats tampax and taxis
    drugged store cowboys and las vegas virgins
    disowned indians and cinemad matrons
    unroman senators and conscientious non-objectors
and all the other fatal shorn-up fragments
of the immigrant's dream come too true
    and mislaid
among the sunbathers
The world is a beautiful place
to be born into
if you don’t mind happiness
not always being
so very much fun
if you don’t mind a touch of hell
now and then
just when everything is fine
because even in heaven
they don’t sing
all the time

The world is a beautiful place
to be born into
if you don’t mind some people dying
all the time
or maybe only starving
some of the time
which isn’t half so bad
if it isn’t you

Oh the world is a beautiful place
to be born into
if you don’t much mind
a few dead minds
in the higher places
or a bomb or two
now and then
in your upturned faces

or such other improprieties
as our Name Brand society
is prey to
with its men of distinction
and its men of extinction
and its priests
and other patrolmen
and its various segregations
and congressional investigations
that our fool flesh
is heir to

Yes the world is the best place of all
for a lot of such things as
making the fun scene
and making the love scene
and making the sad scene
and singing low songs and having inspirations
and walking around
looking at everything
and smelling flowers
and goosing statues
and even thinking
and kissing people and
making babies and wearing pants
and waving hats and
dancing
and going swimming in rivers
on picnics
in the middle of the summer
and just generally
'living it up'

Yes
but then right in the middle of it
comes the smiling
mortician
This life is not a circus where
the shy performing dogs of love
look on
as time flicks out
its tricky whip
to race us thru our paces
Yet gay parading floats drift by
decorated with gorgeous gussies in silk tights
and attended by mothing monkeys
make-believe monks
horny hiawathas
and baboons astride tame tigers
with ladies inside
while googly horns make merrygoround music
and pantomimic pierrots castrate disaster
with strange sad laughter
and gory gorillas toss tender maidens heavenward
while cakewalkers and carnies hustlers
all gassed to the gills
strike playbill poses
and stagger after every
wheeling thing
While still around the ring
lope the misshapen camels of lust
and all us Emmett Kelly clowns
always making up imaginary scenes
with all our masks for faces
even eat fake Last Suppers
at collapsible tables
and mocking cross ourselves
in sawdust crosses
And yet gobble up at last
to shrive our circus souls
the also imaginary
wafers of grace
"We know where we're going, but we don't know where we've been. We're on a road to nowhere." - Talking Heads
"Whoever dies with the most toys wins!" - Auto bumper sticker

Ferlinghetti created the atmosphere for my thesis, but Rem Kolhaas created the framework for me to do it. Initially, I had been reading Delirious New York for other reasons. Then I came across the concept of "technology + cardboard or any other flimsy material = reality." For Kolhaas, this line summarized his interpretation of Coney Island as a testing ground for what happens in Manhattan. Coney Island reflected and exaggerated what people thought and how they perceived themselves and their environment. I had found a solution! The cemetery becomes an amusement park, part fantasy and part nightmare. "A place where man existed only in his folly and silliness." A place where the phrase "It's a mad, mad, mad, mad world never rang more true." These quotes captured the perfect imagery, and appropriately enough, they were made in reference to amusement parks. Once again the direction is leading toward a living cemetery - a living hell! The amusement park becomes the perfect symbol for a cemetery of the absurd. It turns reality into fantasy, serving as an escape. But what the amusement park actually does is intensify and reinforce what is real at a much more exaggerated and gross scale.

"We should mock existence at each moment, mock ourselves, mock others, mock everything by the perpetual creation of fantastic and grotesque attitudes, gestures, and attributes."

Benjamin DeCasserres

Like the game, the amusement park did not quite do what I wanted it to do. It was focused too much in one direction, merriment in a cemetery. There needed to be more depth than that. But, what should I do? Combine everything! The final presentation model shown in this book is just that, a collage of everything I pursued throughout the year. I will refer to it as a synthesis - a synthesis of celebration [amusement park], solace [cemetery], and the mundane [suburban living]. These three categories, more or less, summarize my position to date. What follows is a breakdown of the elements of the model. I will not identify which elements belong to which categories. Initially, each piece belonged to one of the three, but the more complex the model became the more the categories began to blend and overlap. Instead I will leave the model open for interpretation.
Black Celebration
Let's have a black celebration
Black celebration
Tonight

To celebrate the fact
That we've seen the back
Of another black day

I look to you
How you carry on
When all hope is gone
Can't you see

Your optimistic eyes
Seem like paradise
To someone like
Me

I want to take you in my arms
Forgetting all I couldn't do today

Black celebration
Black celebration
Tonight

To celebrate the fact
That we've seen the back
Of another black day

I look to you
And your strong belief
Me, I want relief
Tonight

Take me in your arms
Forgetting all you couldn't do today
Black celebration
I'll drink to that
Black celebration
Tonight

M.L. Gore/Depeche Mode
the amusement park midway/the suburban strip - a combination of the false facade of the amusement park with the icons of commercial suburbia; reminiscent of Hollywood western towns; endless layers of facades; suburban superficiality; suburban clutter; clutter within the mind; putting up barriers to reality;

the elevated freeway - a symbol of idealism; the perfect way to the perfect life; no off ramp, no on ramp; no exit from this hell we have created; ever present reminder; supercedes everything else;

freeway supports - originally designed as pristine white skyscrapers; America's ivory towers; hollow bldgs. - companies without souls;

the rollercoaster - literal metaphor of man's actual path through life; tumultuous, uphill, downhill journey; difficult beginning; difficult ending; precarious path about to give way under foot;

billboards - vignettes depicting the absurdity of day to day events within our lives; unwanted clutter along the highway of idealism; clutter reinforcing the superficiality of suburban existence along the midway;

cages and facades - houses of the living versus houses of the dead - no distinction - one and the same; facades of mausoleums applied to cages; cage with facade represents what suburban living has become; pick a style and apply it to your box; pick a style and apply it to your tomb; live in your tomb; die in your house;

Cemetery of Pere Lachaise - the plan is from an actual cemetery built in Paris in 1812; cemetery plan was an initial framework for order; elements placed on it had no relationship to it; plan was purely arbitrary in its selection; has no meaning except that it is a cemetery;

blood red landscape - the ground and the trees are seething with blood; the landscape is changing; the landscape is dying; giant blades bursting out of the earth; the earth is slowly killing itself, just as man is killing himself from within;

cage - the tower becomes the traditional memorial in the cemetery; man has been replaced by technology; hence, a memorial to technology - a defunct electrical tower in a pool of water; a symbol of futility - of technology's futility and man's futility;

cage - the game - the checkerboard at the end of the midway is a scale representation of the original game; it becomes a part of the cemetery and the cemetery becomes a part of the game; the cemetery is just one square on a much larger checkerboard game; it is a pawn in a much larger and more dangerous game; the scale of the game now ranges from the individual to the universal; a game within a game within a game...
"It is not ours to finish the work, but neither is it ours to give it up." - Talmudic slogan

I guess this is the place in which I am supposed to draw conclusions from what I have done. That is easier said than done. First of all, I do not consider what I have done to be finished. This is just one point of closure. Second of all, I am not exactly sure that I understand everything I have done. Therefore, how do I explain it to someone else? I am trying.

Traditionally, the design process is a linear sequence of steps: research, programming, schematic design, design development, etc...... This project was not at all like that. At times I was doing all of them at once, or none of them, or some of them in a random sequence. I did what felt right until I fell onto something that for the moment worked. This manner of design is extremely difficult to get used to, if you ever do. I have not. It is terribly frustrating, but at the same time incredibly motivating. There is no method to follow for this process. Thus, it is somewhat difficult to teach or be taught what you are doing. I learned that first hand, and I want to thank those who helped me through it, or at least understood it.

I had two initial goals when I began this project. One was to attempt to unite Dada and architecture. Sound simple enough? I do not think so. Many times I found myself banging my head against the wall trying to make sense out of something that was not supposed to make sense. I needed then and still need to stop making sense. As to the compatibility of Dada and architecture, I would say that they are like oil and water. They do not mix. Maybe as ideas within my mind they do, but not in reality. Because of this conflict, I feel all the more compelled to continue to pursue this problem.

My second goal was to explore my perceptions of life and death through architecture. Because of the nature of a goal like that, the only way I can evaluate it is that I did it. If I did it again it might be something complete-
"At least one part of the momentum of the anti-systematic Theodor Adorno was that the open-ended unfinished fragment was the investigatory analogue of an age that had lost its sense of sense." - David Shapiro
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